

Expectation proves again the mother of all disappointments

BY THOMAS VINCENT
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

As a child, when I'd come home with a report card full of C's, my father, who was possessed of a plethora of platitudes, would invariably trot out a gem like: "He who expecteth nothing is seldom disappointed." Thus, if I express disappointment with "Dismantling the Empire," it is largely because I expected something the book didn't deliver. I don't take issue with anything the author says. I simply wish he had said more.

Chalmers Johnson has had a long, distinguished career as a historian and foreign policy analyst. He has written numerous books on history and political science including most recently, three examinations of the consequences of American empire: "Blowback," "The Sorrows of Empire," and "Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic." Johnson's thesis is that America's current foreign policy of attempting to maintain an "empire of military bases" around the world is not only ill-advised from a legal and moral standpoint, but in terms of sheer economics it is quite simply unsustainable: "Until we decide (or are forced) to dismantle our empire, sell off most of our military bases in other people's countries, and bring our military expenditures into line with those of the rest of the world, we are destined to go bankrupt in the name of national defense." In short, as the author says, continuing down the militaristic path we are on is nothing short of a "suicide option."

As in his earlier works Johnson lives up to his reputation for being plainspoken and direct: "During his eight reckless years as President, (George W.) Bush, his Vice President Dick Cheney, his Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and the other

neoconservative and right wing officials he appointed ... drove the country as close to the precipice as was humanly possible."

But Johnson doesn't lay the blame for America's foreign policy follies solely at the feet of any one administration. Rather he sees our current dilemma as the result of years of post-Cold War hubris combined with a military-industrial bureaucracy that has grown to leviathanic proportions, the result of which has been nothing short of disastrous. "The combination of huge standing armies, almost continuous wars, an ever growing economic dependence on the military-industrial complex and the making of weaponry, and ruinous military expenses as well as a vast, bloated "defense" budget ... has been destroying our republican structure of governing in favor of an imperial presidency."

As I said at the start, I do not take issue either with Johnson's historical analysis or his extrapolations of what our recent actions mean for our future. What is disappointing, however, is that he is not saying anything new. Most of the topics in "Empire" have already been covered in his previous trilogy. Indeed, as he notes at the end of the book, most of the essays in "Empire" have been previously published on the website "TomDispatch.com." (He doesn't even include footnotes, preferring to steer readers to the web site for a list of URLs.)

Aside from these minor annoyances, my biggest complaint with the book is that Johnson leaves the reader hanging. After repeating over and over what a disaster America's foreign policy is, the author waits until the last two pages of the book to present a brief bullet point list entitled: "Ten steps Toward Liquidating the Empire." Not only are most of the things on the list obvious - "We must give up our

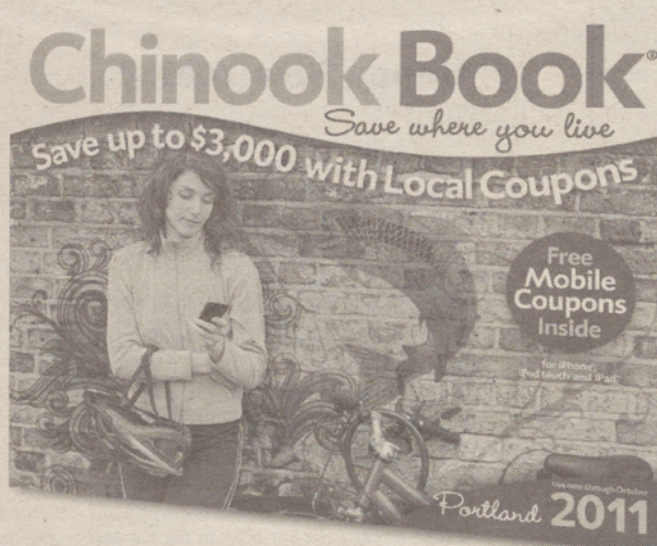
inappropriate reliance on military force as the chief means of attempting to achieve foreign policy objectives" - but the book is frustrating in that nowhere does Johnson advance any clue as to how he thinks America should go about achieving his "ten step" program. He's like a doctor who says, "If you don't quit smoking, you're going to die," and then leaves the room without telling us how we are supposed to quit. To put it another way: I don't need any more convincing that America is on a disastrous, suicidal path. I'm well aware we are hurtling down the "devil's canyon" rapids on the river Styx. What I want to know is how exactly we're supposed to get out of this God-forsaken handbasket.

A codicil to the saying at the beginning of this piece might be: "Expectation is the mother of all disappointments." If so, perhaps I am being unfair. However, "Dismantling the Empire" was advertised as a coda to the "Blowback" trilogy in which he was to give - according to the book jacket - "a prescription for a remedy" to our misguided foreign policies. Sadly, on this score, the book doesn't deliver. By failing to even address the question implied in the title, as readers we are left with a feeling that hope is a train that left the station a long time ago. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Johnson's last words of warning which come off sounding suspiciously like a proclamation of inevitable doom: "Unfortunately, few empires of the past voluntarily gave up their dominions in order to remain independent, self-governing polities ... if we do not learn from their examples, our decline and fall is foreordained."

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Book Review:
Dismantling the
Empire: America's
Last Best Hope
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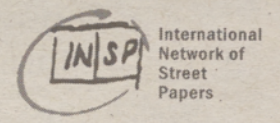
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