

Hail Bush: A New Roman Empire

September 20, 2002

**They came,
they saw,
they conquered.**

Now the United States dominates the world. With the rise of the New Age Roman empire, Jonathan Freedland asks how long before the fall?



The word of the hour is empire. As the United States marches to war, no other label quite seems to capture the scope of American power or the scale of its ambition. "Sole superpower" is accurate enough, but seems oddly modest. "Hyperpower" might appeal to the French; "hegemon" is favoured by academics. But empire is the big one, the gorilla of geopolitical designations - and suddenly the US is bearing its name.

Of course, enemies of the US have shaken their fist at its "imperialism" for decades: they are doing it again now, as Washington wages a global "war against terror" and braces itself for a campaign aimed at "regime change" in a foreign, sovereign state. What is more surprising, and much newer, is that the notion of a US empire has suddenly become a live debate inside the US. And not just among Europhile liberals either, but across the range - from left to right.

Today a liberal dissenter such as Gore Vidal, who called his most recent collection of essays on the US *The Last Empire*, finds an ally in the likes of conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer, who earlier this year told *The New York Times*, "People are coming out of the closet on the word 'empire'." He argued that Americans should admit the truth and face up to their responsibilities as the undisputed masters of the world. And it wasn't any old empire he had in mind. "The fact is, no country has been as dominant culturally, economically, technologically and militarily in the history of the world since the Roman empire."

But is the comparison apt? Are the Americans the new Romans? The most obvious similarity is overwhelming military strength. Rome was the superpower of its day, boasting an army with the best training, biggest budgets and finest equipment the world had seen. No-one else came close. The US is just as dominant - its defense budget will soon be bigger than the military spending of the next nine countries combined, allowing it to deploy forces almost anywhere on the planet at lightning speed. Throw in its technological lead, and the US emerges as a power without rival.

There is a big difference, of course. Apart from the odd Puerto Rico or Guam, the US does not have formal colonies, the way the Romans did. There are no American consuls or viceroys directly ruling faraway lands.

But that difference between ancient Rome and modern Washington may be less significant than it looks. After all, America has done plenty of conquering and colonizing. For some historians, the founding of America and its 19th-century push westward were no less an exercise in empire building than Rome's drive to take charge of the Mediterranean. While Julius Caesar took on the Gauls - bragging that he had slaughtered a million of them - American pioneers battled the Cherokee, the Iroquois and the Sioux. "From the time the first settlers arrived in Virginia from England and started moving westward, this was an imperial nation, a conquering nation," says Paul Kennedy, author of *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.

More to the point, the US has military bases, or base rights, in some 40 countries - giving it the same global muscle it would enjoy if it ruled those countries directly. According to Chalmers Johnson, author of *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, these US military bases are today's version of the imperial colonies of old. Washington may refer to them as "forward deployment", says Johnson, but colonies are what they are. On this definition, there is almost no place outside America's reach.

So the US may be more Roman than we realize, with garrisons in every corner of the globe. But there the similarities only begin. For the US approach to empire looks quintessentially Roman. It's as if the Romans bequeathed a blueprint for how imperial business should be done - and today's Americans follow it religiously.

Lesson one in the Roman handbook for imperial success would be a realization that it is not enough to have great military strength: the rest of the world must know that strength - and fear it. The Romans used the propaganda technique of their time - gladiatorial games in the Colosseum - to show the world how hard they were. Today 24-hour news coverage of US military operations, including video footage of smart bombs scoring direct hits, or Hollywood shoot-'em-ups at the multiplex serve the same function. Both tell the world: this empire is too tough to beat.

The US has learned a second lesson from Rome, realizing the centrality of technology. For the Romans, it was those famously straight roads, enabling the empire to move troops or supplies at awesome speeds - rates that would not be surpassed for well over a thousand years. It was a perfect example of how one imperial strength tends to feed another: an innovation in engineering, originally designed for military use, went on to boost Rome commercially.

Today those highways find their counterpart in the information superhighway: the Internet also began as a military tool, devised by the US Defense Department, and now stands at the heart of American commerce. In the process, it is making English the Latin of its day - a language spoken across the globe. The US is proving what the Romans already knew: that once an empire is a world leader in one sphere, it soon dominates in every other.

But it is not just specific tips that the US seems to have picked up from its ancient forebears. Rather, it is the fundamental approach to empire that echoes so loudly. Rome understood that, if it was to last, a world power needed to practice both hard imperialism, the business of winning wars and invading lands, and soft imperialism, the cultural and political tricks that worked not to win power but to keep it.

So Rome's greatest conquests came not at the end of a spear, but through its power to seduce conquered peoples. As Tacitus observed in Britain, the natives seemed to like togas, baths and central heating - never realizing that these were the symbols of their "enslavement".

Today the US offers the people of the world a similarly coherent cultural package, a cluster of goodies that remain reassuringly uniform. It's not togas or gladiatorial games today, but Starbucks, Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Disney, all paid for in the contemporary equivalent of Roman coinage, the global hard currency of the 21st century: the dollar.

When the process works, you don't even have to resort to direct force; it is possible to rule by remote control, using friendly client states. This is a favorite technique for the contemporary US - no need for colonies when you have the Shah in Iran or Pinochet in Chile to do the job for you - but the Romans got there first. They ruled by proxy whenever they could...

Internally, too, today's US would strike many Romans as familiar terrain. America's mythologizing of its past - its casting of founding fathers Washington and Jefferson as heroic titans, its folk-tale rendering of the Boston Tea Party and the war of independence - is very Roman.

That empire, too, felt the need to create a mythic past, starred with heroes. For them it was Aeneas and the founding of Rome, but the urge was the same: to show that the great nation was no accident, but the fruit of manifest destiny.

There are some large differences between the two empires, of course - starting with self-image. Romans reveled in their status as masters of the known world, but few Americans would be as ready to brag of their own imperialism. Most would deny it. But that may come down to the US's founding myth. For America was established as a rebellion against empire, in the name of freedom and self-government. Raised to see themselves as a rebel nation and plucky underdog, they cannot quite accept their current role as master.

One last factor scares Americans from making a parallel between themselves and Rome: that empire declined and fell. The historians say this happens to all empires; they are dynamic entities that follow a common path, from beginning to middle to end.

"What America will need to consider in the next 10 or 15 years," says the Cambridge classicist Christopher Kelly, "is what is the optimum size for a non-territorial empire, how interventionist will it be outside its borders, what degree of control will it wish to exercise, how directly, how much through local elites? These were all questions which pressed upon the Roman empire."

Anti-Americans like to believe that an operation in Iraq might be proof that the US is succumbing to the temptation that ate away at Rome: overstretch. But it's just as possible that the US is merely moving into what was the second phase of Rome's imperial history, when it grew frustrated with indirect rule through allies and decided to do the job itself. Which is it?

Is the US at the end of its imperial journey, or on the brink of its most ambitious voyage? Only the historians of the future can tell us that.

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America as Empire, Now and in the Future

By **Niall Ferguson** (July 23, 2008) *The National Interest Magazine*

The United States is an empire- indeed, one of the most powerful empires in all history-but refuses to acknowledge the obvious. This is part of the problem, for at present, America is a colossus with an attention deficit disorder, practicing cut-price colonization. Lest we forget, the purpose of the American Empire, as it presently exists, is to spread free markets, to entrench the rule of law so as to eliminate the mainsprings of terrorism (which are commonly to be found in places where there are tyrannies and civil wars), to impose order in those territories and to pave the way for representative government in those territories.

In military terms, we know that roughly 750 military bases and installations staffed by American military personnel exist in approximately 130 countries around the world. We know that the United States accounts now for roughly two-fifths, 40 percent, of all military expenditures in the world. In strictly military terms, then, there never has been an empire as powerful as America under George W. Bush.

Another dimension of power is economic. In economic terms, too, the United States has awesome power. Its share of global economic output, if you take a measure like gross domestic product, using purchasing power parity figures, is something like 31 percent. Nearly a third of world output is accounted for by the United States. This is three times larger than the share of global output that Great Britain enjoyed at the very height of its power, in the very heyday of the Industrial Revolution.

And, of course, the United States also has one very important attribute of empire not contained in the dictionary definition. It has the ability to export its cultural values. Indeed, it has the ability to make its cultural values not only attractive to other peoples, but to make those peoples adopt them voluntarily.

When one considers the above three pillars of power-the military, the economic, and the cultural-from a British vantage point, the only thing that is really quite remarkable about the American empire, aside from the fact that it dwarfs the British Empire, is the fact that Americans refuse to believe in its existence. As Defense Secretary Rumsfeld said in an interview in March, I think, to Al-Jazeera: "The United States is not in the business of empire; we don't do colonies."

The Consequences of Denial

I see three fundamental problems with a hyper-power that refuses to recognize its own imperial role in the world.

The first of these is that all American military interventions, certainly since the 1960s, have been conducted on a false premise, namely, that they can be wound up within a matter of months or, at most, a few years. It is a fundamental flaw-and it is visible already in Iraq and Afghanistan today-in an imperial power when it states that it will withdraw as soon as possible from the country that it has occupied. And yet this is what is constantly stated by American spokesmen. This is a flaw because all empires are based not on coercion but on collaboration. They are based on the willingness of indigenous elites to collaborate in the creation of stable institutions in their home country. Why would you collaborate with an occupying power that says it is about to leave? I cannot imagine anything more reckless than to participate in the authorities that are being created in Afghanistan and Iraq today under American rule when it is so clear that the Americans intend to wind these authorities up and go home within a matter of months.

The second problem about an empire in denial is that it doesn't adequately resource its imperial undertakings. It does not spend enough money on them. At present, America is an empire based on the Wal-Mart principle: the principle of low prices always. Recently, the Pentagon revealed that the monthly cost of occupying Iraq is something like \$3.9 billion. This figure is far too small. And the reason it is far too little is because it is entirely going to maintaining the military presence of 140,000 or so American troops. Virtually no money is being spent on the all-important task of reconstructing the Iraqi economy and ensuring that law and order take root in that society.

I was shocked to discover that in Afghanistan, where the process of nation building-a euphemism for empire (empire with a human face, we could call it) has been going on now for one year and a half, the total amount of money that the American Government has spent in supporting the government that it created in Kabul is \$5 million. An empire cannot be run on a shoestring, but there is right now no other way, because the imperial metropole is in denial. America is a colossus with feet of clay. Denial of reality is not in the national interest. Washington would have to make relatively modest savings to be able to increase the amount of money that the United States spends not just on military but also the nonmilitary aspects of nation-building. If you look at the effective value of American aid, it is around about a third of the equivalent aid budgets of the European Union member-states. This is not a lot of money; in fact, it's small beer. It would be easy to lose it in the huge morass of the federal budget. So relatively modest savings on the bloated domestic programs would allow effective allocation of funds for nation-building.

The third great problem about the American empire today is that it is premised on a misunderstanding about the nature of imperial power, namely, that it should be exerted unilaterally. It was the great imperial statesman Lord Salisbury who coined the phrase "splendid isolation," but when he used it, it was sardonically to criticize his opponents in the House of Parliament. Salisbury's argument was that Britain's power depended on the collaboration and cooperation of a network of alliances with the other

great powers of Europe, and indeed with the United States, in order to be enduring. Empires exist, and have always existed, on the basis of consent.

Also, empire does not necessarily preclude the existence of representative institutions. The British learned their lesson with the disaster of the 1770s and granted responsible government to Canada, to Australia, to New Zealand, to South Africa, and intended to grant it ultimately to India and, in the far distant future, to African colonies when they were considered able to make representative government work.

The United States seems incapable of effective peacekeeping and policing efforts in the countries that it has so recently conquered. It badly needs not only military support but support in the form of aid budgets from the European Union member-states, which currently spend roughly three times more on aid and as much on peacekeeping as the United States.

America's Legacy, British Lessons

In 16 military interventions undertaken by the United States since 1898, only four have successfully led to democratic institutions' taking root: West Germany, Japan, Panama, Grenada. The rest of the names on the list really are names redolent with tragedy: Haiti, Vietnam, Cuba, Cambodia, Nicaragua. The prospects for Kosovo do not look promising, either, and Afghanistan and Iraq seem off to a stilted start.

America has been such an unsuccessful empire because it is an empire in denial, because it does not recognize the nature of its responsibilities, because it attempts to nation-build in a timeframe of two years, the electoral cycle, and without adequate cooperation and support from its allies. That is why the United States is one of the least successful as well as one of the most potentially powerful empires in all history.

That said, it is not in the national interest for the country's political leaders to make explicit use of the terminology of empire. Indeed, I applaud their ability to disclaim imperial ambitions in all of their public pronouncements. That is precisely the right way to play it. The United States should constantly deny that it is an empire, should consistently promise that its troops will be withdrawn. This seems to me to be almost inherently part of the new American Empire.

The key thing is not to mean these things. What worries me is the terrible possibility that Mr. Rumsfeld and Mr. Bush genuinely believe- and Mr. Bremer, and many others genuinely believe- that the United States can withdraw from Iraq in the very near future, having held free and fair elections.

The self-delusion of belief is not new. It is rooted in the sincere belief in the altruism of one's intentions. To say that the expansion of American power was good for America and for the world, and that is why we're not an empire is fine, but to mean it? The British made that mistake. Consider only these familiar words: "We come not as conquerors, but as liberators", said General F.S. Maude in March 1917, following the British occupation of Baghdad.

Indeed, the whole characteristic of 19th century British imperialism was its self-proclaimed altruism. The British saw themselves as the bearers of Christianity, commerce and civilization in the words of David Livingston. They saw their manifest destiny as being to extend the benefits of British liberty, economic and legal liberty to the world.

Our imperial altruism has been a distinguishing feature of both the great Anglophone Empires. We insist that we are acting in the best interests of the people that we subjugate. It is part of our charm. It is our share of culture. It may become our downfall.

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Reaction Assignment:

Reaction Topics: Legitimacy of comparison between Rome and the United States. Is there an American Empire? American Empire good or bad for the world? American Empire good or bad for America? Does Cultural Diffusion = Empire Building? Westernization = Americanization? Denial of the American empire? Fall of an American Empire? Proper governing of an Empire? Would this article change with Obama/Trump as president? Your own reaction topic.