

POWER OF THE EMPIRE

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The evolution of the American empire may be put in terms of power: from a major power (before the Second World War) to a superpower to the sole superpower to hegemon and or empire.

Surplus Power and Imperial Ambitions

American global power –military, economic, technological, cultural and political - is one of the great realities of our age. Never before has one country been so powerful and so unrivalled. The United States began the 1990s as the world's only superpower and its advantages continued to grow through the decade. The globalization of the world economy has reinforced American economic and political domination.

The result of all this by the beginning of the new century, as Henry Kissinger declared in 2001 in a book entitled “Does America Need a Foreign Policy?”, was that the U.S. had achieved “a preeminence not enjoyed by even the greatest empires of the past”. This naturally led to the question. What was the U.S. to do with the enormous surplus of power? Work for an answer particularly after September 11 has been to pursue “imperial ambitions’ through renewed interventions in the global periphery – on a scale not seen since the Vietnam War. In the waging of its imperial war on terrorism, the U.S. state is at one with the expansionary goals of U.S. corporations.

Power and Dominance

In fact the central idea underlying American grand strategy since the end of the Cold War has been dominance – the notion that the U.S. is so powerful and victorious that it can pretty much remake the world on its own terms. For most of its two terms, the Clinton administration pursued a form of *soft dominance* in that it sought to legitimize its policies through America's traditional alliances and through the use of international bodies like the IMF. The Bush administration opted for a more explicit form of dominance arguing that the U.S. must narrow the world's dominant military and economic power notably to discourage the emergence of other rival powers but also to maintain order.

Power Makes the Empire

“What word but ‘empire’ describes the awesome thing that America is becoming?” asks Michael Ignatief. He describes the military, economic, political and cultural power of the empire in these words:

It is the only nation that polices the world through five global commands, maintains more than a million men and women at arms in four continents, deploys carrier battle groups on watch in every ocean, guarantees the survival of countries from Israel to South Korea, drives the wheels of global trade and commerce and fills the hearts and minds of the entire planet through its dreams and desires. (1)

Fareed Zakaria insists “there has never been anything quite like America’s dominance over the world.” *The National Security Strategy of the United States, 2002* boldly states: “Today the U.S. enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence in the world.”

Military Power

“If military power is the sine qua non of an empire then it is hard to imagine how anyone could deny the imperial character of the United States today.” Niall Ferguson argues.(2)

A Defense Department map of the world, which shows the areas of responsibility of the five major regional commands, suggests that American military influence is literally global. The regional combatant commanders – the proconsuls of the imperium – have responsibility for the swathes of the territory beyond the wildest imaginings of their Roman predecessors. USEUCOM (U.S. European Command) extends from the westernmost shore of the Greenland to the Bering Strait from the Arctic Ocean to the Cape of Good Hope, from Iceland to Israel.

U.S. possesses a great many small areas of territory within nominally sovereign states that serve as bases for its armed services. Before the deployment of troops for the invasion of Iraq the U.S. military had around 752 military installations in more than 130 countries. Significant numbers of American troops are stationed in 65 of these. Afghanistan and Iraq have occupying armies of the United States.

National Security Strategy of the USA 2002 (NSS 2002) insists that the President has “no intention of allowing any foreign power to catch up with the huge lead the U.S. has opened since the fall of the Soviet Union more than a decade ago.”

Military Power: Imperial Wars and Doctrines

The American military leaves its “footprints” wherever it goes. Stephen Peter Rose, the Director of the neo-conservative Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University summarized the basic assumptions of the new military view of the USA as follows:

The United States has no rival. We are militarily dominant around the world...the goal is not combating a rival, but maintaining our imperial position and maintaining imperial order...Planning for imperial wars is different from planning for conventional wars. ...The maximum amount of force can and should be used as quickly as possible for psychological impact to demonstrate that the empire cannot be challenged with impunity. ...Imperial wars end but imperial garrisons must be left in place for decades to ensure order and stability. Finally, imperial strategy focuses on preventing the emergence of powerful hostile challengers to the empire, by war if necessary, by imperial assimilation if possible. (3)

It is this view of the military power of the empire that has led to a redefinition of war including formulations of imperial doctrines of war. On 10 April 2003, after the ‘victory’ over Iraq, President Bush declared:

The U.S. is redefining war and toppling tyrants as well. ...Since September 11 we have been engaged in a global war against terror. By a combination of creative strategies and advanced technologies we are redefining war on our own terms (4)

The creative strategies and our own terms were stated in three major documents of the U.S. government: *The Quadrennial Defense Review* (September 11), *The Nuclear Posture Review of the Pentagon* (March 2002) and *The National Security Strategy of the USA*. The new doctrines are doctrines for imperial wars. War aims are changed from defeating the adversary to ‘regime change’ and ‘occupation’. Instead of ‘deterrence’, the new nuclear doctrine proposes nuclear weapons as instruments of war. There is also the most dangerous doctrine of ‘preventive war’ including ‘preventive nuclear war’. All these have been further elaborated and reinforced in the more recent *National Defense Strategy of the USA* (March 2005).

Richard Haas pointed out in his book on “Intervention” that regime change often can only be accomplished through a full-scale military invasion leaving the conquered nation in ruins and necessitating subsequent “nation building”. It therefore requires “an occupation of imperial proportions and possibly of endless domination” (5)

The real question is *how America should wield its power..* For the past half a century it has done so through alliances and global institutions and generally

in a consensual way. On the whole it could be claimed to have been multilateral. But today unilateralism is an integral part of the Bush doctrine.

The U.S. has redefined 'coalition'. It is called the 'coalition of the willing'. It is made clear that it is not the coalition that decides the agenda but the agenda that decides the coalition. The agenda is the U.S. agenda and those who are willing to support the U.S. agenda can join the coalition. But the *National Security Strategy 2002* makes it clear, "We will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary to exercise our right of self-defence by acting preemptively."

Economic Power of the Empire

"The empire has enormous economic power. Today's economic architecture ensures that the normal operation of world market forces (the process we call globalization) tends to yield disproportionate benefits to Americans and confers autonomy to U.S. policy makers while curbing the autonomy of other states. The economic benefits that accrue to the U.S. as the result of the working of market forces within this particular framework provide the financial basis of American military supremacy." (6)

Conversely the military supremacy of the empire is utilized to ensure economic dominance. There is an integral relation between American style free market economics and American security in the world. Globalization and imperial security go together. Global capitalism, enforced militarily if needed, is integral to building the empire. Having achieved a "prominence not enjoyed by even the greatest empires of the past", the U.S. is focused on using the power globally, through both military and market intervention. America's war on terror or war for freedom is at one with the expansionary goals of the market: open invasion in some places, open markets everywhere.

Cultural Power

The empire's cultural power is wielded through its supremacy in the information age. The United States dominates the global traffic in information and ideas. American movies, American music, American television and American software are now dominant and so visible that they are now available literally everywhere on earth. They influence the tastes, lives and aspirations of virtually every nation. The leaders of the empire are aware that this is not just an enormous commercial opportunity but that the rules they make for governing the global information infrastructure will shape the nature of global politics decisively. "For the U.S. the central

objective of an information age foreign policy must be to win the battle of the world's information flows, dominating the air waves, as Great Britain once dominated the waves of the sea.”, David Rathkopf wrote some nine years ago. (7)

Hard and Soft Power

Joseph Nye, of the Kennedy School of Government believes that all the talk of U.S. dominance and influence obscures a much more fundamental reality. He calls it the “paradox of American power” by which he means that for all its global might the U.S. is unable to get the outcome it wants by going alone.

Nye says, “if America is to win that war, its leaders are going to have to do better at combining soft and hard power into *smart power*”. He says, that soft power is the ability to get what one wants by attracting others rather than threatening or paying them. Hard power, which relies on coercion, grows out of military and economic might. It remains crucial in a world populated by threatening states and terrorist organizations. Nye says that the Iraq war shows the limits of hard power.” (8)

But the empire is wedded to hard power. It uses soft power only as the velvet glove concealing the iron hand.

Power and Monopoly of Force

Scholars often characterize international relations as the interaction of sovereign states in any anarchic world. In the classic Westphalian world order, states have a monopoly of force in their own territories while order at the international level is maintained through the diffusion of power among states. Today's unipolar world turns the Westphalian model on its head. The U.S. possesses a near monopoly in the use of force internationally; on the domestic level, meanwhile, the institutions and behaviour of states are increasingly open to global – that is American – scrutiny. Since September 11, the Bush administration's assertion of “contingent sovereignty” and the right of preemption have made the transformation abundantly clear.

An Empire with No Constraints

About the new world order created by the unilateralism of the empire's power, let us hear from one of the votaries of the empire, Michael Ignatieff. This is a very different picture of the world than the one entertained by liberal international lawyers and human rights activists. American power integrated into a transnational legal and economic order organized around the UN, WTO, ICC and other

international human rights and environmental institutions of mechanism. Successive American administrations have signed on to these pieces of the international legal order that suit them (WTO for example) while ignoring or even sabotaging those parts (ICC and Kyoto Protocol) that do no. A new international order is emerging but it is designed to suit American imperialist objectives. America's allies want a multilateral order that will eventually constrain American power. And the empire will not be tied down like Gulliver with a thousand legal strings. (9)

The effects of the empire are well-known. In the name of freedom and democracy it has destroyed the lives and livelihoods of millions. It has destroyed nations and peoples. It has massively violated human rights: civil, economic and cultural. It has curtailed freedom inside and outside America.

Power from Religion

The empire is supported by a special brand of religion. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in his book *The Structure of Nations and Empire* (1959) that "empires require gods." "Dominion is bound to use religious quests for ultimacy and universality as instruments for its power." The Report of the Church of England Bishop says:

What distinguishes it (the American empire) from many other empires in history is the strong sense of moral righteousness. The sense of moral righteousness is fed by the major influence of the Christian Right on present U.S. foreign policy. This has a very worrying political aspect in the way in which Christian millennialism has been taken up by so many evangelical Christians with its apocalyptic overtones and its very clear political agenda in relation to the Middle East. We argue that not only is the political reading of current history in the light of apocalyptic texts illegitimate, but these texts need to be read in a different way altogether, as a critique of imperialism rather than a justification for a particular form of it. (10)

There is an alternative to empire and its power that unleashes endless war. The empire must be contested with a vision that insists multilateralism and that preventive war is not the path to real security. Today war and peace are defined in empire's terms. They have to be redefined in people's terms. We must advance the vision where international institutions are strengthened rather than destroyed, where global poverty is seriously addressed and where all countries are disarming their weapons of mass destruction and where human rights are upheld. Power to resist empire comes from our faith. We must continue opposition to imperial power by *doing justice, loving compassion and walking humbly with God.*

NOTES

1. Michael Ignatieff, "The Empire, the Burden", *New York Times Magazine*, 3 January 2003.
2. Niall Ferguson, "The Colossus: The Price of the American Empire", Penguin Books, New York, 2004, p.17
3. Quoted by Rainer Rilling, "American Empire as *Will and Idea*", *Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Policy Paper*, 2/2003.
4. "U.S. Military Muscle Redefining War," *Toronto Star*, April 17, 2003.
5. Richard Haas, "Intervention: The Use of American Military Power in the Post-Cold War Period", 1999
6. Robert Hunter Wade, "The Invisible Hand of the Empire, *openDemocracy*, March 13, 2003.
7. David Rathkopf, "In Praise of Cultural Imperialism", *Foreign Policy*, June 1997.
8. Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power and Struggle Against Terrorism", *Project Syndicate*, April 2004.
9. Michael Ignatieff, op.cit
10. "Countering Terrorism: Power, Violence, Democracy", A Report by a Working Group of the Church of England's House of Bishops, September 2005.