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## Empire's Age-Old Aim: Wealth and Power

Lawrence Wilkerson

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In his very excellent book, *King Leopold's Ghost*, Adam Hochschild registers a chapter-long lament near the book's end that even though in the preceding pages he has chronicled in an unprecedented manner the crimes against humanity of Leopold's Congo enterprise, so what? Such crimes were almost a concomitant of colonial empire. Britain, France, Germany, the United States -- all the so-called civilized colonial powers -- were guilty of such crimes. Whether murder and plunder in India, slaughter in Algeria, devastation in Cameroon, or torture and massacre in the Philippines, few western powers can rightfully claim innocence. And, perhaps most worrisome, their national myths mask or even convert most of the crimes, and what the myths don't eliminate or alter poor education and memory lapses do.

Surely, however, at this opening to the 21st Century, we have made some progress. Our constant rhetoric -- particularly from Washington -- asserts that we have. International criminal justice and human rights are pursued with relish, are they not?

Not according to the example of Richard Bruce Cheney. As has been the case since humankind began to organize itself, Dick Cheney believes that wealth and power -- his and his cronies wealth and power foremost -- are still the relevant strategic objectives of empire. King Leopold of Belgium is not dead, simply reincarnated in a more modern form. Torturing people is dependent on a nation's supposed needs, killing people on the expediency of policy, waging war

on monetary and commercial gain, and lying to the people is a highly reputable tactic in pursuit of each. Leopold would love Dick Cheney.

Cheney even models Leopold: never in the dangerous fray himself (five draft deferments, e.g.), a master of bureaucratic manipulation and intrigue, in love to a fault with secrecy, willing to undertake any crime under the sun so long as it leads to profit, deeply relishing every moment of evil he is able to engineer, and a master of masking it all through adroit, politically-attuned public relations aimed at people too stupid to question him -- all while paying absolutely no attention to what his past clearly demonstrates he has done, thus thoroughly frustrating the decent folks all around him. Leopold to a "T."

This modern man, Cheney, however needs no kingship, no ornate palaces, no personally-owned colony like the Congo; Cheney's writ is the world. It is all of humankind that Cheney would torture, enslave, murder, or plunder if it were required. And Cheney is the ultimate arbiter of whether it is required. Take a look at that face as he tells the American people and the world in 2002 that "Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us."

Now, wait a dozen years and envision the same face, somewhat leaner and -- if possible -- meaner, [saying](#) on the editorial pages of his *Journal* as Iraq implodes: "Rarely has a U.S. president been so wrong about so much at the expense of so many." He is of course talking about President Obama, not President George W. Bush. Leopold, whom the American poet Vachel Lindsay, has "Burning in Hell...", must be yearning for Dick's arrival because no one, except perhaps for Leopold himself, would register such a claim in the face of such self-demeaning evidence to the contrary.

In the same chapter of his book referenced above, Hochschild writes: "The Congo offers a striking example of the politics of forgetting." He is right. But it is more than forgetting. It is an abject lack of political courage to hold people accountable.

In King Leopold's case, Belgium and the wider world want to move on and not look back. Holding people accountable would mean holding themselves accountable. That central Africa is today still an unfolding tragedy of exploitation, commercial rivalries, and indigenous incapacity partly an inheritance of colonialism, matters little. The world moves on relentlessly to fulfill its oligarchies' desires for wealth and power. Suitable rhetoric is developed and delivered to keep the masses quiescent. The Leopolds and Cheney's of the world are privately lauded for their hard-headed realpolitik while appropriately tut-tutted in public. Presidents and prime ministers proclaim that it would be nationally disruptive to hold people accountable for their crimes and, besides, they are more concerned for the future than the past.

Which is why most people in America today live in the moment and in the moment alone. If they realized and cared about the past, if they used that realization and care to make the future better, they would not be able to live in the moment so well. In that respect, Leopold and Cheney are right: wealth and power is all that matters.

