



The American Empire? Not So Fast

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The one thing that Noam Chomsky and Paul Wolfowitz might agree upon is the reality of an American Empire. Of course, Chomsky regards the American Empire as a monstrosity and Wolfowitz regards it as the savior of humanity, but of its existence neither has any doubt. Commentators make comparisons to the great empires—to the Roman Empire; to the nineteenth-century British and French empires. Is the so-called American Empire a fitting successor to these historic empires? Certainly the overwhelming military, economic, and cultural power projected by the United States at the start of the twenty-first century should qualify as imperial. But does its history commit the United States to an imperial destiny?

Historians who believe in the American Empire, pro or con, think it does. Some cite the use of the word “empire” by Americans when the United States itself was struggling to be born. In 1783, George Washington called the infant republic a “rising Empire.” A few years later in the Fourteenth Federalist, James Madison spoke of the “extended republic” as “one great, respectable, and flourishing empire.” The case turns on the meaning of “empire” in the eighteenth century. If one consults the standard modern work on the subject, Richard Koebner’s *Imperialism: The Story and Significance of a Political Word*, one finds that the Latin word “imperium” meant sovereignty, the exercise of authority, and that in the eighteenth century the word “empire” by no means implied territorial expansion. Look at a contemporaneous dictionary—say the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, pub-

lished in 1771—and one finds “empire” defined as “a large extent of land under the jurisdiction or government of an emperor.” The first European example mentioned is Charlemagne, of whom the *Britannica* says, “It is to be observed that there is not a foot of land or territory annexed to the emperor’s title.”

“Imperialism” did not appear as a word until the nineteenth century. Its first application was not to overseas expansion but to the domestic pretensions of Napoleon III, emperor of France. As late as 1874, when Walter Bagehot wrote “Why an English Liberal May Look Without Disapproval on the Progress of Imperialism in France,” he referred to France’s internal polity, not to its foreign policy. The contemporary meaning of imperialism as the domination of distant peoples appeared toward the end of the nineteenth century.

So evidence derived from the use of the word “empire” by Americans in the eighteenth century is irrelevant. Still, has not the United States been a constantly expanding nation? Has not this expansion been welcomed by an eager popular consensus? Have not the American people from the start been hell bent on empire?

Well, yes and no. Leaders of the early republic would have been astonished to discover that by the twentieth century a single nation stretched from sea to shining sea. Thomas Jefferson expected white settlers to spread across the continent but never supposed the Stars and Stripes would accompany them. Along the Pacific would arise, in Jefferson’s words, “a great, free and

independent empire,” populated by white Americans “unconnected with us but by the ties of blood and interest.” Daniel Webster similarly anticipated an independent, white “Pacific republic” on the west coast. Even Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, for all his flamboyant expansionism, proposed in 1825 to draw “the Western limits of the republic” along the edge of the Rocky Mountains and to erect a statue of the fabled god Terminus on the highest peak. On the Pacific coast, Benton said, “the new Government should separate from the mother Empire as the child separates from the parent.”

Early Americans conceived continental expansion as through empty lands populated only by wandering and primitive Indians—“savages.” But Jefferson would have probably been even more astonished to discover how little the United States had expanded to the south and to the north where European settlers—British, French, Spanish—had established themselves. Jefferson thought Cuba “the most interesting addition which could ever be made to our system of States” and told John C. Calhoun in 1820 that the United States “ought, at the first possible opportunity, to take Cuba.” John Quincy Adams, James Monroe’s secretary of state and his successor in the White House, considered the annexation of Cuba “indispensable to the continuance and integrity of the Union itself” and thought Cuba would inevitably fall to the United States by the law of political gravitation.

In a masterful book 70 years ago called *Manifest Destiny*, Albert K. Weinberg sardonically exposed the long parade of ex post facto justifications—political gravitation, natural right, geographical predestination, natural growth. The 1840s and 1850s were salad years for Manifest Destiny with the acquisition of California and New Mexico (1848), followed by the fantasies of the Ostend Manifesto (1854), a try by American diplomats in Europe at getting Spain to give up Cuba to the United States.

As for Canada, John Quincy Adams held “our proper domain to be the continent of North America.” Sen. Charles Sumner, another Massachusetts man, was sure that the law of gravitation would bring us Canada. John Quincy Adams’s grandson, the young Henry Adams, observed in 1869 “that the whole continent of North American and all its adjacent islands must at last fall under the control of the United States is a conviction absolutely ingrained in our people.” “Long ere the second centennial arrives,” Walt Whitman predicted in *Democratic Vistas* (1871), “there will be some forty to fifty great States, among them Canada and Cuba.” As late as 1895, Henry Cabot Lodge declared, “From to the Rio Grande to the Arctic Ocean there should be but one flag and one country.”

These things, so authoritatively predicted, never came to pass. We have not annexed Cuba or Canada. There is no likelihood that we ever will. The record hardly sustains the thesis of a people red hot for empire. From the Louisiana Purchase on, territorial acquisition has always met resistance. Texas waited outside the Union for a decade as an independent republic and then entered only through presidential sleight of hand, John Tyler procuring admission by joint resolution after the Senate had rejected a treaty of annexation. The outcry during the Mexican War to take “all Mexico” came to naught. President James K. Polk even feared that Congress would turn against the war, the House having passed a resolution declaring that the war had been “unnecessarily and unconstitutionally begun by the President of the United States,” and that he would lose California and New Mexico. The Ostend Manifesto aroused so much criticism that President Franklin Pierce’s secretary of state was obliged to disclaim it, and William Walker and the other freebooters commanding mercenaries who invaded Central America and Cuba were repudiated.

During and after the Civil War, a life-long expansionist, William H. Seward,

served presidents Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson as secretary of state. But Seward's ambitious program got nowhere, except for the flyspeck of Midway and for Alaska, which Russia wanted to get rid of and which Congress reluctantly accepted after members were bribed, perhaps by the Russian minister. The Senate rejected the Hawaiian reciprocity treaty, the purchase of the Virgin Islands from Denmark, the annexation of Santo Domingo, the annexation of Samoa. It took half a century of argument before we annexed Hawaii, and this might not have taken place had it not been for the war with Spain. Even with this war we still did not annex Cuba. We did annex the Philippines but set them free 40 years later. And by 1960 Alaska and Hawaii were states, not colonial possessions. Annexing Puerto Rico as an inadvertent result of the Spanish-American War, we have maintained it as a "commonwealth," though statehood advocates are gaining strength. Independence is a non-issue except for a tiny minority.

In short, the imperial dream had encountered consistent indifference and recurrent resistance through American history. Imperialism was never a broadly based, popular mass movement. There were spasms of jingoistic outrage, as over the sinking of the *Maine*, but no sustained demand for empire. As James Bryce, the foreign observer whose insights into the American mystery were second only to Tocqueville's, wrote in *The American Commonwealth* (1888), Americans "have none of the earth-hunger which burns in the great nations of Europe.... The general feeling of the nation is strongly against a forward policy." At the height of American experiments with imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century, Theodore Roosevelt, a disappointed imperialist, deplored "the queer lack of imperial instinct that our people show."

Americans, unlike the Romans, the British, and the French, are not colonizers of remote and exotic places. We never devel-

oped a colonial outlook. The United States established no colonial department. It trained no administrators to man the outposts of empire. It had no upper class with younger sons who needed outdoor relief. Britain created a British world in India and Africa; the French created a French world in Indochina and Algeria. The number of Americans who settled in the Philippines was negligible. When Britain liberated India and when France liberated Algeria, it was a matter of bitter internal controversy. When America liberated the Philippines, it was a matter of indifference mingled with relief.

To be sure, the United States like all great powers has varied and vital economic interests, ranging from access to raw materials to export markets. But to assert that these interests foreordain wars of conquest is contrary to the evidence, and indeed confuted by the writings of Marx and Engels, who in this matter were hardly as Marxist as their disciples.

Of course we enjoy an informal empire—military bases, status-of-forces agreements, trade concessions, multinational corporations, cultural penetrations, and other favors. But these are marginal to the subject of direct control. "The term 'empire'" writes Professor G. John Ikenberry, summing up the common understanding, "refers to the political control by a dominant country of the domestic and foreign policies of weaker countries." In their days of imperial glory, Rome, London, Paris, despite slow and awkward lines of communication, really ruled their empires. Today communication is instantaneous. But despite the immediacy of contact, Washington, far from ruling an empire in the old sense, has become the virtual prisoner of its client states.

This was the case notably with South Vietnam in the 1960s, and it has been the case ever since with Israel. Governments in Saigon 40 years ago and in Tel Aviv today have been sure that the United States, for internal political reasons, would not use the

ultimate sanction—the withdrawal of American support. They therefore defied major American commands and demands with relative impunity.

Pakistan, Taiwan, Egypt, South Korea, the Philippines, and very likely Iraq itself are similarly unimpressed, evasive, or defiant. For all our vast military power, we cannot get our Latin American neighbors, or even the tiny Caribbean islands, to do our bidding. As for our military power, war against a guerrilla insurgency in Iraq seems to have strained our military resources to

the limit. Of course, we can always bomb, but that is hardly the way to win hearts and minds. Americans are simply not competent imperialists, as we have demonstrated in Iraq. The so-called American Empire is in fact a feeble imitation of the Roman, British, and French empires. ●

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