

The Empire Strikes a Match
in a World Full of Oil

Joel Clarke Gibbons

Other books by Joel Clarke Gibbons

Rethinking the Headlines: Studies in Law, Justice, and Society

Dysfunctions of the Welfare State

Man and God in the World: a Treatise on Human Nature

Cover Art

Confrontation by Hugh Hanlon Gibbons. Visit his virtual studio at www.hughgibbonsart.com.

To the men and women of organizations like the Acton Institute and the Liberty Fund, who defend the light of true freedom, and to courageous scholars everywhere, who each contribute to that cause, but especially to my father, Francis Joseph Gibbons, who showed in his life what is possible for a truly free man.

*Whoever seeks war will not be disappointed,
but he will be surprised.*

Preface

For the first time in world history the planet is populated by sovereign states. However much they differ in size, in economic advancement, and in age and history of accomplishments they are all equal in being sovereign. The world's political history is, in large part, a record of tribes and empires. The empires that owned nearly the whole world a century ago represented the final wave crashing against each other in the horrifying wars of the twentieth century. It was they who were created as a by-product of precisely that exploratory movement that contributed so largely to breaking down barriers of climate and geography that had left many places almost hopelessly backward, in order to unify the world. Those empires are gone, but their legacy of an open world has transformed our lives by setting in motion a dynamic of world unity. Now former colonies stand shoulder to shoulder with their former rulers around the United Nations General Assembly.

At this moment in history, however, it is not sufficient, and may actually be confusing and misleading, to observe events from the floor of the general assembly. Standing just outside the main entrance to the United Nations Building, looking west from the plaza in front of it, one sees the reciprocal forces of competing visions of future world government. The Roman god Janus, the gatekeeper, had two faces: seeing both forward and back. So Janus is the spirit of the UN plaza, because he and we see within the UN building one vision, and behind him and us, bustling New York City, and extending from that point to vast America, a very different and competing vision. What will it be for this new world: a new kind of world government based on voluntary cooperation of sovereign states or an old kind of world government dictated by a ruler that reigns supreme over a world empire?

My purpose in this small book is to lay out in public the real architecture of this rivalry—between America and the dream of a United Nations—and to clarify those implications that are discernable at this time. In practice, I will have much more to say about the American project for world empire than I will have to say about the future of the UN. The reason is that the participatory and comparatively democratic nature of the UN makes its future obscure in the extreme. Who can say what that many different men and women, left to their devices and a whole world of contrasting strengths and weaknesses, will decide? If therefore I disappoint on the matter of implications of the United Nations, it is not because I dismiss them, but because I cannot discern them.

In any case, an accounting of the consequences for America is a sufficiently broad and deep project, because as the subtitle warns, it is easy to start a war, but not so easy to bring it to the intended conclusion. Much is known, or is at least knowable, about the plans of the American government, so the bulk of the discussion will necessarily be devoted to that topic. While my preferences will become clear in the course of the discussion, and may very well be apparent already, the competition is not a simple contest between good and evil, the final Manichean morality play. There is enough of each sort on each side, and indeed the outcome may be decided by some almost-accidental alignment of them on a single pivotal day. If so, we pray that good triumphs over evil, because the alternative is too terrible to contemplate. But the two sides are not morally equivalent in principle. There is a reason why the United Nations exists, and why as half century ago the United States led a war-weary world to create it. It is a forum that can and should embody all the genius of American government: of freedom for all, of limited and participatory government. No one can deny at this time that it is the best plan for world government. Those who want to supplant it do not question its virtues; they question its feasibility. I grant that there is logic in that point of view, but I insist that the logic be carried through to its logical conclusion. Only the United Nations is feasible. It is the dream of empire that is unworkable.

There is another side to this story, which could be characterized by saying that while the United Nations is feasible, it is not inevitable either. If the American empire fails, what comes next—world governance or a succession of evermore-frantic contestants? I do not raise this question because I plan to answer it. I don't know the answer. But the question itself is an essential part of the context in which we pose more immediate and workable questions. If the American empire stumbles on the shores of other powers, what then? Does this lead to a more peaceful world or to a less peaceful one? If nothing else, we can commit this question to memory and remember to rethink it when its dimensions are clearer and its implications more pressing.

This book is the fourth in a series of studies that I began to write a few years ago. My goal for the entire series—projected to run to seven books—is to bring together insights from many different fields of study and from years of observation of the world and its works. The first volume is called *Rethinking the Headlines: Studies in Law, Justice, and Society*. It deals with many contemporary issues—generally highly charged emotionally—of law and human rights. There is a certain school of thought in law and government that in America traces its roots to

Thomas Jefferson's immortal Declaration of Independence. Actually, the roots reach back further in time, and across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe, and they are the defining thread in the movement we call Conservatism. Its central political tenets are the rights of the individual and the natural limits of state authority. This book applies the logic of natural rights to these hot-button issues of contemporary life.

The second book, entitled *Dysfunctions of the Welfare State* (second ed., Piscataway, New Jersey: Transaction Publishing, 2010), is a critique of the economic effects of unlimited state involvement in economic and business affairs. The subject is treated not in an abstract way, but in terms of the contemporary American economy. Quite simply, when the political leaders are expected to look after the economic welfare of the public, as they are in the United States today, they unavoidably make choices that will be *perceived* as serving the general welfare even as they drift farther and farther from actually doing that. Economic logic constantly questions what is the most valuable thing to do right now, while political process asks on what is the most popular thing to do.

The third book addresses quite different issues. It is entitled *Man and God in the World: A Treatise on Human Nature* (Xlibris Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2009). It draws from two sources of insight into humanity: Christian theology and philosophy on the one hand and study of the social and life sciences on the other. One central goal of this book is to reconcile them: to explain the complementarity of Christian vision of man with the discoveries of the social and life sciences. A truly comprehensive moral view of man and society requires us to draw on both sources of wisdom. I make no claim of completeness. It may very well be that we will never exhaust the depths of wisdom that either Christianity or the social sciences have to offer us. In any case, I do not pretend in any way to have exhausted them. But we have to start seeing them together and putting them together, so this is perhaps a beginning.

These four books may not seem at first blush to have much in common except their author, and superficially that is true. Beneath the surface, however, beats a single heart, which is the truth that the rights of the citizens are never safe, and their interests are never well cared for unless their governors accept the limits on their authority that emerge simultaneously from the rights of the people and descend from the god who fashioned them in his own image and likeness. Without limited government, there are no human rights because each and every right will eventually become a burdensome nuisance to the governors. At this very moment in

America, the right of habeas corpus is under attack from an administration that asserts the right to imprison presumed enemies of the nation without allowing them recourse to hearings or courts. They are denied the right of habeas corpus. The administration asserts its right to do this on the grounds that those presumed enemies of the nation are from foreign lands and are not citizens of the United States. But that is no defense. Habeas corpus is not a right of citizens; it is a fundamental human right enjoyed by all persons and against any government in the world regardless of where they are citizens. It is another of those inalienable rights like the ones enumerated by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence: the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. So unlimited government seeks to wield unlimited power. Hardly surprising, of course. The people who do these things are not the friends of the citizens, nor do they care about their welfare. They only serve their own interests.

No issue today is more central to our daily lives than the imperial ambitions of the American government, and I claim that no issue is more injurious to our lives. I have set out in this book to make that clear. It has been my good fortune to have enjoyed the company of other men of like mind. Some of them make their case on the airwaves, where we can all hear and weigh their words. Others write in public journals, and in this case most of what is valuable and insightful are published elsewhere around the globe. A few are colleagues and friends of my own acquaintance. None of them has been a better guide and intellectual partner than Professor Raaj Sah of the University of Chicago. Countless others, unknown to me but like me striving to retain their sanity in a mad world, offer the reassurance that comes from knowing that this short work, while far from perfect and sporting many gaps of fact and understanding, will set matters straight and make it easier for them to formulate a response—a defense—against the follies of empire.

There is another unity that draws these books together. They are all by-products of the things I have studied in the course of my student career and working life. Economics I studied at the University of Chicago, law I studied there also (both in the law school and in the business school), and philosophy and Catholic theology I studied in college at Georgetown University along with a dose of physics. In between these excursions, I earned a doctorate in mathematics at Northwestern University. My schooling in world current events, which is the subject matter of this book, I studied not in the ivied halls, but in the school of hard knocks, as a bond trader and commodity trader in Chicago. The life of a trader is to read the news every day and occasionally to buy or sell based on what it seems to imply. While many traders reverse this allocation of

effort, I can assure them, as Warren Buffett assures them and much more persuasively than I, that they are headed for poverty. There really is a real world out there that we do well to study with student humility. I think that fellow Socrates said something to the same effect long ago, and as you know he was a very smart guy.

A word on style. There are many quotations throughout this book. They are, of course, rendered verbatim. In a few cases, however, it seemed desirable to correct punctuation errors. The Internet branch of the world media, in particular, practice rather whimsical punctuation rules that only detract from the message, and that I was unwilling to endorse. Most obvious of the errors is a wildly excessive use of quotation marks to set off perfectly ordinary phrases. If any author feels that in making these changes I have corrupted his text, I can only apologize, and point out that in every case I provide the original citation. I can provide any interested party with the full text of any passage I have cited on demand. All citations to documents and formal writings are of course entirely unedited.

St. Joseph, Michigan
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Introduction

In the years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was presumably the end of the Cold War too, the United States has been engaged almost constantly in armed conflict. We would have to conclude from the evidence that the removal of a large and powerful adversary has loosened the bonds of mutual deterrence and freed America to assume an imperial role: replacing offending governments at will, making war in their countries and painting the natives who oppose us as the villains both in their own countries and in the international scene. The premise on which we have undertaken this enterprise is that we alone have both the freedom and the capability to fashion a new world order. There can be no doubt but that the world is launched on a new order of things, but whether the rest of the world is willing to tag along with us is

precisely the point from which our seemingly endless conflicts emerge. This book is about the dream of American empire, which has emerged from the Second World War, to be revealed fully in wake of the Cold War. The first three chapters address empire in a modern world.

This book is in part a work of history, detailing two historical records that shed light on the progress of the new world order. The remainder of part 1 is devoted to comparisons with two other empires, each of which presents valuable lessons for America. One is itself recent: the British Empire of the last two centuries and the parallels between us are, of course, more than merely accidental. The other is ancient Athens and her ill-fated empire. Like Athens, America is a true democracy. For her, democracy undermined the dream of empire, and I will argue that we are caught in the same dilemma as Athens.

As valuable as historical parallels are, they are never a substitute for the actual flow of events in the field. The other historical record starts in the middle part of this book, parts 2 and 3, with a recitation of modern American history, stressing both how we evolved into our imperial ambitions starting about a century ago (part 2), and how we are implementing what we proclaim to be the New World Order and the New American Century (part 3). Our ambitions have presented us with a challenge that the British Empire never really faced. Britain, along with France, Spain, and other western European countries, expanded imperially by overrunning rather backward tribal regions around the world. Except for India, whose civilization in no way suffered by comparison with Europe, conquest was almost too easy, and even in the case of India, France and Britain arrived at a most propitious moment in history as the previous weak central government lost whatever bit of legitimacy it still held on to. The New World—with or without *order*—is a very different place than the world of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. It is a world growing up, and its development has produced powerful rivals, most notably the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China. The New American Century, if it is to be achieved, cannot abide rivals, but history has conferred large rivals on us anyway. The book concludes in part 4 with a survey of, first, the progress of our intensifying rivalries and where they are leading us. We see from current events that now we have a difficult choice to make: whether to redefine our goals to accommodate rivals or to confront them militarily and risk a conflict too deep and broad that no one will emerge a winner. The outlines of that choice are becoming clear in the course of our wars and the world economy.

Finally, we conclude in chapter 18 with a discourse on an alternative to perpetual, ruinous conflict. At the end of the Second World War, America seemed to have chosen a very different path: through the United Nations to mutual cooperation. It is an ideal that we need to rediscover, even while we recognize that there is a need for a binding legal framework for international cooperation. Simply meeting with ambassadors from other nations in New York City does not produce any outpouring of bonhomie strong enough to overcome the worst instincts of a very warlike world. The management of world affairs has to be taken over by a structure of laws and law enforcement capable of resolving conflicts and of holding the parties to compliance. This is the tradition that we as Americans proudly proclaim as our rule of law, although the burden and the folly of the imperial dream have caused us to part from it in practice. But it is the only future that works, just as the laws of a single country keep the peace and, in the main, assure the just resolution of competing interests and desires. The history of recent times makes this case compellingly: what we are trying to do unilaterally is not working and is only going to become more costly and impractical. It is time to return to our roots in law, one grounded on the natural law that the wisest of the Athenians already envisioned at the very moment that their empire was being torn apart by her enemies.