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Book Author(s): FAYE CARONAN

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Conclusion

Imagining the End of Empire

So I ask of you, you can ask me, too, in what direction we're headed
for a world that's brand new?
—Johneric Concordia, "Do You Want to Know?"

The institutionalized history of U.S. imperialism in the Philippines and Puerto Rico tells a story of benevolent assimilation. In this narrative the United States reluctantly and selflessly developed the Philippine and Puerto Rican economies, offered these islands military protection, established "sovereign" democratic governments, and provided public education to civilize racially inferior Filipinos and Puerto Ricans. The United States recognized when its good work on these islands was completed and left Filipinos and Puerto Ricans to manage their own affairs. Any subsequent problems after the end of the colonial relationship are the responsibility of the islands and not of the United States. The Philippines and Puerto Rico have been constructed in U.S. hegemonic culture for the express purpose of justifying U.S. imperialism through a narrative of U.S. exceptionalism. For this reason, Filipino Americans and U.S. Puerto Ricans only become visibly legible for a mainstream audience when they can affirm narratives of U.S. exceptionalism as former colonial subjects or when they affirm narratives of U.S. multiculturalism as ethnic Americans.

Pop singer Bruno Mars's biography potentially embodies the intersection of multiple histories of U.S. colonialism. He was born in Hawaii to an ethnically Puerto Rican father and ethnically Filipino mother. Locating Bruno Mars within a history of U.S. imperialism, we might guess that his father and mother descend from Puerto Rican and Filipino migrants who were recruited to work on Hawaiian plantations in the early twentieth century.[1] Or perhaps his family more recently arrived in Hawaii, having been stationed there by the U.S. military. Or maybe it is a combination of the two. These explanations

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of his diverse heritage make historical sense, but the mainstream media do not try to offer historical explanations for his heritage. Rather, Mars's diverse heritage is deployed to reproduce lucid U.S. multiculturalism.[2] In 2014 Mars headlined the Super Bowl halftime show, evidence of his commercial success and mainstream popularity. The Super Bowl is among the most-watched live television events. Companies pay the highest premiums to advertise during the game. Mars's performance demonstrates how the products of U.S. imperialism can be hypervisible while the history of U.S. imperialism that should accompany those products is completely obscured. What is foregrounded is the celebration of the United States as multicultural and postracial. After all, how could the dark-skinned Bruno Mars be so successful and popular if the United States is a racist society?

In the preceding chapters I have demonstrated how Filipino American culture and U.S. Puerto Rican culture across various genres critique narratives of U.S. exceptionalism that justify U.S. colonial projects. However, these critiques are obscured either by hegemonic culture's incorporation or marginalization of the cultural productions. I return now to cultural theorist Raymond Williams's conceptualization of selective traditions. As quoted in the introduction to this book, Williams argues that "where a version of the past is used to ratify the present and to indicate directions for the future, . . . a selective tradition is at once powerful and vulnerable. Powerful because it is so skilled in making active selective connections, dismissing those it does not want as 'out of date' or 'nostalgic,' attacking those it cannot incorporate as 'unprecedented' or 'alien.'"[3] Hegemonic narratives of U.S. multiculturalism, U.S. exceptionalism, and the good immigrant all function to define and discipline Filipino Americans and U.S. Puerto Ricans. These narratives are all selective traditions that have privileged narratives of Filipino and Puerto Rican history that affirm a story that the United States tells about itself: a story of a reluctant, benevolent, global power and of a progressive, egalitarian, democratic society. Through the capitalist cultural industry, Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican cultural productions that are popular for a mainstream American audience are carefully marketed to affirm hegemonic U.S. narratives. Novels like *Dogeaters* and *América's Dream*—cultural critiques of U.S. imperialism—are marketed as cultural representations of corrupt national governments and oppressive, traditional, patriarchal cultures that serve as a contrast for an equitable and progressive United States and seem to invite U.S. intervention to fix such problems. Films such as *Yo soy Boricua, pa'que tu lo Sepas!* that demonstrate that continuity of U.S. imperialism from at least 1898 to the present are marketed as works celebrating vibrant minority cultures that showcase U.S. diversity and inclusion. Hegemonic U.S. narratives

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imagine the end of empire as the reproduction of U.S. liberal, democratic, and capitalist values around the world and selects Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican cultural productions that can be interpreted to support such an end.

However, Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican cultural productions that explicitly imagine a different end to empire and cannot easily be packaged to support narratives of U.S. exceptionalism, like *Memories of a Forgotten War* and activist performance poetry, are marginalized. Recognizing the popularity of performance poetry but unable to incorporate the radical critiques it produced, hegemonic U.S. culture instead neutralized those critiques through commodifying the cultural form. In February 2007, Volkswagen ran a television advertisement in the United States featuring a dark-skinned Asian American performance poet. The poet performs in an urban cafe patio at night. His rhythm, seriousness, and intensity are characteristic of hip hop sensibility, of spoken word poetry. He performs to a multiracial audience who drinks coffee as they nod in agreement to the poet's statements: "Conflict boils over like an angry sludge. Politicians lie to us like they've got a grudge. We're in a decaying spiral of fevered ferocity. . . ." The poet is interrupted mid-performance by a white male gleefully driving a white Volkswagen sedan. The driver honks his horn as he drives past the café and shouts "Three V-dubs for under $17,000. Woo-hoo!" The poet pauses. A smile forms on his previously serious face. No longer reading from his poem, he resumes speaking and states "hope springs." This scene abruptly ends, cutting to a shot of the three Volkswagen sedans referenced earlier.[4]

Unlike the poems produced by the performance-poet activists earlier discussed, the poem read by the poet in this advertisement has no substantive critique. The phrase "politicians lie to us like they've got a grudge" indicates to the viewer that this poet distrusts the politicians that represent him, but he gives no specific reason for his distrust. The advertisement suggests that the poet's unhappiness has nothing to do with the failures of his government representatives, because his unhappiness is so easily remedied by the mere mention of affordable German import cars. The key to happiness, it seems, is not to hold the politicians accountable to the public but to consume luxury goods, because the source of unhappiness is not institutional inequality. Individuals are personally unhappy because they have yet to buy the right product. This particular advertisement was one in a series of hope-themed Volkswagen advertisements for their three sedans. Another advertisement in this series represented a white male about to commit suicide by jumping off a billboard; he changes his mind upon hearing the same driver spread the word about the sedans' pricing. Equating the performance-poet activist

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critical of the political system with a suicidal man underscores that the figure of the critical performance poet is to be understood as irrational.

In her study on Hispanic marketing in the United States, Arlene Dávila argues that "ethnic marketing . . . responds to and reflects the fears and anxieties of mainstream U.S. society about its 'others,' thus reiterating the demands for an idealized, good, all-American citizenship in their constructed commercial images and discourses."[5] Given how hip hop has historically been considered an African American form in the U.S. cultural imagination, featuring an Asian American as the performance-poet activist in this advertisement could be understood as recognizing the real diversity of American hip hop, yet I would like to argue that this is not the case. In representing an Asian American performance-poet activist verbalizing critiques, however inarticulate, of the U.S. government, this advertisement references the binary narratives of the undeserving and model minority. Asian Americans were constructed as model minorities to simultaneously construct those in the civil rights movement as undeserving minorities who wasted their time protesting government inequality when they needed only to work hard to succeed.[6] Thus, this advertisement functions as a disciplinary mechanism of performance-poet activists of color, in general, and Asian Americans, in particular, providing a model of what not to be and a model for reformation. A performance-poet activist can become a good, patriotic citizen through consumption.[7]

This Volkswagen advertisement demonstrates how hegemonic U.S. culture dismissed and delegitimized critiques emerging from performance poetry as a cultural form. Since then, performance poetry has been used by other major transnational corporations, including McDonalds. The use of performance poetry in corporate television advertisement shows how U.S. hegemonic culture co-opts emergent cultural forms through incorporation. Raymond Williams describes oppositional emergent forms as reflecting the formation of a new class that challenges hegemonic culture.[8] At the turn of the twenty-first century, performance poetry genres known as spoken-word and slam poetry surged in popularity. At open mic events and slam poetry competitions across the United States, poetry critical of U.S. culture, politics, and history emerged. This is not to suggest all spoken-word and slam poetry produced is oppositional. However, as I elaborated earlier, the few barriers to participating in this cultural form and the active efforts of performance-poet activists to cultivate new poets allowed for poetry that challenges U.S. hegemonic narratives to emerge. Threatened, U.S. hegemonic culture worked to incorporate this emergent cultural form, as evidenced by the Volkswagen commercials and others. Williams states, "Incorporation looks like recog-

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nition, acknowledgement, and thus a form of acceptance. . . . Elements of emergence may indeed be incorporated, but just as often the incorporated forms are merely facsimiles of the genuinely emergent cultural practice."[9] The Volkswagen commercial is a facsimile of spoken word that incorporates style but not substance. In fact, it actively attacks the critical substance of spoken word.

Arguably, the popularity of spoken word peaked sometime between 2005 and 2010. The establishment of a performance-poetry community that predated the popularity of spoken word facilitated the continued use of performance poetry for Nuyorican performance poet's decolonial genealogical work. For this reason, while many of the Nuyorican performance poets I interviewed still identify as poets, most of the Los Angeles Filipino American performance poets I interviewed have since moved on to other cultural forms for their decolonial genealogical work because they question poetry's pedagogical potential due to the commodification of spoken word and the popularity of slam poetry. Alfie Ebojo contrasts the spaces that Los Angeles Filipino American performance poets once frequented with slam poetry venues to underscore how slam poetry does not value the sharing of histories. Whereas she characterizes spoken-word open-mic events as creating a space for people of diverse backgrounds and experiences to share their stories, she describes slam poetry's competitive nature as discouraging people from understanding one another's experiences. The perceived increasing predominance of slam poetry venues that encourage competition instead of collaboration does not foster the formation of safe community spaces for sharing one's ideas through poetry or the authorization of other speakers. Ebojo cites this shift away from more collaborative performance poetry as a major reason that she has switched her artistic focus from poetry to graphic art.[10] Dorian Merina is now a reporter for Free Speech Radio News. Faith Santilla now works organizing healthcare workers in San Francisco. Cheryl Samson works for a Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization that provides music education to at-risk youth to foster better communities. Though many still write poetry and are part of writing collectives, they do not perform their poetry with the same regularity as in the past. In spite of this, those I interviewed continue to advocate for change, whether through programs targeting local communities or through cultural representation involving other cultural forms.

Their transition away from performance poetry can be attributed to several factors. First, these individuals have transitioned to adulthood. Unable to fully support themselves or their families as artists, they secure more stable employment and no longer have the time to perform poetry.[11] The defunding

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of arts programs, including the National Endowment of the Arts, beginning in the 1980s has made it incredibly difficult for independent artists to survive solely on their craft. Conservatives used explicitly sexist and homophobic arguments to cut funding to arts programs that they believed were incubators of radical social change.[12] They advocated that the cultural market would produce diverse artistic productions, free from government intervention, and that consumer-citizens should determine what art gets produced.[13] This assault on public arts funding coupled with the deregulation of telecommunications companies has led to the near impossibility of surviving as an independent artist.[14] As I have demonstrated in this book, the result of a consumer-driven cultural market is the reproduction of hegemonic cultural narratives.

Though I point to ways that spoken-word and slam poetry have been commodified in certain instances, I do not mean to suggest that performance poetry does not continue to be an empowering site where oppositional narratives can emerge. One example where this occurs is through Youth Speaks, a nonprofit organization based in San Francisco that seeks to empower young people to articulate their life stories through the arts. Among their programs is the annual Brave New Voices competition.[15] Such organizations seek to establish and/or continue poetry communities like as those in New York City. The fact that many of the Nuyorican performance-poet activists still actively identify as poets—whereas Los Angeles-based Filipino American performance-poet activists I interviewed have moved on from performing poetry—points to the different nature of the poetry communities in New York City and Los Angeles. As I previously discussed the Nuyorican poetry community is an establishment with decades-old roots. Los Angeles does not offer similarly robust resources, though the fact that Tuesday Nights Project has managed to provide a continuous open mic may indicate that one has now been established for Asian Americans. However, I understand also the transition of the Filipino American performance poets I interviewed as another indicator of their roles as organic intellectuals in their communities. Gramsci describes organic intellectuals as "never [tiring] of repeating [their] own arguments (though offering literary variation of form)."[16] Whereas some performance poets have used the cultural capital they accumulated to become educators in order to support themselves financially, other performance poets have chosen alternative employment where they can similarly make use of their cultural capital. In their continued cultural production, their community organizing, their teaching, their journalism, and their providing community services, these former Los Angeles Filipino American performance

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poets still articulate their genealogies of global power and work to address social consequences of these genealogies. The difference is that they have found new tools that they find more effective in working toward an end to empire and its consequences.

Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican culture contend that empire has not ended. Global capitalism and supranational organizations enable the continued subordination and exploitation of the postcolonial developing world. Though the colonial period in the Philippines and Puerto Rico officially ended shortly after World War II, neither U.S. empire nor the United States' will to global power has ended. Literary theorist Victor Bascara argues that imperialism today depends on the converging ideas of multiculturalism and globalization because these are "the leading antidotes to an accumulation of historical forces and conditions antagonistic to peace and progress, such as war and underdevelopment."[17] Mainstream U.S. ethnic cultural productions can be used to support U.S.-led globalization and U.S. multicultural narratives. They represent dire problems in the developing world that require humanitarian solutions and provide a prescription for such problems. Novels such as Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* and Afghan American Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) are representative of popular ethnic novels and films in the United States that represent government corruption and human despair in developing countries. I am in no way suggesting that these cultural productions are completely uncritical of the United States, imperialism, or globalization. However, taken on face value these cultural representations can be used to justify U.S. humanitarian or military intervention. One other hegemonic narrative reproduced in U.S. ethnic cultural productions is the narrative of immigrant assimilation that depicts determined individuals who leave their impoverished homelands and find success in the United States through hard work. Their American-born children culturally assimilate and build on their parents' success. Examples of the immigration and assimilation narrative in American popular culture include the films *The Namesake* (2007) and *Joy Luck Club* (1993). Ironically, the success and popularity of these assimilation narratives are used to celebrate U.S. acceptance of minority cultures. That is, assimilation narratives are used to affirm a narrative of U.S. multiculturalism. Though both globalization and multiculturalism seemingly celebrate difference, both actually advocate for *assimilation to* Western cultures. The former recommends developing nations to replicate U.S. democracy and capitalist system to facilitate their own national success. The latter recommends ethnic minorities to assimilate to U.S. culture in order to facilitate personal economic success. For the United States the end of empire is assimilation:

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nations assimilating to a democratic, capitalist, global order and individuals assimilating to a progressive U.S. culture. Bruno Mars's appropriation by the mainstream cultural market for lucid multiculturalism and U.S. postraciality represents one imagining of the end of empire.

Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican culture imagine a different end to empire, an end that entails the empowerment of those who have been exploited by imperialism and subsequently by globalization. Hagedorn and Santiago argue nationalist movements need to meaningfully incorporate feminist nationalism in order to construct a truly decolonial nationalism. Griggers demands that the United States recognize the excessive violence during the Philippine-American war to allow for a more honest and equitable relationship to form between the two countries and between Filipinos and Americans. Perez argues that Puerto Ricans need and deserve political representation, implicitly advocating that Puerto Rico needs to be given either more political sovereignty or voting representation in Washington, D.C. Filipino American and Nuyorican performance-poet activists construct genealogies of global power that encourage disidentifcation with power and work toward empowering people of color in their own communities. Put simply, Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican culture imagine "a world that's brand new."

While Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican novels and films contribute to imagining a world that's brand new, performance-poet activists actively work toward that world. May 3–5, 2002, more than one hundred Puerto Rican, U.S. Puerto Ricans, and other artists against the U.S. military bomb testing gathered in Vieques to participate in "Viequethon 2002: Poetry and Concert for Peace." The international group of artists joined the local community in protesting and demanding an end to U.S. military bomb testing on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. Despite former President Clinton's agreement to put an end to U.S. military testing in Vieques by 2003, President George W. Bush deemed more testing necessary after the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. The Viequethon was an organized response protesting the renewed bomb testing, regardless of the use of unarmed test dummies, and demanding the U.S. Navy withdrawal from Vieques promised in 2003. The event was organized by two New York Puerto Ricans: poet Pedro Pietri and photographer Adal Maldonado. In addition to poetry readings and performances, they also held seminars, told stories, and read poetry to children at a local public school.[18] The ability of New York Puerto Ricans to organize and participate in an event in Vieques points to the collaborations between Puerto Rican activists in New York and those in Puerto Rico enabled by Puerto Ricans' U.S. citizenship.

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In 1999, City University of New York (CUNY) students organized a strike against tuition increases and the end of open admissions. Lenina Nadal describes how students from Puerto Rico with experience organizing hundreds of thousands workers in Puerto Rico during the 1998 general strike against the privatization of the Puerto Rican Telephone Company came to New York to help the CUNY students' organizing efforts and to enlist the support of the local Healthcare Workers Union (SEIU 1199) and the transit workers' union. The relationships established during the CUNY strike led to more activist collaborations between CUNY students and University of Puerto Rico (UPR) students. After the CUNY strike, Nadal returned the favor by participating in student activist struggles at the UPR while visiting the island, helping students organize for smaller class sizes and more parking spaces.[19] Such collaborations and sustained relationships of students of the same generation in Puerto Rico and the U.S. confirm Georges E. Fouron and Nina Glick-Schiller's assertion that transnational social fields simultaneously shape the identities of immigrants and their children in the U.S. as well as their counterparts in the homeland.[20] These particular transnational practices that Nadal describes are remarkable because they provide examples of a circular "long-distance nationalism." Fouron and Glick-Schiller define "long-distance nationalism" as "ideas about belonging that link people living in various geographic locations and motivate or justify their taking action in relationship to an ancestral territory and its government."[21] The transnational activist coalitions between CUNY and UPR not only show U.S. Puerto Ricans taking action in their home islands but also Puerto Ricans taking action to aid Puerto Ricans in the diaspora.

In contrast to the circular cultural and activist exchanges between Puerto Ricans in New York and in Puerto Rico, such exchanges between Filipinos and Filipino Americans are less feasible. As Philippine citizens, Filipinos cannot come to the United States without a visa. Obtaining a tourist visa is especially difficult for young Filipinos who are assumed likely to become undocumented immigrants. These conditions make the circulation of activists and artists less possible. Filipino Americans can travel to and from the Philippines as they please, but the expense of a round-trip ticket and the length of the transpacific flight to the Philippines also limit the number of trips that many Filipino Americans in Los Angeles can make.

The cultural exchanges that occur between Filipinos in Los Angeles and Filipinos in the Philippines depend largely on Filipino American travel to the Philippines. Filipino American performance poets perform in the Philippines to introduce their work to Filipinos. To introduce Philippine performance poetry to Filipino Americans, poets returning from the Philippines either

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recount their experiences or bring back examples of Philippine performance poetry to share. This is precisely what Filipino American performance poet and chair of Kabataang Maka-Bayan (KmB) USA (also known as Pro-People Youth) Johneric Concordia did. He spent four months in the Philippines in 2004 to experience firsthand the conditions that people living in Mindanao face as a result of joint U.S.-Philippine military operations there. While he was there, he performed a poem titled "Do You Want to Know?" The poem debunks the American Dream often packaged for Filipinos who long to immigrate to the United States. Johneric begins his poem by asking the audience, "Do you want to know what's happening in my town?" In his answer, he paints an image of misunderstanding, distrust, and violence in an inner city: "This kid was shot with a glock by another kid who would not appreciate the statement the other kid wouldn't talk. The bullet lodged in his heart and bloodless died on the spot. No second chance to advance for a future. All that it got: sixteen buried and wasted, lifer incarcerated. The concrete conditions we live in rarely debated. Up in congress, I guess our life is worthless, feel no justice, peace, solace."[22] Whereas Filipinos in the Philippines often hear stories about higher wages and economic success from their Filipino American counterparts, Concordia represents the life that low-skilled immigrants and their families face in the United States. The desire to secure a better future for their children often motivates Filipinos to immigrate to the United States. By representing two youngsters whose futures are cut short by violence, Concordia argues that the United States does not always offer a better future for immigrant children. Likewise, he insinuates that the conditions that foster such violence are unlikely to change because the U.S. lawmakers do not value the youngsters' lives. The image he paints for Philippine audiences contrasts starkly to immigrant success stories that reproduce the U.S. as a land of opportunity for anyone.

To complete the Philippine—Filipino American cultural exchange, Concordia wrote a second verse to this poem representing the struggles of the indigenous minority in the southern Philippines. Upon returning to the United States, he embarked on a twelve-city tour to perform the new version of "Do You Want to Know?" and then report back on what he observed during his time in the Philippines. He intended to perform his poem for Filipino American audiences, so he chose venues in major U.S. and Canadian cities with large Filipino populations. The second verse of his poem begins with the question, "Do you want to know what's happening back home?" To respond to this question, Concordia depicts how one man's family was murdered by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP): "Here's the story of one father.

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His child ripped from the womb. The mother died pretty soon, an example to anyone who would dare to assume, challenge AFP goons will bring about your own doom. They'll destroy all you love and keep whatever they can, too. Mother, daughter were buried. The rotten smells carried, found by the husband. They were just recently married. It's a nightmare he swears he can never wake from, so he hikes up the hills with a pack and a gun."[23] By uncovering the circumstances that compel Filipinos to join guerilla resistance movements in the mountains, Concordia illustrates that guerilla fighters have legitimate reasons for opposing the Philippine government. This representation challenges the construction of guerilla resistance in Mindanao as terrorists by the Philippine and U.S. governments and the international media.

Toward the end of both verses of "Do You Want to Know?" Johneric Concordia states, "So I ask of you, you can ask me, too. In what direction we're headed for a world that's brand new?"[24] With this question he encourages the audience to become actively involved in finding solutions to problems facing people of color in the United States and peasants in the Philippines. Ray Ramirez also asks his audience to take action by stating, "It's war. Which side you joining?" in his poem "Drop the Bomb."[25] Directly addressing or questioning the audience in their performances is a tactic New York Puerto Rican and Los Angeles Filipino American performance poets often use to organize their communities. They perform their poetry to build interracial, interethnic, transnational coalitions that bring together local concerns around the globe. They build coalitions that hegemonic constructions of race, immigration, and U.S. exceptionalism actively discourage and therefore work toward a different end of empire.

All of the cultural productions I analyzed in this book critique U.S. imperialism in its covert and overt forms. The novelists, filmmakers, and performance poets challenge the eventual outcomes of benevolent assimilation, thus questioning the initial sincerity of the promises of U.S. imperialism as exceptional. They illustrate the continuing social inequalities that are consequences of U.S. global power. Such critiques are telling in a moment wherein the United States attempts to construct an end to its interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States may celebrate the success of the democratic institutions it established and the gains that the Iraqi and Afghani people have made toward sustaining their own democratic nations, but the cultural narratives discussed in this book indicate that what we are witnessing is not the end of U.S. imperialism in the Middle East but a transition to a new beginning. A new beginning of political sovereignty given with strings attached,

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where political corruption is blamed entirely on power-hungry local leaders, not on the process of establishing democratic institutions under military occupation. The United States will take credit for the new beginning it has given to Iraq and Afghanistan but not take responsibility for the consequences of insisting on that new beginning.

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