

The Limits of Empire

By Pat Buchanan

Napoleon III, emperor of France, saw his opportunity. With the United States convulsed in civil war, he would seize Mexico, impose a Catholic monarchy and block further expansion of the American republic. In 1863, a French army marched into Mexico City. In 1864, Maximilian, brother of Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph, was crowned emperor of Mexico.

Secretary of State Seward did nothing until the Union armies had defeated the Confederacy. Then he instructed Gen. John Schofield to go to Paris: "I want you to get your legs under Napoleon's mahogany and tell him he must get out of Mexico." President Johnson sent Gen. Sheridan with 40,000 troops to the Rio Grande. Napoleon got the message. The French army headed for the boats, and Maximilian went before a Mexican firing squad.

Lesson: Nations are unwise to seize upon the temporary weakness of a great power to put military forces inside its sphere of influence.

Which brings us to this headline in last week's Washington Post: "U.S. May Set Up Bases in Former Soviet Republics." With bases already in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, we apparently intend to build a base in Georgia. What are we doing there?

What is the strategic interest in Georgia? Why are we rubbing Russia's nose in her Cold War defeat by putting U.S. troops into nations that only yesterday were a part of that country? Powell anticipated the question: "Are we pointing a dagger in the soft underbelly of Russia? Of course not. What we're doing is working together against terrorism."

But after Iraq, where we invaded an oil-rich country on what the world believes were false pretenses and forged evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, why should Russians not suspect our motives? After all, the neoconservatives who beat the drums for war and cherry-picked the intelligence sent to Bush that got us into war have been braying for years that we intend to impose our "benevolent global hegemony" on all mankind.

Why should Russians, Chinese and Iranians not believe America's crusader castles in Central Asia and the Caucasus are not part of a grand scheme for a Pax Americana?

Have we forgotten our history? When Reagan put Marines into the middle of Lebanon's civil war, 241 perished in the terrorist bombing of their Beirut barracks. Reagan retaliated, but got out. He should never have gone in. Who rules Lebanon is not our business. When we intervened in Somalia's civil war, we got "Blackhawk Down" and 18 dead Rangers. We pulled out. We should never have gone in. When we planted a U.S. army on Saudi soil after the Gulf War, we got 9-11. Now we have pulled out of there. How often must we be taught the lesson?

A U.S. imperial presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus resented by Russia, Iran and China and detested by Islamists is less likely to contain terrorism than to invite it.

U. S. history shows us to be almost paranoid about foreign military presence near our frontiers. The French, British, Spanish and Russians were all bought off or driven out. Moscow's presence in Cuba and meddling in Grenada and Nicaragua in the Cold War were constant causes of American outrage.

If we are entitled to our own Monroe Doctrine - no foreign colonies or bases in our backyard - are not other great nations such as China and Russia equally entitled? Why should they not feel as we do, and one day tell us to get out of Central Asia and the Caucasus?

Again, why are we going in? Other than empire, what is the vital interest?

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