Globalization has in the past been associated with the creation and maintenance of empires for two reasons. First, globalization is simply the process of integrating previously loosely linked or even autarkic countries and regions through creating a common economic space in which goods, services, labour and capital can move relatively freely. Empires created this common economic space. Globalization has, thus, been a cyclical phenomenon for millennia, being associated with the rise and fall of empires.

Apart from the creation of a common economic space, past empires also promoted prosperity in this space by providing the essential public good of protecting the life, liberty and property of their citizens through their Pax. Though nationalist rhetoric has tended to undervalue this public good, a simple thought experiment shows how important for the most basic human needs it is. Consider an ordinary citizen of either of the two of the supposedly benighted 19th century empires, the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman, who is contemplating the likelihood of his grandchildren living, surviving and passing on their property to their children. Now consider a similar citizen of any
of the post imperial successor state's during the last century
looking at the same prospect. There could be no doubt of the
great deterioration in life-chances that has befallen the
citizens of the successor states. The situation is, of course,
even worse in Africa, even if we consider the inhuman and brutal
regime of Leopold's Belgian empire in the Congo. The main
beneficiaries of the Age of Nations have been the 'nationalist'
predatory elites who have failed to provide even this most
elemental of public goods- law and order- for human thriving. Not
surprisingly in many of the successor states of empires-
particularly in Africa- ordinary people now look back
nostalgically on the imperial past.

These empires can further be distinguished as being
either multi-ethnic or homogenizing. The former included the
Roman, the Abbasid, the various Indian empires, the Ottoman,
Austro-Hungarian and the British, where little attempt was made
to change 'the habits of the heart' of the constituent groups- or
if it was, as in the early British Raj, an ensuing backlash led
to a reversal of this policy.

The homogenizing empires, by contrast, sought to
create a 'national' identity out of the multifarious groups in
their territory. The best example of these is China, where the
ethnic mix was unified as Hans through the bureaucratic device of
writing their names in Chinese characters in a Chinese form, and
suppressing any subsequent discontent through the subtle
repression of a bureaucratic authoritarian state. In our own time
the American 'melting pot' creating Americans out of a multitude
of ethnicities by adherence to a shared civic culture and a
common language, has created a similar homogenized imperial state.

Similarly, the supposedly ancient 'nations' of Britain and France were created through a state-led homogenizing process. India, by contrast is another Imperial State whose political unity is a legacy of the British Raj, but whose multi-ethnic character is underwritten by an ancient hierarchical structure which accommodates these different groups as different castes.

With the end of the Cold War and the fears it engendered- which kept this broad structure of nation states with their distinct forms of 'national identity' intact- we are seemingly moving into a post modern world where there are varying currents which are undermining these familiar structures, as I have outlined in previous columns.

In the multi-ethnic imperial nation states, on the one hand, we have assertions of cultural self determination, leading in many cases to bloody conflicts: from the successor states of the former Yugoslavia, the Kurds in Turkey, the Kashmiris and Sikhs in India, the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the various regional separatists in Indonesia and numerous ethnic conflicts in Africa of which that between the Hutus and the Tutsis was the most bloody. This desire to assert a distinct cultural identity is not limited to the multi-ethnic imperial nation states. It is also happening in the 'homogenized' nation states. The partial deconstruction of the United Kingdom- with the establishment of Scottish, Welsh and Irish parliaments- the continuing demands for Quebec to secede from Canada, the continuing tensions between the Wallons and the Flemish in Belgium, and the rise of separatist
movements (still without mass appeal) in the US are all part of this trend.

But side by side with these centrifugal decentralizing tendencies there are also centripetal ones as represented by the attempt to resurrect a new Holy Roman Empire through the ongoing process of European integration, as well as the growing demands - which are being partially and fitfully satisfied - from a host of international non-governmental organizations (NGO's) for the creation of a new international moral order.

This Age of Nations has also let the ethnic genie out of the bottle, and the most common form of deadly conflict today is a civil war in the name of cultural self-determination. Apart from the obvious detrimental effect on the prosperity of the countries concerned there are also spill-over effects from these civil wars on other countries, for instance through the mounting number of refugees.

Some interesting recent research by Paul Collier of Oxford and his associates on the causes of civil wars finds that the relationship of ethno-linguistic fragmentation in a state and the risk of a civil war is an inverted U in shape. The most homogenous as well as the most fragmented are least at risk of civil war. Thus there is likely to be a bipolarity in the institutions best able to deal with ethnic diversity.

One, (complete fragmentation) is to be found in multi-ethnic empires. The other (homogeneity) in a nationalist ethnic state - is surprisingly a course advocated by Keynes during the Second World War when speculating about the ideal political post war order in Europe. But, Skidelsky in vol.3 of his biography of
Keynes, notes "this pleasing picture of a re-medievalised Europe did not survive in later drafts." This homogenized solution, which as Keynes recognized could involve 'ethnic cleansing', has clearly been eschewed by the West as witness its actions in Bosnia and Kosovo, where, in effect, multi ethnic Western protectorates have been created. While, at least in some respects, the desire of a number of successor states of the Soviet Empire to join the European Union can be looked upon as a voluntary application to join another Empire.

In this confused and confusing picture, what is likely to be the new world order, particularly in light of the events of September 11 and the US response? Will we see some post-modern version of Empire returning? For, as I have argued in this column Empires have got a bad name and after the bloody events of the last century the Age of Nations looks as sordid at the beginning of this century as that of Empires looked at the beginning of the last.