

## Beware Empires in Decline

By Michael T. Klare | October 13, 2006

The common wisdom circulating in Washington these days is that the United States is too bogged down in Iraq to consider risky military action against Iran or—God forbid—North Korea. Policy analysts describe the U.S. military as “over-burdened” or “stretched to the limit.” The presumption is that the Pentagon is telling President Bush that it can’t really undertake another major military contingency.

Added to these pessimistic assessments of U.S. military capacity is the widespread claim that a “new realism” has taken over in the administration’s upper reaches, that cautious “realists” like Condoleezza Rice have gained the upper hand over fire-breathing neoconservatives. Ergo: No military strike against Iran or North Korea.

But I’m not buying any of this.

Just as an empire on the rise, like the United States on the eve of the invasion of Iraq, is often inclined to take rash and ill-considered actions, so an empire on the decline, like the British and French empires after World War II, will engage in senseless, self-destructive acts. And I fear the same can happen to the United States today, as we, too, slip into decline.

The decline of an empire can be a hard and painful thing for the affected imperial elites. Those who are used to commanding subservience and respect from their subjects and from lesser powers are often ill-prepared to deal with their indifference and contempt. Even harder is overcoming the long-inbred assumption that one’s vassals are inferior—mentally, morally, and otherwise. The first malady makes the declining elites extraordinarily sensitive to perceived slights or insults from their former subjects; the second often leads elites to overestimate their own capabilities and to underestimate those of their former subjects—an often fatal error. The two misjudgments often combine to produce an extreme readiness to *strike back* when a perceived insult coincides with a (possibly deceptive) military superiority.

### The Suez Blunder

One of the most spectacular examples of such miscalculation in modern times—and an especially illuminating one—was the Suez Canal crisis of 1956. The crisis began in July 1956 when



Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, angry at the West’s failure to support construction of the Aswan High Dam on the Nile, nationalized the Suez Canal, then owned principally by a British-French company and long regarded as a pre-eminent symbol of the British Empire.

A reasonable Anglo-French response to Nasser’s move might have been to negotiate a dignified turnover of the canal (as President Carter did in 1977 with the Panama Canal, thereby removing a major irritant in U.S.-Latin America relations). But no: it was beneath their dignity to negotiate with rabble like Nasser. Instead, with images of imperial grandeur still fresh in their minds, the British and French embarked on October 29, 1956 upon an invasion of Egypt (wisely bringing in the Israelis for a little backup).

Then the second malady kicked in. From what can be reconstructed today, it never occurred to British and French leaders that their former subjects would even consider putting up any resistance to modern European armies, and so victory would occur swiftly. Instead, it was pure debacle. The British and French were far too few on the ground to win any military victories, and the Egyptians didn’t cry “uncle” at the first sight of the Union Jack.

Desperately, the British and French—who had first dismissed any need for American help—pleaded with then-President Eisenhower for American assistance. But Ike wasn’t in a mood to help. Having seen which way the wind was blowing in the Middle East, he decided it was better to abandon his NATO allies than support the old imperialists in a battle with pan-Arab nationalism (which might then choose to align with Moscow). And so the British and French were forced to withdraw in utter humiliation.



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Much in this extraordinary episode bears on the situation in Washington today. Once again, a former subject state—in this case, Iran—is thumbing its nose at its former imperial overlords—Britain and the United States (which together put the megalomaniacal Shah in power there in 1953). Once again, extreme discomfort and distress has been the result. Yes, I recognize that Iran’s pursuit of nuclear technology poses a different sort of danger than Egypt’s seizure of the Suez Canal (though to hear the British tell it, that was no less of a strategic peril).

But there nevertheless remains a symbolic aspect to this whole crisis that cannot be entirely ignored. A once subservient Third World nation confronts the Greatest Power the World Has Ever Known on something approaching equal terms. It is precisely these sorts of circumstances that are likely to trigger rash, ill-considered action on the part of the declining power.

“How dare they stand up to us in that way?” British and French officials must have been muttering to themselves back in 1956. And: “We’ll teach them a thing or two!—Just you watch!”

“How dare they stand up to us in that way?” White House officials must be saying to one another in private today. And: “We’ll teach them a thing or two!—Just you watch!”

## Overcoming Objections to War

But what about the problem of the over-stretched U.S. military and all those American soldiers now bogged down in Iraq? This is where the second post-imperial malady comes in. Yes, American ground troops are bogged down in Iraq, but American air and sea power, currently under-utilized in the Iraq conflict, can be used to cripple Iranian military capabilities

with minimum demand on U.S. ground forces. Despite the Israeli inability to emasculate Hezbollah with airpower during the Lebanon fighting last summer, American air and naval officers, I suspect, believe that they can inflict punishing damage on the Iranians with airpower alone, and do so without suffering significant casualties in return. I also suspect that well-connected neoconservatives and, no doubt, Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld are whispering this message into the ear of President Bush.

And what about all the forms of retaliation we might expect from the Iranians, like an upsurge in Shiite disorder in Iraq and chaos in the oil markets? These and other likely Iranian responses are also said to be deterring a U.S. military strike. But the Iranians will be incapable of such coordinated action after the U.S. Air Force subjects them to Shock and Awe, and anyway there are contingency plans in place to deal with the fallout. Or so say the neocons, I would imagine.

So I believe that the common wisdom in Washington regarding military action against Iran is wrong. Just because American forces are bogged down in Iraq, and Condoleezza Rice appears to enjoy a bit more authority these days, does not mean that “realism” will prevail at the White House. I suspect that the response of declining British and French imperial elites when faced with provocative acts by a former subject power in 1956 is a far more accurate gauge of what to expect from the Bush administration today.

The impulse to strike back must be formidable. Soon, I fear, it will prove irresistible.

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*Michael T. Klare is a professor of peace and world-security studies at Hampshire College, a Foreign Policy In Focus columnist, and the author of Blood and Oil: The Dangers and Consequences of America's Growing Dependence on Imported Petroleum (Metropolitan Books, 2004).*

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

## Foreign Policy In Focus

“A Think Tank Without Walls”

### Recommended citation:

Michael T. Klare, "Beware Empires in Decline" (Silver City, NM and Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, October 13, 2006).

### Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/fpiftxt/3596>

### Production Information:

Writer: Michael T. Klare

Editor: John Feffer, IRC

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC

**p. 2**

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