

The United States' Global Empire

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EVAN FOSTER-JONES, MAY 28 2009

Does it Make Sense to View U.S. Global Power in the Late 20th and Early 21st Centuries as Constituting a Kind of Empire and, if so, What Kind of Empire is it?

The Oxford dictionary defines empire as: 'Paramount influence, absolute sway, supreme command or control'; how suiting such terminology is to define the current disposition of the United States. Over the past century the U.S. has risen to be the undisputed world power, with its tentacles of influence sprawled across the globe, leaving almost no state untouched. However, does this significant power and influence construct qualify the United States for imperial status? Does its lack of territorial dominions, vassals, or a greater U.S. controlled commonwealth disqualify it from being an imperial power? Advances in technology and political thought[1] have brought to an end the age of territorial empire[2] and brought forth from the ashes an age of globalisation. This is an age where the global free-market is king and where technological advances have revolutionised means of transport and communication, ensuring the planet is much smaller place than it once was. The forerunner, the leader, the creator of this globalised world is the United States. Its gargantuan military capacity and its robust and powerful economy have ensured it a place of 'paramount influence' in the world.

The United States has not engaged active expansionism since, arguably, the end of the American-Spanish war in 1898[3]. In victory, the United States acquired such extra-territorial holdings as the Philippines, Cuba and Puerto Rico from a crumbling Spanish empire[4]. To place the war into a greater context, these foreign acquisitions were the last of note to be taken by the U.S. during an age where the 'manifest destiny' theorem had inspired the great westward expansion of the American state. This aggressive expansionism has been labelled by some as empire building[5], whereas historians such as Samuel Flagg Bemis describe the outcome of the Spanish-American war as "a great aberration in American history"[6], a fleeting entanglement with imperialistic tendencies[7]. This point is perhaps illuminating when analysing a proposed American empire; as a contemporary U.S. empire does not fit the historical model, the answer to the posed question is essentially a matter of perspective.

A modern American 'empire' is founded upon an Allied victory in 1945. Without the advent of World War Two it is likely that the American state we know today would not exist. For it were the war-caused desecration of Europe and the flattening of Japanese Imperialism which forced the U.S. into a power vacuum it was previously unwilling to traverse. No other state had the military or economic wherewithal to answer and solve the plentiful reconstruction problems a war ravaged world faced. American led, co-operative initiatives which were initiated after the war (Bretton Woods and the United Nations amongst others) were all sponsored by the U.S. economy[8]. Therefore, the U.S. was enabled to position itself into the most influential of roles within these organisations: a permanent seat on the Security Council; the Dollar being the bench mark currency of world trade. It manoeuvred itself into a position where the world became dependant on the strength of the U.S., for protections sake and most notably, for the sake of the greater world economy. With the U.S. military machine being also unsurpassable, at the mid point of the 20th century the U.S. found itself surging into the position of world hegemon; a position it has since aggressively defended.

As noted, the U.S. is vastly unlike empires of past. Therefore, the question must be begged, what characteristics do the U.S. display for it to be characterised as an empire. Essentially, much of what leads some to state that the U.S. is an empire relates to the influence and control to which the U.S. can and does exert over the globe.

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Whilst the U.S. has no extra-territorial empire, a commonwealth of nations to preside over, it does however have territorial interests in other states. The most mundane examples are of course its embassies and consulates. The more controversial relate to its military might. For instance, the U.S. has approximately 725 military bases located outside of the mainland U.S.[9]. This poses many interesting ponderings when considering the sovereign state model[10]; especially when state leaders are unaware of such bases[11]. The use of many of these bases for global surveillance and information gathering also gives the U.S. significant leverage in the world of international affairs[12]. The sheer size of its intelligence and counter intelligence operations are designed to ensure the U.S. has somewhat of a monopoly on the information passed on the arrays of communicative devices into which it can tap. This in turn leads to other states seeking the knowledge that the U.S. possesses, and conversely, living in fear as to what it knows.

Its unsurpassable military and intelligence community has also been used to manipulate or drastically interfere with the internal machinations of foreign states. There are numerous people who deny the existence of U.S. imperialism, see Rumsfeld for his musings[13]. Moreover, there are those who argue that if a U.S. empire does exist, it is benevolent in structure and action[14]. I anticipate that the political histories of Iran, Nicaragua[15], Afghanistan, Vietnam or Cuba[16] would beg to differ[17]. During bitter 'cold-wars' engaged in by the U.S. during the age of said multilateralism, paranoia as to the curbing of its power and influence rang through much of its international policy. One only has to analyse the U.S. sponsored bludgeoning of Afghanistan during the 1980s, in seeking a Vietnam styled revenge on its Soviet comrades, to appreciate the negligently wanton all too often displayed by this supposedly "benevolent" empire. These intrusions into the affairs of others are not for the sake of a territorial empire, but rather to protect and nurture its financial and political interests. No more clearly can this be seen of recent than in the Iraq war[18].

American Realpolitik engagement with the world should not be overlooked. The decrees so often sounded from the White House or its varied leaders about American protection of hope, freedom and the world-wide prevalence of democracy leaves much to be desired. The American disdain shown toward a hostile North Korea has little to do with Kim Jong-Il's humanitarian record or totalitarian regime. If such were so, U.S. opposition to the running of the 'democracies' of Caspian Sea[19] would be far more evident. Rather, U.S. resentment of North Korea, or Iran for that matter, is more involved with the threat that these two states potentially pose to the hegemony of the U.S. The support shown to the Caspian Sea democracies is all done to ensure benefit for the American state; in this case financial benefit[20]. In short, the U.S. often decries the benevolence of the American led free world, the hope that it inspires and the tyranny to which it opposes. In reality, it will often support any means or power that ensures the betterment and empowerment of the American state.

The cold-war era is also significant to an analysis of an American Empire. The threat posed by the U.S.S.R. to American unilateralism was significant, if overstated. What is of interest is the American treatment of soviet ideals and those people connected to them. One only has to look at the time that McCarthyism[21] plagued the American political landscape. The paranoia which swept the U.S. and, by association, the rest of the 'western world' was largely unfounded. Although the U.S.S.R., with Russia at the spear head, did have a considerable military capacity, it paled in comparison to that of the U.S.. For example, at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the U.S.S.R. had to its disposal 3, 522 nuclear weapons; the U.S. had close to ten times this amount[22]. Whilst of course three thousand warheads is clearly capable of reeking extreme devastation and a life ending nuclear winter, the figures are clearly symbolic and indicative of the vast gap between the two superpowers. The American disdain for the soviets and communism is not unlike the Roman unease at the vast barbarian hordes. To be American today is surely as it was to be Roman. The politics of fear, the control and power which it brings, has evidently not been lost to the ages.

The cold war also provides a suitable backdrop to express American exceptionalism. The right wing of the American political spectrum is more inclined to view the American state as 'a civilizing force in world affairs, shaping economic and political relationships through business, governmental and other processes to ensure a world economy and polity that is in the American image'[23]. It is not surprising then that we see a gearing up of U.S. soviet tensions during the Regan administration and the rise of Neo-conservatism[24]. However, it was a champion of the Democratic party, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who initiated post World War Two imperialism, with a mind attuned to the growing influence of the U.S.S.R. and with a view to coexist with this new global power[25]. However, as he sought to spread the influence

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of capitalism, to the financial benefit of the U.S., tensions began to rise as spheres of influence collided. This fostering of a greater capitalist society only grew under later presidents, until the time of Reagan arrived, when such contention was intended to be ended by way of a rapid investment in the armed forces, aimed to extinguish any semblance of soviet competition. Not until the Bush Jr. years[26] has the world seen neo-conservatism on the scale that prevailed during the 1980's. It has been an experiment which has dramatically backfired. Two failing wars, a failed economy and a public tired with personal cost of imperialistic tendencies.

So how should one interpret an American hegemony? Evidently the U.S. does not have the traditional institutions of empire, thus new formulae have been born to describe the current dominance of the U.S. Hardt-and-Negri-ite theory places the U.S. at the heart of a decentralized but global empire, based on the free-flowing of trade and goods. The U.S. is essentially the heartbeat of this global economy, but is not its ruler[27]. The theory states, "the United States does indeed occupy a privileged position in Empire, but this privilege derives not from its similarities to the old European imperialist powers, but from its differences." [28]. Political scientists such as Leo Pantich suggest the world has been enveloped by a U.S. led super-imperialism, where the big financial players in the western economy (Europe, Japan, U.S.) have become too economically interdependent to engage in armed geopolitical conflict[29]. The U.S., being at the centre of the global economy is therefore the greatest power and thus resides over an economic empire[30]. If the U.S. is unable to use its military muscle to dominate countries such as Japan, or the EU, can it be a truly imperial power? Or is it just a dominant power of the day, with its role being limited to a hegemonic state, acting as a balance of power within the international arena.

The U.S. is unlike empires of past. However, it has vast commonalities with Imperial powers lost to the ages. Its empire is not marked by territorial boundaries, for it is truly global. The world grips upon the back of the U.S. economy like a baby chimp to its mothers back; no more piquantly evidenced than the current global recession we find ourselves in. Such reliance gives the U.S. great power, influence and sway in the international arena. Furthermore, it's military is unsurpassable. It has the potential to annihilate any given or perceived threat. It does not need to set territorial boundaries to dictate its sphere of control; it has already embedded itself so deeply into global politics that the states of the world march to the pace set by the U.S.; with little exception. It is an empire of the modern era. Yet a U.S. empire is in decline. It is struggling to maintain its control in an ever changing planet. Stateless enemies, resources out of its control, a public whose mind set is more attuned to an isolationist U.S. than an imperialistic one. But no one can doubt the influence it has had and still does maintain. One only has to look at contemporary pop culture, or how an American led globalised free market has consumed global economics; comparisons with the old might of Rome are easy to make[31]. Whilst the make up of a U.S. empire is certainly different than those of past, the 'paramount influence' it exerts is surely not.

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[16] John F. Kennedy, one of America's most revered presidents, often interpreted as person of benevolence

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(perhaps for his liberal leanings) oversaw or instigated the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the Cuban Missile crisis and Operation Mongoose, See: L. Scott, '*The Cuban Missile Crisis And The Threat Of Nuclear War*', Continuum, London, 2007, and; A. Husain 'Covert Action and U.S. Cold War Strategy in Cuba, 1961-1962' *Cold War History*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2005

[17] It must be noted, that if the U.S. is to be interpreted as an empire is has been far more benevolent in its actions than empires of past. It has not engaged in active racism, slavery or genocide on the scale once witnessed, which is perhaps more a sign of the times than being indicative of anything else.

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[30] L. Panitch, M. Konings, p. 45

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