Empire has struck back with a vengeance. Half a century after the process of decolonization banished it to radical academic circles, the notion of “empire” has re-emerged among international relations theorists and foreign policy analysts struggling to understand American foreign policy in the “unipolar” era. Such thinkers increasingly tend to assume that America is an empire. Indeed, the moniker “empire” is no longer reserved for critics of American foreign policy; it is an accepted term in analytic, if not political, discourse, and some even argue that the United States should act in a more forthrightly imperial manner. This discussion has proved fruitful in raising questions about means and ends, the nature and limits of American power, and the efficacy of “hard power” in promoting democratization. On the other hand, the debate has failed to touch on the realities of the American empire, the form that it takes on its so-called frontiers, and the role played by the U.S. military in shaping its character. Robert Kaplan has attempted to fill this vacuum with Imperial Grunts: The American Military on the Ground.

Kaplan, a journalist who has monopolized the genre of “current affairs travel writing” with his books Balkan Ghosts and The Coming Anarchy, evinces little doubt that the United States is history’s latest imperial power. This book is less a case for empire than a tour of the American empire’s frontiers and the men—heirs of Rudyard Kipling’s Tommy Atkins—who conduct its policy on the periphery. Kaplan argues for the kind of empire the United States ought to be, making Imperial Grunts a more interesting contribution to the empire debate than another is-it-or-isn’t-it tract. Unlike historians Niall Ferguson and Max Boot, who have both argued that the United States should more openly embrace an imperial role and redesign its institutions to support empire, Kaplan rejects the idea of a massive, hulking state weighed down by the bloated accoutrements of imperial rule. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of limiting the scale of America’s imperial commitments in order to improve their efficacy.

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Kaplan’s empire is one for the information age. Whereas the European empires of the late nineteenth century were at least partially built in pursuit of economies of scale, and therefore required large-scale commitments of men and materiel to their maintenance, the American Empire in the twenty-first century is, to Kaplan, an empire without agglomerative instincts. If America’s is an empire that, as Niall Ferguson argues, “dare not speak its name,” it is for the best; what Kaplan demonstrates in *Imperial Grunts* is that the less visible the imperial mission, the greater the chances of its succeeding. “The more subtle and cautious its application of power, the greater would be America’s sustaining impact,” writes Kaplan. “The United States could hold sway over the world only quietly, off camera, so to speak.” Trying to reforge the British Empire with American power would be a futile task: Consider whether the British Empire would have lasted centuries if a global media hungry to fill a twenty-four-hour news cycle had scrutinized its activities daily. The American empire must contend with a global media that immediately apprises critics of its failings. Thus, were a highly visible, even boastful, empire to be desirable, it would be impossible to build in a world where small states can wield “power over opinion” through the United Nations and other multilateral institutions. The American empire of the twenty-first century will necessarily have a smaller footprint (Iraq notwithstanding), leaving it less exposed to its enemies and critics while at the same time making it more effective in shoring up emerging democratic governments.

The essence of the American empire as seen by Kaplan could be encapsulated by a slogan from the multinational bank HSBC: “Never underestimate the importance of local knowledge.” In his grand tour of America’s less visible military deployments, including locales such as Mukalla, Yemen, Zamboanga, the Philippines, and Zamyn-Uud, Mongolia, upon which he lavishes romantic detail, Kaplan demonstrates how small detachments of U.S. Special Forces or Marines build relationships with “frontier” governments and militaries to advance America’s strategic and political interests. Their missions are multifarious: in Colombia, the U.S. military combats the drug trade; in Yemen, it fights terrorism; in Mongolia, it trains the Mongolian military to patrol their borders, defending Mongolian sovereignty and its nascent democratic government. What these missions have in common is that they serve both American interests and ideals, creating space for the spread of more democratic, or less authoritarian, governments while achieving specific strategic goals.

The relationships forged by the U.S. military in these frontier locales figure heavily in Kaplan’s account, becoming a form of soft power, a way to make governments “want what you want.” The soldiers and marines portrayed
by Kaplan, mostly noncommissioned or junior officers, do not appear overbearing in their conduct of imperial affairs and demonstrate a cultural sensitivity that has been gravely lacking in Iraq. In this sense, the hero of the book is Lieutenant Colonel Tom Wilhelm, the U.S. Army’s man in Mongolia who, without fanfare, traverses the Mongolia steppe and the Gobi Desert, solidifying ties with his Mongolian counterparts, aiming to “make the descendents of Genghis Khan the ‘peacekeeping Gurkhas’ of the American Empire.” Colonel Wilhelm and his fellow empire builders, whom Kaplan regards as the heirs of the troopers who subdued “Injun Country,” enjoy the same latitude that previous imperial agents have enjoyed. But in contrast to earlier eras, that latitude depends largely on the discretion of policymakers in Washington, D.C. because of the modern command-and-control capabilities at their disposal.

Although Kaplan does not devote an entire chapter to the imperial government in Washington, he constantly alludes to U.S. elites in the Northeast corridor, casting aspersions on the tortured reasoning of the chattering classes who lack the simple wisdom of the grunts among whom Kaplan has ingratiated himself. As Kaplan writes, “Intellectuals reward complexity and refinement; the military, simplicity and bottom-line assessments.” He makes perfectly clear which of these approaches he prefers. In fact, at certain moments in Imperial Grunts, Kaplan begins to sound like Theodore Roosevelt at his most belligerent. Like Roosevelt or Rudyard Kipling, Kaplan aims to represent the soldiers of the empire to their political masters, who, after all, are the ones reading his books. But rather than cautioning the U.S. foreign policy establishment to pay closer attention to the grunt work of empire being performed far from the think tank seminars and university research groups, he brutally castigates America’s elites for their myopia, implying that the new empire builders would be better off without the nuanced insights of the armchair experts in the metropole.

Though Kaplan is not wrong to observe that there is a significant gap between the fighting men and women of the armed forces and U.S. elites, he is mistaken to assume that an empire, particularly one as extensive as the United States’, can be run exclusively from the periphery by highly empowered “strategic corporals.” Independent soldiers, diplomats, and adventurers may have played a significant role in expanding the British Empire in Africa and Asia, but empires still require management by political elites. In the United States, oversight by the government and the foreign policy establishment are essential to ensure that the activities of the empire builders are consistent with the larger strategic goals determined by responsible authorities in the U.S. government. Political leaders and intellectuals must consider the strate-
gic and moral questions of empire from which Kaplan’s grunts often demur. Indeed, the strength of American society is that it is well situated to debate the questions raised by imperialism, thanks to its sophisticated intellectual establishment. If anything, the information revolution, while forcing the American empire to play a less visible role, also enables the agents on the periphery to consult with political officials, ensuring that the tactical means chosen by the military align with the government’s strategic ends. While the ability to communicate between Washington and the outposts of empire may occasionally relegate “local knowledge” to a lower priority, on balance, it leads to a more sustainable imperialism.

To support his argument against interference by elites in the imperial project, Kaplan concludes his tour attached to the First Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, First Marine Division in Iraq, where he finds old-fashioned imperialism. Instead of a web of informal relationships, he observes a massive, intimidating troop presence. Instead of independent warriors, he finds the heavy, clumsy hand of Washington as represented by the visit of a delegation of Marine generals in the midst of the first battle for Fallujah in April 2004. Kaplan writes:

The U.S. military was everywhere burdened by a top-heavy bureaucracy, with too many layers of staff that needed pampering. Thus, it was organizationally miscast for dealing with twenty-first-century insurgencies. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, as I had seen, the U.S. military had set up structures it was historically comfortable with, not those particularly suited for the challenge at hand.

The problem, therefore, may not be civilian interference in the management of the empire, but rather a military that is fundamentally uninterested and unprepared for the tasks associated with an imperial military. At present, the detachments Kaplan visits are more the exception than the rule: the U.S. military is still doctrinally and technologically oriented to conventional warfare. Even with the increased recruitment of Special Forces since September 11, the bulk of the U.S. military remains temperamentally unsuited to the difficult task of building durable relationships with partners. The mass of its fighting men and women still lack the necessary language skills, the necessary cultural training, and, ultimately, the necessary staying power required for applying the light-touch imperialism that Kaplan documents.

What is clear from Kaplan’s account is that the Iraq campaign may be the last of its kind. The maintenance of the American empire over the coming
decades will increasingly resemble the political and social work performed by Lieutenant Colonel Wilhelm and his ilk—the means by which America will consolidate its partnerships and create the space for the advance of democracy. Accordingly, the American empire is, and will be, a profoundly limited one. The tasks performed by Kaplan’s imperial grunts, though important, are not the large-scale institution building of empires past. Indeed, though the deepening of democracy may ultimately require links between the U.S. military and the civilian components of the imperial project, such as the Peace Corps, U.S. Agency for International Development, and the National Endowment for Democracy, it seems that the American empire can do little more than try to create the space in which democratic institutions can take root, with Iraq an extreme example. Thus the American empire may be extensive, but it is and will remain shallow. Still there is no question that the American empire will succeed only insofar as it is able to fly under the radar screen. Only by using hard power discretely will the United States be able to enhance the legitimacy of its imperial project and expand the borders of democracy, a strategy that will require steady cooperation between Washington and its imperial grunts who man the outposts of the American empire’s distant frontiers. ☐