

Empire Discourses: The »American Empire« in Decline?

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»In all ages, the regular rise and fall of great nations has passed unperceived.«

Sir John Glubb

»America has never been so powerful, but its citizens have rarely felt so uneasy.«

Charles S. Maier

»We don't do empire!« Donald Rumsfeld

1. Empire Talk

Discourses about »empire« have been fashionable in the past decade among American intellectuals, pundits and commentators. Like the »civil society« and the »ancient hatreds« of ethnic conflicts in the last decade of the twentieth century, the notion that the United States is an empire after all has fired up the imagination of academics and pundits alike, particularly after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York of 9/11. Nary a self-respecting man of letters in the United States who does not believe he must contribute *his* book on empire to this lively public debate.

Yet most Americans, throughout their history, have been adverse to the idea »American empire« and leery to speak of »American imperialism«. Americans have used all kinds of *euphemisms* to circumscribe American superpower status *during* the Cold War and »hyper power« eminence *after* the Cold War – »Pax Americana«, »American preponderance«, »American primacy«, »American ascendancy«, and »hegemony«. President George W. Bush assured us: »America has never been an empire. We may be the only great power in history that had the chance, and refused – preferring greatness to power, and justice to glory« (Ferguson 2004: 6). In spite of his Yale degree, G.W. Bush's knowledge of American history seems to be spotty. If Americans thought in terms of empire it only occurred along the lines of the Jeffersonian notion of »empire of liberty«, or John L. O'Sullivan's idea of civilizing benevolent expansionism on the American continent, which he called the U.S.'s »manifest destiny« (Maier 2006: 2ff).

Prior to Bush ascendancy American President »American Empire« was a dirty word that did not dare to speak its name. This changed after the brutal 9/11 attacks. Many Americans, especially the neoconservative *kamarilla* that advised President Bush, eagerly embraced the notion that the United States constituted a »new empire« with global interests, even though arch-imperialist Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld confidently asserted that »we don't do empire«. Is the United States an empire in the traditional sense? If yes, what kind of empire?

Scholars are very circumspect in defining empire. The best among them apply strict criteria to what constitutes an empire (Ferguson 2004; Münkler 2005; Maier 2006; Porter 2006; James 2006). Most simply put, empires »conquer or annex territories, or rule their peoples directly« (Porter 2006: 1). Empires are demarcated with

clearly defined imperial borders – neighbors beyond those imperial borders are not considered equals. The people on the periphery of the empire tend to have fewer rights than those in the imperial center. Empires are constituted of client or satellite states, while hegemonic powers are the *primus inter pares* and do not dominate in a group of equal political actors. Empires differ from imperialism in as much as the latter is signified by a »will to great power.« Most empires gather their territory in the words of the British historian J. R. Seeley »in a fit of absent mindedness«, namely by way of coincidences and individual decisions. *Empires are large and they last long*. Empires may be vast land empires like Russia and China, or stretch across the globe as sea empires like the Spanish or British empires. Hitler's proclaimed »thousand year empire« only lasted for 12 years, Napoleon's not much longer, and Mussolini's »Mediterranean empire« was even shorter (Münkler 2005: 16-29). In Sir John Glubb's neat framework of rising and decaying empires, empires all last for ten human generations – around 250 years (Glubb 1976, 1977).

Charles S. Maier characterizes empires by size, ethnic hierarchization, and by centralizing regimes. He applies the term empire to »a territorially extensive structure of rule that usually subordinates diverse ethnolinguistic groups or would-be nations and reserves preponderant power an executive authority and the elites with whom this power is shared« (Maier 2006: 31). Anatol Lieven avers that an empire by definition is »not a polity ruled with the explicit consent of the governed« (quoted in Ferguson 2004: 10). From these definitions we gather that formal empires are defined by vast size, longevity, clearly defined borders, and dominant control over clients.

2. Consensual Empire

So have Americans »done empire« in spite of their incessant professions to the contrary? They do and have always done so. A historical approach to America's ascendancy may demonstrate this most clearly. The »manifest destiny« of American westward expansion across the entire continent in the 19th century was nothing less than the building of a mighty continental empire similarly to the Russian one built in the same century. Alexis de Tocqueville already recognized the potential future power of both these continental empires, when he visited the United States in the 1830s. European historians writing on American empire more recently have clearly recognized this *continuity of American imperialism from the 19th to the 20th century* (Stephanson 1999; Ferguson 2004; Kiernan 2005; Porter 2006), but to be fair, so have American historians (Mead 1987; Ninkovich 2001; Maier 2006).

»Manifest destiny« was an *ideology* of American expansionism and the missionary zeal of spreading liberty and democracy and capitalism across the American continent could easily and neatly morph into an imperialist ideology beyond the North American landmass. And so it did. American expansion into the Pacific and to the Far East (Philippines, Hawaii, Wake, Guam), as well as into the Caribbean after the defeat of the Spanish in 1898 and the »open door notes« about prying open China (1899, 1900) for all early 20th century imperialist powers, was a continuation of America's »civilizing mission« of colored people and geopolitical positioning as a great power. Call it »liberal empire« or »empire of right« – it was the building of an *informal imperium* in the Caribbean and the Pacific replete with colonial dependencies, trading posts, military bases and missionary crusaders for uplifting souls and

gaining concessions but without direct control of the »colonies« (except the Philippines) (Stephanson 1995; Ninkovich 2001).

It continued with the frequent military interventions in and the sending of »*financial missionaries*« (Rosenberg 1999) to the Caribbean and Central America under Presidents Theodore Roosevelt (1901–09), William Howard Taft (1909–13) and Woodrow Wilson (1913–21). Woodrow Wilson's »liberal interventionism« in Mexico and elsewhere posited an American presence of »making the world safe for democracy«. America's mission to export democratic governance and rule of law – her drive for »liberal empire« – would prevail for the rest of the century and all the way to George W. Bush (Judis 2004). Henry Luce's call for shouldering the burdens of geopolitical responsibility in the »American Century« in 1941 (Hogan 1999) rang in the sea change from reluctant to more eager American imperialism.

After World War II the U.S. to strengthen its global *informal »empire by invitation«* (Lundestad 1986 and 1990; see also Ferguson 2004: 12; Maier 2006: 7). In the »civilizational« Manichean struggle against the »evil« Soviet Union after World War II, the United States expanded its global military presence and built a global system of multilateral alliances (Rio Pact, NATO, SEATO, Baghdad Pact) and bilateral treaties with key allies (Japan, Taiwan, Korea). By 1955 the U.S. had locked some 55 countries around the globe into its global alliance structure. The American »nuclear umbrella« constructed in this mortal »cold war« against the Soviet Union was designed to guarantee the protection of American allies against the Soviet Union. The point was that the Western European countries and other lands across the earth pleaded with the U.S. to come and protect them from the Soviet threat; they begged Washington to come and enter into military pacts with them to help contain the Soviets and guarantee their survival in a nuclear world. In the early 1950s, while a hot war was raging in Korea, the U.S. allies felt they need American »hard power« to counter the communist threat; even German rearmament became tolerable again so soon after the end of World War II. With their continued military presence in dozens of bases, West Germany and Japan became quasi-protectorates of the U.S. (Todd 2003: 111).

The growing American military presence (through bases, listening posts, and »proconsuls«) also came with the blessings of attractive American »soft power«. American pop culture (jazz, Hollywood movies) had begun to pour into Europe after World War I – after World War II it became a veritable flood of American pop and consumer culture that conquered Western Europe and much of the non-Communist world. Western European youngsters – soon to be followed by the youth around the world – became enthralled with »jeans and coca cola«, as well as Elvis Presley and James Dean. This American »*empire of consumption*« (Maier 2006: 238ff) became »*irresistible*« (De Grazia 2005).

But it was more than jazz and the lure of televisions and refrigerators. Next to the avalanche of American consumer products, American Fordist mass production methods and higher productivity were imported through the Marshall Plan (»*empire of production*«, Maier 2006: 191ff). Europeans needed credits to fill the »dollar gap«. American aid came with Washington's pressure for currency convertibility and acceptance of American economic leadership (Maier 2006: 214). The American geopolitical presence after World War II also came with American economic engagement and dollar domination. On top of it, American public diplomacy massively bombarded Western Europeans with overt and covert programs in the propaganda wars against

the Soviet Union (Wilford 2008). The »hard power« alliances were reinforced by these »soft power« campaigns, usually more popular than the growing military presence, which by the mid-1950s – eg. long before De Gaulle – began to grate on Europeans and other allies.

What is unusual, then, is that the American imperial presence was largely welcomed – it became one »*between empire and alliance*« (Trachtenberg 2003). John Lewis Gaddis has termed the voluntaristic allies of the American sphere of influence as »consensual« – the Soviet Union's sphere was one of »coercion« (Gaddis 1997: 17). So call it the Cold War standoff between the American »empire of consensus« vs. the »Soviet empire of coercion«.

Since the late 19th century critics of the growing American economic and geopolitical power in the world have dubbed it »dollar imperialism«. Yet the American ascendancy always had an idealistic side to it too, particularly during the »golden age« (Hobsbawm 1994: 225ff) after World War II, when the »American empire by invitation« tend to act benevolently in Europe and Asia, particularly in the nations defeated during World War II (even though Austria did not exist as country during the war, arguably most reborn »Austrians« felt defeated too in May 1945 and Americans were invited to stay as long as the Soviets refused to leave occupied postwar Austria).

During the decolonization of the 1960s, the U.S. acted differently in the »Third World«, where the Cold War and the American struggle against communism. World systems analysts would say capitalism staked out the periphery for economic exploitation (McCormick 1989: 2ff). In places such as mineral-rich Congo, Vietnam, Iran, Guatemala and Cuba the U.S. exerted control (covert and overt) to defeat the communist threat. The U.S. accepted and worked with »friendly dictators« around the world in newly independent nations. There was much raw imperialism and little benevolence involved here.

While the U.S. balance of trade and balance of current accounts position worsened during the 1960s vis-à-vis its competitors, the Vietnam War made produced enormous deficits and President Richard Nixon took the dollar off the gold standard and began to »float« it vis-à-vis other currencies in 1971. This was the end of the »Bretton Woods system« with the dollar acting as the reserve currency of the global financial systems. With this relative economic decline Washington began to face more political challenges such as Chancellor Willi Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, Soviet and Cuban engagement in Africa, and a fundamentalist backlash in places like Iran. America's hegemonic position in the world came under increased scrutiny and severe pressure. President Ronald Reagan succeeded with a relative comeback in the 1980s, which was also due to precipitous decline of Soviet economic and political power. Both superpower empires appeared »overstretched« and in *relative* decline during this decade (Kennedy 1988). Many thought Kennedy's explanation of »declinism« premature, but then the Soviet Union unexpectedly collapsed while the U.S. experienced a come back. Yet »declinism« as a school of thought in analyzing America's relative power position in the world prevailed in the post-Cold War world (Ferguson 2004: 17).

3. Empire in Decline?

The post-Cold War world left the United States without a major competitor in the world arena and »hyper power« status almost by default. Intellectuals such as Fran-

cis Fukuyama prematurely announced »the end of history« and an eternal era of democracy, while Samuel Huntington announced a future world of cultural strife between the world's major religions, a bit of Spenglerian *Weltuntergangsstimmung*. The geopolitical analysts like Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brezinzinski witnessed a post-Cold War world emerging in which the U.S. unique power status was threatened (Todd 2003: 21ff). Declinism talk continued after the end of the Cold War among perennial critics of American power such as Noam Chomsky and Gore Vidal. Even before the invasion of Iraq, Immanuel Wallerstein in 2002 posited the end of American hegemony in the world – the »shrinking of the eagle« (the symbol of American power) (Wallerstein 2002).

Meanwhile the Pentagon built a powerful military machine and *American »full spectrum dominance«* (Bacevich 2002: 117ff). It may well have wanted to follow the Roman aphorism »If you want peace, prepare for war« (Zakara 2009: 115). The U.S. did not take full advantage of the »peace dividend«. Even though defense budgets were cut, the Pentagon continued to advance its global military presence and build new advanced weapons systems that could project American power on land and from the air and sea anywhere on the globe within hours of new threat. The new empire operated »by stealth« (Kaplan 2003). The number of American military bases and outposts around the world – like the Roman roads garrisons established to defend the frontiers of the empire and for surveillance of the areas beyond (Kaplan 2005: 13) – was increased from some 450 to 725 (Johnson 2004: 24ff).

The five American regional commanders (Northern, Southern, Central, European, Pacific) became the all powerful »proconsuls« of the new American empire, commanding more military capability and resources than the Washington insiders. Like the proconsuls of Rome they were supposed to bring order and law to the unruly and anarchical world of the Middle East and Africa (Priest 2004: 66ff). Instead of massive conscript army, the U.S. volunteer force projected its power with highly skilled special forces, operating in some 170 countries and »enjoying the soldiering life for its own sake« (Kaplan 2005: 7f). While the hawkish neocon promoters of American empire see these »imperial grunts« as the skillful agents of American empire (Kaplan 2005), the critics see such »militarization« of American foreign policy and life as an inherent threat to the long-term survival of American democracy (Johnson 2004: 24ff).

American power increased precipitously after the end of the Cold War. During his first term in office, President Bill Clinton did not throw the full weight of American power around. During the second term, he intervened in the Balkans ethnic conflicts (as a result of European incompetence to resolve »ethnic cleansing« in their own backyard). Clinton chased al-Qaeda terrorist operatives in Afghanistan and Sudan with sudden drone attacks from the air. He pushed the frontiers of NATO to the Russian borders. Yet the limits of American power also became clear in his inability to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. When George W. Bush entered the White House after an unclear election result, during his first year it looked like a neo-isolationist regime. With the terrorist attacks on the World Center in New York on September 11, 2001, he found a new mission by rallying the traumatized nation for a global »war against terrorism«.

George W. Bush' America after 9/11 experienced a »Roman moment« of unilateral actionism in the world (Zakaria 2009: 217). Based on the ideas of the hawkish neo-

con *Vordenker* of an activist reassertion of American power in the world, the Bush administration unleashed a new grand strategy of unilateral preemption of perceived threats (Bush Doctrine) (Bischof 2005; Lieven 2000). The Bush hawks believed America had to impose its will on the world because »first, the United States can get away with it«. And secondly, »if Washington doesn't exert its force, the United States will become increasingly marginalized« (Wallerstein 2002: 66). Now the »full spectrum dominance« developed during the Clinton years could be brought to bear on would-be »rogues states«. Neocon pundits like Robert Kagan and Robert Kaplan celebrated the American martial spirit (»Americans are from Mars, Europeans from Venus«, »supremacy by stealth«) and provided the rationale for American empire and its neo-interventionist strategy (Kagan 2003; Kaplan 2003). Like comparative historian of empire Niall Ferguson they welcomed American empire as a stabilizing factor in the anarchic global arena. (Ferguson 2004). Afghanistan was invaded to clean out the Taliban regime that had provided a heaven to Bin Laden and the al-Qaeda terrorists. The »Third Gulf War« was unilaterally unleashed against Iraq to end the brutal regime of the ugly dictator Saddam Hussein. It was sold to the world as a crusade to ring democracy to the Near East – as a war to rid Iraq of nuclear weapons of mass destruction and al-Qaeda cells. The evidence presented to the United Nations Security Council was forged. Old allies like Germany and France refused to join the alliance that invaded Iraq. The American »liberators« expected to be welcomed with flowers and kisses. Instead they got bogged down in a long and nasty occupation of the country and a violent war against terrorists and guerillas. The real reasons behind the invasion were the long-term establishment of military bases and the securing of oil supplies from Iraq with the second largest oil resources in the world. After the loss of Iran as a firm ally in the region, the U.S. needed a new geopolitical stronghold (Khalidi 2004; Johnson 2004: 217ff; Todd 2003: 168ff; Ferguson 2004: 200ff).

Has America's involvement in Iraq become a test for empire? Charles S. Maier has argued that it was only logical that America with its large geopolitical ambitions would be sucked into the fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia like numerous empires before ever since the Assyrians and Babylonians. He adds:

»How long they would stay or remain interested was to be the test of whether they might follow in the long tradition of empire or remain just perhaps the most exuberant and self-preoccupied of superpowers, like some overgrown adolescent of great strength and good intentions but careless with force and inconstant in temper« (Maier 2006: 293).

While American military hard power is undiminished and suggests a strong imperial dominance of the world, its soft power is declining. President Clinton foolishly thought that the State Department's »United States Information Agency« (USIA) was no longer needed as the principal tool of American public diplomacy to promote American culture across the globe (Bischof 2007). The hubristic unilateralism of the Bush Presidency and his strategy of preemption produced a global backlash. Whether the 9/11 attacks were a result of »blowback« to begin with – »American imperialism and its secret operations« reaping what it sowed – will be debated for a long time to come (Johnson 2004: 8ff). But the invasion of Iraq, its brutal occupation (the abuses of Abu Ghraib prison), the torturing (what the Pentagon and the CIA call »enhanced interrogation techniques«) of detainees/prisoners of war in Afghanistan, Iraq and

Guantanamo, have produced an upsurge of anti-Americanism around the world and an enormous decline in America's prestige (Bischof 2007). With every »drone« attack on Taliban strongholds in Pakistan the danger of »blowback« increases. With every U.S. inhumanitarian intervention American soft power appeal suffers.

The American imperial presence in the Near East and elsewhere is no longer one by »invitation« but one of coercion. America and its value system is no longer a model to the world. As Tony Judt has observed: »*The real tragedy is that we are no longer an example to ourselves*« (Judt 2004: 41). The world is no longer buying »the myth of American exceptionalism« (Hodgson 2009). This is the fundamental difference in its *soft power posture* between America's Cold War and post-Cold War imperial presence in the world.

4 Soft Power Manqué: The End of American Exceptionalism

America is an empire. Does the American Empire resemble the Roman empire? The ancient historian Christian Meier compares the »Pax Americana« with the »Pax Romana« and sees some parallels. Unlike Rome, America is not a vast empire that accumulated power by conquest. It leads with allies and partners rather than with clients. The »Pax Americana« is governed as a community of values. It rules by way of »institutionalized cooperative platforms« and »mechanisms of negotiating interests«. While Rome demanded obedience, Washington has lead by consensus-building. Rome demanded inclusion in its civilization; Washington exports its civilization of democracy and human rights (Meier 1998: 115-20).

This analysis may fit late 20th century America, but no longer Bush's America when human rights were violated regularly. The economic historian Harold James is concerned with the rules-based functioning of complex societies and the survival of the »liberal commercial world order«. He sees the American dominated international Bretton Woods and post-Bretton Woods financial system in danger of collapsing (in a book penned before the current global financial crisis). In the messy world of globalization, the U.S. faces the »predicament« of the late Roman Empire in decline when established rules »lose their legitimacy and when violence becomes the counterbalance to power« (James 2006: 144).

Parisian intellectual Emmanuel Todd, who already has written his »obituary« of the American empire, asserts that in its moment of economic weakness (derived from the overconsumption of the American people), the U.S. no longer can exact tributes from its clients like the Roman Empire did (Todd 2003: 107ff). While his »obituary« may be premature, the U.S. economic situation has worsened considerably since Todd attested it mortal weakness almost ten years ago. He defies Glubb's assertion in our prescript that it is hard for contemporaries to *perceive imperial decline* while it may unfold before their eyes.

The comparative historian Charles S. Maier thinks the Roman empire is still the best comparative model:

»*For all the distance and technology and intervening history that separates us, Rome remains the most completing imperial model, because Rome changed from a recognizable republic – if aristocratic and intensely factionalized by class – into an empire*« (Maier 2006: 41).

All these comparisons are instructive yet Maier is not willing to concede that Washington is an empire and heading the Roman way towards decline.

Paul Kennedy's model of explaining the rise and fall of »great powers« (he is reluctant to use the loaded empire-term) over long periods of time may be the most compelling. All empires in the modern era declined and fell as a result of »imperial overstretch«. He concludes:

»*decision-makers in Washington must face the awkward and enduring fact that the sum total of the United States' global interests and obligations is nowadays far larger than the country's power to defend them simultaneously*« (Kennedy 1987: 515).

This assessment rings more true in 2009 than it did in 1997. Can the U.S. continue to fight a global war against terrorists and pirates and maintain two costly occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan *during* a period of growing economic crisis when America's leadership role in the global financial markets is weakened? Can American society transcend its growing division between rich and poor and deepening inequality? Can American democracy – with its »Washington gridlock« and gross influence peddling by the rich in elections and through lobbyists – be reformed? Is the »American value system« still an attractive export model as it was during the Cold War? Is American exceptionalism a myth? (Hodgson 2009)

Niall Ferguson believes that the greatest challenge to the American empire comes from the decline of American institutions within not from challengers abroad (Ferguson 2004: 286ff). Charles Maier argues that the American ascendancy in the world is built »on economic and technological prowess and the appeal of its popular culture«. He adds »*the United States allegedly dominates by virtue of soft as well as hard power*«. (Maier 2006: 8). Yet its soft power appeal is in precipitous decline and its hard power is hard to finance in a time of economic downturn. Fareed Zakaria thinks that the »post-American« world will be defined by »the rise of rest« – new powers such as China, India, Russia, Brazil and EUrope that are catching up with the United States.

Tony Judt warned Americans a few days before the 2004 election:

»*If George W. Bush is reelected much of the world (and many millions of its own citizens) will turn away from America: perhaps for good, certainly for many years*« (Judt 2004: 41)

Can the globally appealing President Barack Obama arrest these adverse trends and make America appealing again to the world? This remains to be seen.

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Notes

- 1 In the spring semester of 1994 I gave a lecture course at the American Studies Department of the University of Munich, where I served as guest professor, on »The Rise of American Empire«. In this course my main theme was America's rise to the status of a continental power in the 19th century towards its apex as a world power in the 20th century. My main point was to define America's growing presence in the world as an *informal empire* based on economic, political and cultural preponderance – not a formal empire with colonies. I am grateful to Elisabeth Springler for her invitation to write this essay and return to the current debates about empire, which sound very familiar indeed.