Chalmers Johnson’s *Nemesis* is the third in a trilogy—*The Blowback Trilogy*—about the changing nature of the American political and economic system in its exercise of power in the world, and the legacies and consequences of those changes for both America and the world. The other books in the series are *Blowback* (2000) and *The Sorrows of Empire* (2005). The three books are published as part of *The American Empire Project* (http://www.americanempireproject.com/index.asp).

*Blowback* attracted much attention for its prophetic explanation of the ways in which American economic, political and military influence in the modern world was coming back to haunt it through the rise of anti-American attitudes and reactions across the world. The most significant recent expression of that phenomenon was the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York.

*Nemesis* presents a clear-minded and persuasive assessment of the consequences for American domestic politics and society of the ways in which the exercise of American imperial power has evolved. Johnson focuses on the ongoing growth of militarism and influence of the military-industrial complex (M-IC) on the American system and their distortions of the political and economic foundations of the American republic.

A series of chapters examine the influence of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as an increasingly unfettered and private means of the exercise of Presidential power; the corrosive impact on host societies of the presence of US military bases and other facilities in foreign countries; a detailed analysis of the ways in which that corrosion expresses itself in the operation of US military bases in Japan—in particular, the scope that US agreements with the Japanese Government to host US bases allow for basic legal rights to be circumvented—and the militarisation of the US Space program. These chapters examine these issues in considerable detail and with an enviable command of sources. The overall impact of Johnson’s analysis in these chapters is very sobering and connects directly with his blowback thesis—that the particular ways in which the...
US pursues its imperial interests produces reactions and responses that should not be unexpected or surprising.

The main argument of *Nemesis* though focuses on the domestic political and economic implications of America’s imperial commitments and its more recent adaptations to blowback. Johnson argues that the general directions have been evident for some time. For example, the M-IC has had powerful domestic political influence and economic impacts since the end of WW2. What is new for Johnson are the ways in which the system is becoming more secretive and sinister with very negative impacts on the operation on the American republic. For example, with the rise of the neo-conservatives during George W Bush’s Presidency, the principle of the separation of powers has increasingly been put to one side on the basis of arguments about the need for greater Presidential and bureaucratic autonomy to respond to the problem of terrorism. Decisions have been made—the most significant being that to invade and prosecute the war in Iraq—that wider and more balanced assessment in a system with proper checks and balances might have resisted.

In economic terms, Johnson argues that American military, defence and security commitments have become very expensive and unsustainable with an increasingly destabilising impact on the American economy and society. The M-IC has always been thought about and practiced as a form of what Johnson calls *military Keynesianism*. What this form of economic demand management does is to lock in very inflexible and dependent relationships between government and private industry in the military economy. With economic changes of recent times which have seen other American industry decline and economies like China and Japan grow, the M-IC is increasingly dependent on high levels of international borrowing from those countries. Johnson suggests that with the decline of American economic power, the American military and related commitments express imperial over-reach and ‘threaten the nation with bankruptcy’.

Johnson examines the specific trends from the perspective of an argument about imperial pathologies and makes a comparison of the American case with the Romans and British. For America, he argues that ‘we are on the cusp of losing our democracy for the sake of keeping our empire’. The current political arrangements in America are
less and less able to tame the militarism that is a condition of the maintenance of empire. The British path of giving up empire to keep democracy does not seem to be available to contemporary America.

Johnson is a friend of the American political system and its philosophical foundations. *Nemesis* is not the work of an anti-American critic. He wants to rescue the American system from itself—or from the political and economic forces that currently shape it. He sees direct democratic expression as the best hope in achieving that. While some have argued that Johnson’s trilogy is excessively alarmist and pessimistic, he sees America’s current problems very clear-mindedly while acknowledging that other political paths are open. Whether those paths are taken will depend on the strength of the resistance to the pathologies he analyses so well.

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