

AFTER THE WINNING OF THE WAR - United States: wider still and wider
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For those with a long memory and an understanding of the ambitions and history of previous empires - and their inevitable decline - the present behaviour of the United States is familiar and yet unprecedented. It may lead to the militarisation of the US, the destabilisation of the Middle East and the impoverishment, in every way, of the rest of the world.

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The present world situation is quite unprecedented. The great global empires that have been seen before, such as the Spanish in the 16th and 17th centuries, and notably the British in the 19th and 20th centuries, bear little comparison with what we see today in the United States empire. The present state of globalisation is unprecedented in its integration, its technology and its politics.

We live in a world so integrated, where ordinary operations are so geared to each other, that there are immediate global consequences to any interruption - SARS, for instance, which within days became a global phenomenon, starting from an unknown source somewhere in China. The disruption of the world transport system, international meetings and institutions, global markets, and even whole economies, happened with a speed unthinkable in any previous period.

There is the enormous power of a constantly revolutionised technology in economics and above all in military force. Technology is more decisive in military affairs than ever before. Political power on a global scale today requires the mastery of this technology, combined with an extremely large state. Previously the question of size was not relevant: the Britain that ran the greatest empire of its day was, even by the standards of the 18th and 19th century, only a medium-sized state. In the 17th century, Holland, a state of the same order of size as Switzerland, could become a global player. Today it would be inconceivable that any state, other than a relative giant - however rich and technologically advanced it was - could become a global power.

There is the complex nature of today's politics. Our era is still one of nation-states - the only aspect of globalisation in which globalisation does not work. But it is a peculiar kind of state wherein almost every one of the ordinary inhabitants plays an important role. In the past the decision-makers ran states with little reference to what the bulk of the population thought. And during the late 19th and early 20th century governments could rely on a mobilisation of their people which is, in retrospect, now quite unthinkable. Nevertheless, what the population think, or are prepared to do, is nowadays more directed for them than before.

A key novelty of the US imperial project is that all other great powers and empires knew that they were not the only ones, and none aimed at global domination. None believed themselves invulnerable, even if they believed themselves to be central to the world - as China did, or the Roman empire at its peak. Regional domination was the maximum danger envisaged by the system of international relations under which the world lived until the end of the cold war. A global reach, which became possible after 1492, should not be confused with global domination.

The British empire in the 19th century was the only one that really was global in a sense that it operated across the entire planet, and to that extent it is a possible precedent for the American empire. The Russians in the communist period dreamed of a world transformed, but they knew well, even at the peak of the power of the Soviet Union, that world domination was beyond them, and contrary to cold war rhetoric they never seriously tried such domination.

But the differences between today's US ambitions and those of Britain of a century and more ago are stark. The US is a physically vast country with one of the largest populations on the globe, still (unlike the European Union) growing due to almost unlimited immigration. There are differences in style. The British empire at its peak occupied and administered one quarter of the globe's surface (1). The US has never actually practised colonialism, except briefly during the international fashion for colonial imperialism at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The US operated instead with dependent and satellite states, notably in the Western hemisphere in which it almost had no competitors. Unlike Britain, it developed a policy of armed intervention in these in the 20th century.

Because the decisive arm of the world empire was formerly the navy,

the British empire took over strategically important maritime bases and staging-posts worldwide. This is why, from Gibraltar to St Helena to the Falklands Islands, the Union Jack flew and still flies. Outside the Pacific the US only began to need this kind of base after 1941, but they did it by agreement with what could then genuinely be called a coalition of the willing. Today the situation is different. The US has become aware of the need directly to control a very large number of military bases, as well as indirectly to continue to control them.

There are important differences in the structure of the domestic state and its ideology. The British empire had a British, but not a universal, purpose, although naturally its propagandists also found more altruistic motives. So the abolition of the slave trade was used to justify British naval power, as human rights today are often used to justify US military power. On the other hand the US, like revolutionary France and revolutionary Russia, is a great power based on a universalist revolution - and therefore based on the belief that the rest of the world should follow its example, or even that it should help liberate the rest of the world. Few things are more dangerous than empires pursuing their own interest in the belief that they are doing humanity a favour.

THE basic difference is that the British empire, although global (in some senses even more global than the US now, as it single-handedly controlled the oceans to an extent to which no country now controls the skies), was not aiming at global power or even military and political land power in regions like Europe and America. The empire pursued the basic interests of Britain, which were its economic interests, with as little interference as possible. It was always aware of the limitations of Britain's size and resources. After 1918 it was acutely aware of its imperial decline.

But the global empire of Britain, the first industrial nation, worked with the grain of the globalisation that the development of the British economy did so much to advance. The British empire was a system of international trade in which, as industry developed in Britain, it essentially rested on the export of manufactures to less developed countries. In return, Britain became the major market for the world's primary products (2). After it ceased to be the workshop of the world, it became the centre of the globe's financial system.

Not so the US economy. That rested on the protection of native industries, in a potentially gigantic market, against outside

competition, and this remains a powerful element in US politics. When US industry became globally dominant, free trade suited it as it had suited the British. But one of the weaknesses of the 21st century US empire is that in the industrialised world of today the US economy is no longer as dominant as it was (3). What the US imports in vast quantities are manufactures from the rest of the world, and against this the reaction of both business interests and voters remains protectionist. There is a contradiction between the ideology of a world dominated by US-controlled free trade, and the political interests of important elements inside the US who find themselves weakened by it.

One of the few ways in which this weakness can be overcome is by the expansion of the arms trade. This is another difference between the British and US empires. Especially since the second world war, there has been an extraordinary degree of constant armament in the US in a time of peace, with no precedent in modern history: it may be the reason for the dominance of what President Dwight Eisenhower called the "military industrial complex". For 40 years during the cold war both sides spoke and acted as though there was a war on, or about to break out. The British empire reached its zenith in the course of a century without major international wars, 1815-1914. Moreover, in spite of the evident disproportion between US and Soviet power, this impetus to the growth of the US arms industry has become much stronger, even before the cold war ended, and it has continued ever since.

The cold war turned the US into the hegemon of the Western world. However, this was as the head of an alliance. There was no illusion about relative power. The power was in Washington and not anywhere else. In a way, Europe then recognised the logic of a US world empire, whereas today the US government is reacting to the fact that the US empire and its goals are no longer genuinely accepted. There is no coalition of the willing: in fact the present US policy is more unpopular than the policy of any other US government has ever been, and probably than that of any other great power has ever been.

The Americans led the Western alliance with a degree of courtesy traditional in international affairs, if only because the Europeans should be in the front line in the fight against the Soviet armies: but the alliance was permanently welded to the US by dependence on its military technology. The Americans remained consistently opposed to an independent military potential in Europe. The roots of the long-standing friction between the Americans and the French since the days of De Gaulle lie in the French refusal to accept any

alliance between states as eternal, and the insistence on maintaining an independent potential for producing hi-tech military equipment. However, the alliance was, for all its strains, a real coalition of the willing.

Effectively, the collapse of the Soviet Union left the US as the only superpower, which no other power could or wanted to challenge. The sudden emergence of an extraordinary, ruthless, antagonistic flaunting of US power is hard to understand, all the more so since it fits neither with long-tested imperial policies developed during the cold war, nor the interests of the US economy. The policies that have recently prevailed in Washington seem to all outsiders so mad that it is difficult to understand what is really intended. But patently a public assertion of global supremacy by military force is what is in the minds of the people who are at present dominating, or at least half-dominating, the policy-making in Washington. Its purpose remains unclear.

Is it likely to be successful? The world is too complicated for any single state to dominate it. And with the exception of its military superiority in hi-tech weaponry, the US is relying on diminishing, or potentially diminishing, assets. Its economy, though large, forms a diminishing share of the global economy. It is vulnerable in the short term as well as in the long term. Imagine that tomorrow the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries decided to put all its bills in euros instead of in dollars.

Although the US retains some political advantages, it has thrown most of them out of the window in the past 18 months. There are the minor assets of American culture's domination of world culture, and of the English language. But the major asset for imperial projects at the moment is military. The US empire is beyond competition on the military side and it is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. That does not mean that it will be absolutely decisive, just because it is decisive in localised wars. But for practical purposes there is nobody, not even the Chinese, within reach of the technology of the Americans. But here there will need to be some careful consideration on the limits of technological superiority.

Of course the Americans theoretically do not aim to occupy the whole world. What they aim to do is to go to war, to leave friendly governments behind them and go home again. This will not work. In military terms, the Iraq war was very successful. But, because it was purely military, it neglected the necessities of what to do if you occupy a country - running it, maintaining it, as the British did in the classic colonial model of India. The model "democracy"

that the Americans want to offer to the world in Iraq is a non-model and irrelevant for this purpose. The belief that the US does not need genuine allies among other states, or genuine popular support in the countries its military can now conquer (but not effectively administer) is fantasy.

THE war in Iraq was an example of the frivolity of US decision-making. Iraq was a country that had been defeated by the Americans and refused to lie down: a country so weak it could be easily defeated again. It happened to have assets - oil - but the war was really an exercise in showing international power. The policy that the crazies in Washington are talking about, a complete re-formulation of the entire Middle East, makes no sense. If their aim is to overthrow the Saudi kingdom, what are they planning in its place? If they were serious about changing the Middle East we know the one thing they have to do is to lean on the Israelis. Bush's father was prepared to do this, but the present incumbent in the White House is not. Instead his administration has destroyed one of the two guaranteed secular governments in the Middle East, and dreams of moving against the other, Syria.

The emptiness of the policy is clear from the way the aims have been put forward in public relations terms. Phrases like "axis of evil", or "the road map" are not policy statements, but merely sound bites that accumulate their own policy potential. The overwhelming newspeak that has swamped the world in the past 18 months is an indication of the absence of real policy. Bush does not do policy, but a stage act. Officials such as Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz talk like Rambo in public, as in private. All that counts is the overwhelming power of the US. In real terms they mean that the US can invade anybody small enough and where they can win quickly enough. This is not a policy. Nor will it work. The consequences of this for the US are going to be very dangerous. Domestically, the real danger for a country that aims at world control, essentially by military means, is the danger of militarisation. The danger of this has been seriously underestimated.

Internationally, the danger is the destabilising of the world. The Middle East is just one example of this destabilisation - far more unstable now than it was 10 years ago, or five years ago. US policy weakens all the alternative arrangements, formal and informal, for keeping order. In Europe it has wrecked the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation - not much of a loss; but trying to turn NATO into a world military police force for the US is a travesty. It has deliberately sabotaged the EU, and also systematically aims at

ruining another of the great world achievements since 1945, prosperous democratic social welfare states. The widely perceived crisis over the credibility of the United Nations is less of a drama than it appears since the UN has never been able to do more than operate marginally because of its total dependence on the Security Council, and the use of the US veto.

How is the world to confront - contain - the US? Some people, believing that they have not the power to confront the US, prefer to join it. More dangerous are those people who hate the ideology behind the Pentagon, but support the US project on the grounds that, in the course of its advance, it will eliminate some local and regional injustices. This may be called an imperialism of human rights. It has been encouraged by the failure of Europe in the Balkans in the 1990s. The division of opinion over the Iraq war showed there to be a minority of influential intellectuals, including Michael Ignatieff in the US and Bernard Kouchner in France, who were prepared to back US intervention because they believe it is necessary to have a force for ordering the world's ills. There is a genuine case to be made that there are governments that are so bad that their disappearance will be a net gain for the world. But this can never justify the danger of creating a world power that is not interested in a world that it does not understand, but is capable of intervening decisively with armed force whenever anybody does anything that Washington does not like.

Against this background we can see the increasing pressure on the media - because in a world where public opinion is so important, it is also hugely manipulated (4). Attempts were made in the Gulf war, 1990-91, to avoid the Vietnam situation by not letting the media near the action. But these did not work because there were media, for example CNN, actually in Baghdad, reporting things that did not fit the story Washington wanted told. This time, in the Iraq war, control again did not work, so the tendency will be to find yet more effective ways. These may take the form of direct control, maybe even the last resort of technological control, but the combination of governments and monopoly proprietors will be used to even greater effect than with Fox News (5), or Silvio Berlusconi in Italy.

How long the present superiority of the Americans lasts is impossible to say. The only thing of which we are absolutely certain is that historic ally it will be a temporary phenomenon, as all these other empires have been. In the course of a lifetime we have seen the end of all the colonial empires, the end of the so-called Thousand Year Empire of the Germans, which lasted a mere 12

years, the end of the Soviet Union's dream of world revolution.

There are internal reasons why the US empire may not last, the most immediate being that most Americans are not interested in imperialism or in world domination in the sense of running the world. What they are interested in is what happens to them in the US. The weakness of the US economy is such that at some stage both the US government and electors will decide that it is much more important to concentrate on the economy than to carry on with foreign military adventures (6). All the more so as these foreign military interventions will have to be largely paid for by the Americans themselves, which was not the case in the Gulf war, nor to a very great extent in the cold war.

Since 1997-98 we have been living in a crisis of the capitalist world economy. It is not going to collapse, but nevertheless it is unlikely that the US will carry on with ambitious foreign affairs when it has serious problems at home. Even by local business standards Bush does not have an adequate economic policy for the US. And Bush's existing international policy is not a particularly rational one for US imperial interests - and certainly not for the interests of US capitalism. Hence the divisions of opinion within the US government.

The key issue now is what will the Americans do next, and how will other countries react? Will some countries, like Britain - the only genuine member of the ruling coalition - go ahead and back anything the US plans? Their governments must indicate that there are limits to what the Americans can do with their power. The most positive contribution so far has been made by the Turks, simply by saying there are things they are not prepared to do, even though they know it would pay. But at the moment the major preoccupation is that of - if not containing - at any rate educating or re-educating the US. There was a time when the US empire recognised limitations, or at least the desirability of behaving as though it had limitations. This was largely because the US was afraid of somebody else - the Soviet Union. In the absence of this kind of fear, enlightened self-interest and education have to take over.

Edited by Victoria Brittain

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(1) The Age of Empire 1875-1914, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1987.

(2) Op cit.

(3) Chalmers Johnson, Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire, Owl Books, 2001.

(4) "France protests US media plot", International Herald Tribune, 16 May 2003.

(5) Eric Alterman, "United States: making up the news", Le Monde diplomatique, English language edition, March 2003.

(6) "US unemployment hits an 8-year high", International Herald Tribune, 3 May 2003.

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