

Has American Imperialism Shaped the World in the 20th Century?

Written by Leighton James Hughes

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LEIGHTON JAMES HUGHES, AUG 30 2012

“Critically evaluate claims that the world was shaped by American imperialism in the Twentieth Century.”

Consumed by the intoxicating promise of an ‘American Century’, Henry Luce in 1941 declared the subsequent hundred years to be the destiny of the United States of America (USA). “The prediction was 100 years of unparalleled power and predominance. The United States had 50% of the world’s GDP, it led the world in almost every major area of technology, most areas of basic science, we had the ability to project military force around the world, its major competitors were left in ruins, and had a monopoly on the Atomic Bomb.[1]” To this day, America still has the largest economy in the world, the firepower and global status to, almost unilaterally, engage in wars as immersive as Iraq, and a powerful cultural resonance. Imperialism is defined as: “a policy of extending a country’s power and influence through colonization, use of military force, or other means[2]”; yet, Luce’s audacious statement was regarding America’s newfound capacity to shape the rules of the new world order, with itself at the head. Herein, we can examine the extent of American dominance and the very legitimacy of the word “empire”.

The international organs and institutions were, for the greater part, initiated by America at the climax of the Second World War. “They believed firmly that a stable international order could be best built upon such principles as freedom,[3]” and this would be through the establishment of a United Nations (UN) and other collective administrative forces. Ikenberry affirms that this has actually filled the void of empire, with “states hold[ing] a monopoly on the use of force in their own territory while order at the international level is maintained through the diffusion of power among states.[4]” This is certainly an idealistic view and probably a deficient one because, in the post-war period, with America having succeeded in carving out a near monopoly on these organizations, accentuating that “the UN without the US is nothing,[5]” this was, in fact, an indirect manifestation of imperialism.

This same dominance was also a feature of the international financial world, with America having crafted the architecture of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (and instigating the Bretton Woods system of currency): “the policies the debtor countries had to adopt became known as the Washington Consensus.[6]” Such prestidigitatation enabled the US to gain the upper hand in terms of its economic relationship with other countries, something particularly important in an increasingly globalized age. With regards to the ‘American empire’, “unlike any other in the history of the world, [it] has been built primarily through economic manipulation, through cheating... giving loans to other countries, huge loans, much bigger than they could possibly repay.[7]” This sentiment is fundamental to Pax Americana, as well as in establishing security; however, inequity has occurred with “the backward countries... now discovering that their political importance to the rich nations has decreased in inverse proportion to their own economic need.[8]” On the other hand, as along with having the capacity to ignore organizations’ requests and demands regarding situations that do not suit its agenda, such as George W. Bush’s decision to go to war in Iraq, America, would, nonetheless, assist countries in need of humanitarian aid. For example, “a Pakistani conservative credits US military and economic aid with enabling Pakistan to survive ‘during her tender infancy.’[9]” It is clear that such flexibility for America “clearly had influenced the United States as it rose to power over the course of the twentieth century.[10]”

The existence and presence of US military is also a striking indicator of the extent of imperialism. There are “156

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countries with U.S. troops; 63 of which also have fully functioning bases,[11]" and with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, America now has modest bases on Russia's doorstep, which serve as a live prospect. The fact that such territorial 'violation' has existed would seem to legitimate the view that America is an empire – at least in the sense that it is supreme to those countries that its forces impregnate – or perhaps simply that these countries see no loss in playing host. The key question to the extent of America's shaping of the Twentieth Century is whether these countries were directed by America or simply in agreement with the super-power from the outset?

It is clear that counter-factualists would say that if America had not intervened in the First and Second World Wars, their very dominance would have ceased to exist. This is simply because alliances would also cease to exist in a Nazi Europe and Soviet East, as there would be no possibility of having bases in an ideologically hostile arena. The Washington Consensus would be superfluous. "Parents of teenagers know that if they have structured their children's beliefs and preferences, their power will be greater and will last longer than if they had relied on active control.[12]" Therefore, after US military intervention, *endorsement* rather than occupation of Europe was required, and this came via a gargantuan expenditure programme (5.5% of US Gross Domestic Product in its first year alone) called the Marshall Plan, which aided war-torn Europe with funds in order to quell American fears of it turning to Communism. Alliances were required for the enhancement of the American vision for the future, in acting as political and trade partners. Allied with the 'Truman Doctrine', an early example of America tailoring the political alignment of the world – in this case Europe – so as to make conditions conducive for itself to flourish, this could therefore be interpreted as the creation of an ideological empire. Such intervention cemented the view that liberal democracy, albeit more loosely capitalistic compared to the laissez-faire American-style, was the paradigm to follow.

Direct interventionism has been one of the most important features of the reach of American imperialism. Although through a kaleidoscope of ultimate subjectivity, with the assumption that liberal democracy is the paradigm, such interventionism has arguably had positive effects on the modern world. It would be jejune to simply highlight the cataclysm that was the Vietnam War, spanning three decades. Accordingly, it is important to understand the context of all American involvements. Max Boot defends American imperialism by declaring that it "has been the greatest force for good in the world during the past century. It has defeated Communism and Nazism and has intervened against the Taliban and Serbian ethnic cleansing.[13]" American hegemony, at this very moment, was paved by the dissolution of the Soviet Union that had been accelerated by American military spending and a Strategic Defence Initiative. It is clear that "today the Cold War is over. The Soviet Union is no more.[14]" America's strength could also be understood as extinguishing the dying embers of British Empire: "one thing we are not fighting for is to hold the British Empire together[15]", as echoed by President Eisenhower who famously condemned British action in Suez in 1957 as "in error". This condemnation was also a necessity to exert American influence at its fullest.

Furthermore, it is significant that, after Woodrow Wilson's intervention in the First World War, "America was no longer merely the great example of freedom — America was now to bestow freedom on the world through its political and military intervention. Peace would be established by reordering the world according to a new socially engineered design.[16]" The most notable and substantial achievement in American interventionism, however, can be overlooked. Contemporary West Germany, Japan, and South Korea are all testament to the American capacity to re-invent and stabilize nations. "In the first two, rogue regimes far more dangerous than Saddam Hussein's in Iraq, with ideologies far more dangerous than the radical Islamic fundamentalism that inspires Al-Qaeda, were over-thrown, and the societies which supported them were drastically transformed to produce the stable Western-orientated capitalist liberal democracies we know today.[17]" If the respective American governments did not take such action, it is unequivocal that the modern world would be unrecognizable, especially seeing that all three are, to this day, are strong American allies. In this sense, American 'imperialism' has carved two key regions into its own mould.

While American imperialism has had positive effects, it would be quixotic to assume that the American agenda and the effects of interventionism have been wholly beneficial and successful. "The world is a much more dangerous place as a result of America's determination to save it[18]". This is due to excessive entanglement in areas of entrenched tribal conflicts, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite his usual fetishism for America and empire, even Ferguson acknowledges "the failures outnumber the successes roughly four to one" and that "in the countries that the United States intervened in militarily, between 1898 and the present, only a tiny handful were successfully transformed into quasi-American societies." [19] It is probable that the Cold War would not have helped the American

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cause for the proliferation of capitalism and liberal democracy, in that there was a broad acceptance that each sides' influence be contained. The period of the Cold War was intrinsic, however. Yet, despite this, the more intervention America wills for today, the more the world "will become more militarized, and less democratized." [20] This explicitly challenges the veracity of 'Pax Americana'. There is some truth in such a claim, but the success of various involvements in post-war Europe and post-1991 Eastern Europe would seem sufficient warrant for future liberal interventionism, despite the existing cloud left by the recent Iraq War.

Little actually criticizes "the failure of the United States to establish a stable world order" [21] of having left a preponderance of dangerously unstable hybrids, such as Afghanistan. However, others would even question America's actual capacity to influence the world in absolute terms. Even in the Cold War, despite America's ultimate triumph, it was beholden to smaller countries due to the fear that they would jettison a policy of alignment with them: "if pressure from one superpower became too great, a smaller power could defend itself by threatening to align with the other superpower" [22], to further its own objectives. As alignment was crucial in the ideological conflict, so were alliances. As such, despite being stronger than every other country, they still had to woo potential allies, rather than simply occupy territory. Furthermore, "it could not intervene in the zone of accepted Soviet hegemony" [23] and, so, had virtually no active influence over Eastern Europe for the greater part of the Twentieth Century. Thus, this idea has limitations.

Cultural imperialism is also a significant feature of the world today. "The connection between imperial politics and culture in North America, and in particular in the United States, is astonishingly direct." [24] Whether concerning the instant familiarity of Hollywood or the phenomenon of jeans, "the United States... has a universalistic popular culture" [25], and this has left a cultural impression on all continents of the world, to some degree. The most significant reason of America's success is its control of information flows, that it has such a stronghold on the media, and that it can "fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place." [26] The fact that America holds such a strong position with such vast instruments for communication allows it to guide the world toward its own paradigm. Marxists would go as far to consider America as facilitating a self-perpetuating cycle of expansion, whereby it can monopolize the world order through economic and military superiority. On this basis, the intervention in the Gulf Wars was a consequence of American lust for oil. Others would see intervention as purely ideological, imposing Western values onto torn, despotic regimes. However, the nuances of the term "imperialism" would indicate America to be less of an empire and more of 'a global policeman', "forming the nuclear system, the monetary system, and the post-war trade system." [27]

Luce's declaration of an American Century was certainly prescient, yet far from absolute: the immediate post-war supremacy mirrored the Soviet bloc, until its dissolution in 1991. However, it is equally apparent that, throughout the period, America *has* had the capacity to intervene in varying countries and conflicts, but, as Kondracke argues, this has been to act as "a status quo power." [28] It is evident that America has not intervened in countries for the sole reason of furthering its own ends, "not trying to exert military hegemony on any region" [29]; such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Kosovo, where failed states have contributed to civilian destruction. Although, it is also clear that the proliferation of an ideology broadly aligned with the American modus operandi is desirable for the further enhancement of their own success. Therefore, the optics and the substance need careful disentangling. It is prevalent view that America *has* been a global colossus over the Twentieth Century and it has wielded its considerable influence for humanitarian purposes, *as well as* more dubious geo-political ones in a host of countries, from Grenada in 1983, and Panama 1989, to Iraq at the turn of the century. It is essential to recognize that the ways in which America has shaped the world of today: in West Germany, in South Korea, with the destiny of the Cold War, and now with the 'War on Terror'. If America is an empire, it is not in the conventional sense of defined territorial occupation. However, regardless of semantics, with the depth of America's strength having been so unequivocal, the legacy of many of its successful international pursuits have been sufficiently encompassing, in that they will undoubtedly outlast America's own supremacy.

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