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Charles Hill: The Empire Strikes Back

*One of American's foremost strategists says the era of liberal democracy is in jeopardy, and the historical norm of dominance by great powers will return if the U.S. fails to lead.*

By [ROBERT L. POLLOCK](http://online.wsj.com/search/term.html?KEYWORDS=ROBERT+L.+POLLOCK&bylinesearch=true)

Yale Prof. Charles Hill is often called a "conservative." But he is one of the foremost students and advocates of what he calls the "liberal" ("in the finest sense of the word") world order. And he is worried that Americans increasingly don't understand how special the modern era has been or their own crucial role in developing and securing it.

To some, the Obama's administration's desire to "lead from behind" and seek United Nations approval for actions abroad represents an appropriate retreat to a more humble American posture. Mr. Hill, by contrast, sees the possible end of a great era of human rights and democracy promotion the likes of which the planet has never seen.

Our world has "been increasingly tolerant and increasingly trying to eradicate racism and increasingly trying to expand freedom. And it can come to an end," he says.

What might replace it? "Spheres of influence." Or to use a more archaic term, "empire."

Mr. Hill is the all-too-rare professor with an extensive background outside of academia. He made his career in the U.S. foreign service working on China and the Middle East, among other issues. He has advised secretaries of state Henry Kissinger and George Shultz and served as a policy consultant to U.N. Secretary-General Boutros-Boutros Ghali. His ability to combine real-world experience with appreciation of the intellectual currents animating history—Dickens comes up during our discussion of the anti-slavery movement in 19th-century Britain—has made his courses some of the most popular at Yale.

So what makes our era unique and valuable? And how did we get here? To understand the road we've travelled, we have to go back—a long way.

"The way the world through almost all of history has been ordered is through empires. The empire was the normal unit of rule. So it was the Chinese empire, the Mughal empire, the Persian empire, and the Roman empire, the Mayan empire."

What changed this was the Thirty Years War in Europe in the 17th century. "That was a war between the Holy Roman Empire and states, and states were new. They had come forward in northern Italy in the Renaissance and now they were taking hold in what we think of as a state-sized entity. The Netherlands and Sweden and France were among these. . . . France was both an empire and a state—and the key was when [Cardinal] Richelieu took France to the side of the states, which was shocking because France was Catholic and the empire was Catholic and the states were Protestant."

Our modern concept that war should be governed by law dates from the era. "It was so awful that it produced Grotius," the Dutch philosopher of international law.

It also produced the Treaty of Westphalia. "What they did in creating something to prevent another Thirty Years War, they put in place what would develop into the international state system. . . . This is a work of genius, probably inadvertent in some sense," Mr. Hill says. "To be a good member of the international club you had to follow minimal procedures. . . . You could be Catholic or Protestant, but you had to be a state. So the state then replaces the empire as the fundamental unit of world affairs."

The next major event is the Congress of Vienna in 1814, when the powers that defeated Napoleon Bonaparte put their own stamp on the system. Meanwhile, the procedural norms for membership in the international club—such as hosting and protecting ambassadors—are being supplemented by more substantive and moral-sounding requirements.

"The Ottomans are an empire and there's kind of a back and forth across the 19th century—it's kind of a precursor to the Turkish thing of the 20th century—of European statesmen saying, well, yeah, you can come in to it but you have polygamy, you have slavery, so you can't be all the way in," the 76-year-old Mr. Hill says.

"My view is that every major modern war has been waged against this international system. That is, the empire strikes back. World War I is a war of empires which comes to its culmination point when a state gets into it. That's the United States." And then we get something very interesting added: "That's Woodrow Wilson and [the promotion of] democracy."

"World War II, and I think this is uncomprehended although it's perfectly clear, . . . World War II is a war of empires against the state system. It's Hitler's Third Reich. It's Imperial Japan." The Axis goal "is to establish an empire. The Nazi empire would be Europe going eastward into the Slavic lands. The Japanese empire in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, as they called it."

Is the story uncomplicated? Of course not. One of the most important developments was the rise of the British navy—the "empire" on which "the sun never set"—in the mid-19th century. But that so-called empire arguably was the global rules-based system, committed to abolishing slavery and to free trade and free movement on the seas.

So too for the United States, as it assumed responsibility for protecting the air and sea lanes while the British pulled back after World War II. "The grand strategy of the U.S. since Harry Truman," says Mr. Hill, has been the establishment of a rules-based system built on institutions like the U.N. and NATO. It's a system designed to protect the rights of states to Wilsonian "self determination," not to subject them to the will of the strongest.

Mr. Hill is neither a U.N. basher nor romantic about the institution. "The U.N. is a very useful organization. Its usefulness goes up or down" depending on "whether it is used within the boundaries it was designed to be used. . . . When the states themselves don't want to get involved and hand something over to the U.N., then it always goes wrong." He cites Bosnia, and now Syria, as examples.

On former Secretary-General Kofi Annan's mission in Syria: "What he's doing is very detrimental. By its own design it can't do anything but serve as a kind of rescue mission for Bashar Assad." Mr. Annan "takes a U.N. approach to this that says what you want to do is stop the fighting. Well, if you stop the fighting you're serving Assad."

And then there is the misimpression that the U.N. is itself a global governing body, rather than an instrument of the state system.

"Model U.N. is very deleterious. It has been educating now two or more generations of high school and college students about a U.N. that isn't really the U.N. Now when people talk about the U.N. they talk about something that doesn't exist. They talk about it as though it's a kind of untethered international governing body," he says. "So you've got 4,000 high-school students coming in for a weekend at Yale" and "you give them 45 minutes for a little problem like Iran's nuclear program, and they solve it! And they wonder why, if we solved it this morning before lunch, why can't you solve it?"

The U.N. works, Mr. Hill says, when states take charge. "The point is not that the U.S. has to act unilaterally. . . . The point is will the U.S. take a leading role?" he says. "The whole system has been defended by the leadership of the U.S. and its allies. And the idea of open expression and open trade is the American way of seeing the world improve itself in the future. If America is not gonna do that, nobody else is gonna do it. And that's what's happening now."

Mr. Hill sees two very different kinds of challenges to the liberal, state-based world order. One, the aggressive kind, is exemplified by China. The other, very different, can be seen in the European Union.

China has been a believer in the international system in recent decades, he says. It has seen advantages in the doctrine of state equality (which it uses to defend against human-rights complaints) and has gained from the liberalization of trade. But as the U.S. pulls back—a shrinking Navy, President Obama's foreign policy—things are starting to change.

The Chinese are talking about how they used to approach the world in the dynastic era, says Mr. Hill. "'[We] know that states are not equal and therefore we need a world order in which that reality is recognized.' This meme is getting around in China and is what accounts for statements starting two years ago as regards the South China Sea to Vietnam or the Philippines saying openly 'We are a big power and you're not a big power and therefore you should follow what we say.'"

The problem of the European Union, by contrast, is not the over-assertion of state power but the abdication of it without a suitable replacement. Of the current troubles in Europe, Mr. Hill says, "They took away the sovereign powers of the states" but they "didn't take enough power to Brussels to be able to run the Continent under crisis situations."

Why did Europe do that? Mr. Hill suggests that German and other war guilt was a big factor. "It so sickened the European intelligentsia" that "it was almost as though they said, yes, Europe has been the cause of all the world's problems. Napoleon and colonialism and imperialism and Stalin and Marx and Lenin and Hitler and the Holocaust. But no more. Now we're going to be the most moral people in the world. And the Americans who have been causing these problems along with us? They represent the past, we represent the future."

In short, "the European vision is we're just going to be nice" and "people will follow our lead. The Chinese view is why should we not do what we want to do with these little people who used to pay us tribute?"

What amazes Mr. Hill is how much of a break the Obama foreign policy represents compared with the bipartisan consensus stretching back to Truman. That culminated in President George W. Bush's second inaugural address, which he likens to an "emancipation proclamation for the world." But, he says, "The democracy wave that began 20 years ago [at the end of the Cold War] is now turning backward." Why? "The conduct of the Obama administration."

So the future is still very much a choice, not an inevitability, I ask.

"Absolutely. It's been a choice," he says. "I'm not so sure now that people even see the choice because the mentalities are shifting. . . . What I'm beginning to see is that when you try to explain something like this to someone, they don't have any idea what you're talking about. They just don't get it. But you wrecked your educational system the way we have. I'm talking about fourth grade, not higher education."

He talks about his aunt, who was principal of a middle school. The library was "incredible." Students read "Tacitus or Horace or Caesar's 'Gallic Wars.' Now we don't teach that. And we don't teach American history."

I ask about other possible future spheres of influence if the international system breaks down. If Europe doesn't get its act together, "the sphere of influence is going to be run from Moscow," Mr. Hill says. "There is an Indian sphere of influence" and "you look this way to Bali and this way to Zanzibar." Is Brazil a power of the future? "As they say, it always will be," he chuckles, alluding to a well-known joke about the country.

But the message remains dead serious. The "battle" for liberal democracy and some semblance of international order "has been being won because the U.S. has been putting out the effort for it," he says. "And now we're not."

*Mr. Pollock is the Journal's editorial features editor.*

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