

sanctimoniousness in the literature. They are about the implications of the present US government's claims to global supremacy. Those who favour the idea tend to argue that empires are good; those who do not tend to mobilise the long tradition of anti-imperialist arguments. But these claims and counter-claims are not really concerned with the actual history of empires. They are trying to fit old names to historical developments that don't necessarily fit old realities, which makes little historical sense. Current debates are particularly cloudy, because the nearest analogy to the world supremacy to which the current US government is committed is a set of words – 'empire', 'imperialism' – which are in flat contradiction to the traditional political self-definition of the US, and which acquired almost universal unpopularity in the twentieth century. They are also in conflict with equally strongly held positive beliefs in the US political value-system, such as 'self-determination' and 'law', both domestic and international. Let us not forget that both the League of Nations and the United Nations were essentially projects launched and pressed through by US presidents. It is also troublesome that there is no historical precedent for the global supremacy the US government has been trying to establish, and it is quite clear to any good historian and to all rational observers of the world scene that this project will almost certainly fail. The most intelligent of the neo-imperial school, that excellent historian Niall Ferguson, has no doubts about this probable failure, though, unlike people like me, he regrets it.¹

Four developments lie behind the current attempts to revive world empire as a model for the twenty-first century. The first is

the extraordinary acceleration of globalisation since the 1960s, and the tensions that have consequently arisen between the economic, technological, cultural and other aspects of this process and the one branch of human activity that has so far proved quite impermeable to it, namely politics. Globalisation in the currently dominant form of free-market capitalism has also brought about a spectacular and potentially explosive rise in social and economic inequality, within countries and internationally.

The second is the collapse of the international balance of power since the Second World War, which kept at bay both the danger of a global war and the collapse of large parts of the world into disorder or anarchy. The end of the USSR destroyed this balance, but I think it may have begun to fray from the late 1970s on. The basic rules of this system, established in the seventeenth century, were formally denounced by President Bush in 2002, namely that in principle sovereign states, acting officially, respected one another's borders and kept out of one another's internal affairs. Given the end of a stable superpower balance, how could the globe be politically stabilised? In more general terms, what would be the structure of an international system geared to a plurality of powers in which, at the end of the century, only one was left?

The third is the crisis in the ability of the so-called sovereign nation-state, which in the second half of the twentieth century became the almost universal form of government for the world's population, to carry out its basic functions of maintaining control over what happened on its territory. The world has entered the era of inadequate, and in many cases failing or failed, states.