

## Grano Series – *The American Empire*

*This speakers series, held in Toronto at the Grano restaurant, explores the potential and limits of American power in the 21st century through the ideas of four outstanding thinkers.*

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### **Just say 'no'**

#### **Canadian political leaders should have the courage to stand up to the U.S.**

MICHAEL IGNATIEFF

*Michael Ignatieff, the Canadian award-winning broadcaster, author and expert on nationalism who teaches human rights at Harvard University, caused a stir last year when he supported the American-led invasion of Iraq. Ignatieff backed the war partly because he felt the United States, as a global empire, could use its strength to achieve positive change. Recently, he spoke in Toronto as the second of four speakers in the Grano lecture series on the potential and limits of American power. An excerpt:*

**Good historians** have pointed out that an empire means the colonial acquisition and management and administration of real estate. So I begin with a kind of apology. America is *not* an empire, because it does not have colonies in any traditional obvious sense, not even in Iraq. It doesn't have satrapies. Canada is a sovereign independent nation with the capacity to say "no." It's an ally, not a satrapy.

The best that you can say is that we're talking about primacy. The United States has obvious military preponderance. But notice that preponderance does not produce hegemonic power. This is a country using Abrams tanks to smash an insurgency in Falluja -- and everybody knows that's like picking up mercury with a spoon.

The critical issue with America is the legitimacy gap in the exercise of its power. It has got force. It has got power. It does not have authority -- and you only have authority if you have legitimacy. And to an absolutely astounding degree, to a much greater degree than at any time in my lifetime, with the possible exception of Vietnam, American power appears to be illegitimate and, therefore, appears to the world simply as naked force.

One source of legitimacy for American power after 1945 was the presence of what we now see, I think very clearly, as an evil empire. What legitimized American power for 50 years was a system that, whatever else you thought about the States, was considerably worse. A system of tyranny, a release from which is one of the great achievements of the 20th century and also one of the greatest achievements of American power.

We are now looking at the gradual emergence of Europe as a counter power to the United States. That's not necessarily a bad thing. It's not good to have too much American power in the world.

The other big source of counter power in the world is Islam. For 25 years now, since the Iranian embassy siege of 1979, Islam has been on the attack against American power. And it's anything but clear that American victory in that battle is assured.

Another source of counter power to the U.S. is international law. Canada has been among those countries that had sought to tie down Gulliver with the thousand strings of international law. For a long time, America was the leader in the creation of this multilateral system of international law. Now that it is being used to constrain the United States, the U.S., not surprisingly, is pushing back.

Another factor, and one Canadians feel very strongly about, is the eroding legitimacy of the American domestic model. In contrast, this has produced a sense of pride in the distinctiveness of *our* social model: the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, medicare, all the things we like.

For Americans then, the question is, how to get legitimacy back. And there seem to be two possibilities. There's a liberal agenda that was essentially the John Kerry campaign -- make a kinder, gentler America that signs up to Kyoto, that signs up to the International Criminal Court, that will sacrifice a certain amount of sovereignty for the legitimacy gains that accrue by joining a multilateral order.

And also clean house at home. It just isn't sustainable for the richest country in the world to have 45 million Americans without health insurance. It looks ridiculous.

The second way to re-legitimize American power is the conservative option which is "Beat our enemies." Nothing legitimizes power like

success. Defeating Islamic terrorism is crucial to the re-legitimization of American power. Success makes friends. Failure creates enemies.

Why should Gulliver be tied down? The giant has been attacked. The giant does not want to be tied down by the UN. It doesn't want to be tied down by the Geneva Convention. It wants to stand up and fight back -- and win.

The electoral difficulty with the liberal model is decisive. Kerry made a very clear proposal to the American electorate that "we need to re-legitimize American power by becoming more multilateral, kinder and gentler and clean up our social deficits at home." And the electorate, to the degree that it understood that option, rejected it decisively.

The other weakness with the liberal model, particularly for Canada, is that we don't pay the piper. You can't complain about U.S. military hegemony if you are not prepared to pay for a military of your own. It is very old-fashioned to say it, but there is no alternative coinage of power than the capacity to deploy military force when you have to. Talking about human rights will not get you there if you can't send a combat-ready brigade to Darfur to fish people out. Any strategy to make multilateralism robust means that middle powers have to invest so that the United States can say: "These guys are serious. These guys have come to the party with some capabilities. We don't have to do everything. We can hand missions to the Canadians -- and they will do it."

The weakness of the conservative alternative is its belief that power creates its own legitimacy, that force can be converted into authority. Well, we're looking at what that looks like in Iraq. The application of force does not create legitimate authority. It just creates chaos. This is what hubris is. Hubris is the belief that the sheer application of force, the sheer application of power, will bring minds and souls along. It doesn't. It generates resistance.

Therefore, we're in a situation where neither alternative to the legitimacy deficit is adequate. And I don't have a clever way out. My business, since I'm not running for office, is to present problems, not solutions. But one thing that I feel strongly about, thinking about American power, is that the cost of saying no to the U.S. is going down. Canada said no over Iraq, and the cost was small. France said no to Iraq, and the cost was little. If this were an empire, the cost of saying no would be much, much higher.

The message for Canadians is that saying no is sometimes in the national interest. Historically, it has been in the national interest of our country. The recognition of Cuba, good decision: the Americans don't like it, tough. The recognition of China, good decision: Americans don't like it, tough. Land mines treaty: Americans don't like it, tough. International Criminal Court, good decision: Americans don't like it, tough.

If we understand the limits of American power more coolly, if we understand that the cost of saying no is going down, not up, it gives middle powers such as Canada much more room to maneuver, much more room to defend our sovereignty. But there is a price. You can't do it with words. I can't go into a human rights classroom and point to Canada being at the bottom of the Overseas Development Assistance League, at the bottom of the Peacekeeping League. If you want an independent sovereign country, you've got to pay for it.