



## America's Virtual Empire

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In 1878, when Britain had just gained control of the Middle East by purchasing the majority shares in the new Suez Canal, and was about to secure its dominance of the Mediterranean by acquiring Cyprus at the Conference of Berlin, the colonial secretary, Lord Carnarvon, asked his civil servants if they knew the meaning of this new word “imperialism.” As a member of the government that had two years earlier bestowed the title empress of India upon Queen Victoria, and as the man who steered the North America Act through Parliament, making Canada into a self-governing dominion, he should have known. He did not. Even as the sun of Victorian empire was rising to the point at which it never set on lands owing allegiance to Her Majesty, the term caused confusion. It does so to this day, as a fascinated and resentful and sometimes admiring world tries to comprehend the nature of the current extraordinary American preeminence in the arts of war and commerce, finance and technology, scientific scholarship and popular culture.

“Empire,” as a metaphor rather than a precise definition, seems to describe this new predominance better than most alternatives, largely because of its familiarity. The Pax Britannica of the nineteenth century was based on global military reach through naval power and on commercial and industrial dominance. The current Pax Americana appears to share many of the same characteristics. Thus the easy syllogism suggests that the United States is the British Empire’s heir, and that just as the British entered upon their imperial greatness after the 20-

year war against Napoleon’s France, so the United States now inherits the fruits of its success in the Cold War.

There are three serious objections to this simplistic parallel. The first is that nineteenth-century Britain commanded nothing remotely akin to the current American military supremacy. The British faced acute difficulties whenever they sought to deploy their power ashore against even semi-modern armies, whether against Russia in the Crimea or the Boers of Southern Africa. The British could even be humiliated by ill-armed local rebellions, as when Lord Chelmsford’s small army was destroyed by the Zulus at Isandlwana. Britain never sought, until the Great War of 1914–18, to field a mass land army and maintained its global influence on the cheap through the Royal Navy. In European terms, Britain acknowledged that it was but one among a group of great powers, and for all practical purposes its European policies always depended on finding another great power as an ally on land. As Germany’s “Iron Chancellor,” Count Otto von Bismarck jested when warned that the British might land its small army on the German coast to defend Denmark, Britain’s army was of so little consequence as a European land power that he would simply send the constabulary to arrest it.

The second difficulty with the idea of America as heir to the British Empire is its hesitancy in the deployment of influence, its reluctance to risk its gunboats—even in the most worthy and altruistic causes. The United States has since the end of the Cold

War been remarkably timid in the exercise of its power abroad. The Gulf War was stopped swiftly, and perhaps prematurely, rather than launch a full-scale invasion of Iraq to force the ouster of Saddam Hussein. The Clinton administration scuttled from Somalia after suffering a handful of casualties, dithered over military intervention in Haiti, refused the most haunting appeals to its conscience to fend off genocide in Rwanda, and sought for five years to keep out of the wars of the Balkans. The eventual deployment of U.S. air power against Serbia in 1995, and the full engagement of American diplomacy, followed the Anglo-French threat to withdraw their “peacekeeping” forces, with the associated demand through NATO auspices that the U.S. military provide cover for that retreat. The change to a much more assertive policy since the terrorist attacks of September 11 is explained by the de facto declaration of war upon the United States; vital interests are evidently involved.

And yet empires, almost by definition, do not exercise their military sway only when their vital interests are involved. There were no vital British interests at stake in Zululand in 1879, nor in General Gordon’s mission to Khartoum in 1885, to cite but two of the Victorian empire’s embarrassments. It is almost a defining characteristic of empires that they can afford to defend and uphold even their marginal interests. They often fear that by choosing to disregard them, they reveal a casual regard for their own prestige that may attract serious rivals and put at risk the deeper national interest.

Moreover, empires come to be defined by the challenges they choose to confront. Under Lord Palmerston’s brisk dictum—“Trade without rule where possible; trade with rule where necessary”—India was left until 1857 in the corrupt but not incapable hands of private enterprise in the form of the Honorable East India Company. The outbreak of the Mutiny in that year forced the dispatch of British reinforcements

(arousing fears that France might seize the opportunity to invade across the Channel) and the assumption of official control in India. The India of the Company could write off the disaster that befell British arms in Kabul in 1842, when only one survivor returned from an expeditionary foray into Afghanistan. The India of the Raj, deeply conscious of the ambitions of Tsarist Russia in Central Asia and their impact on the European chessboard, could not let such military reverses pass unavenged. Lord Roberts of Kandahar, that classic Victorian soldier (who took his first commission in the East India Company’s Bengal Artillery) earned his peerage at the 1878 battle deep inside Afghanistan, marching to the relief of a besieged British garrison.

It is at this point, and by coincidence at the same place on the map, that the parallel between British and American empires starts to look plausible. With some 3,000 of its citizens slaughtered, the United States took the war to al-Qaeda’s base in Afghanistan. To wage that war in the manner to which the U.S. military had become accustomed, bases were required in Pakistan, and in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan deep inside Asia. These bases swiftly acquired a more than temporary look. In December 2001, the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* reported that the U.S. military was tendering for 40,000 tons of cement, bricks, and air conditioning equipment for the new base at Jacobabad. Building on agreements originally made through NATO’s Partnership for Peace, the U.S. military established itself in that vague heart of Eurasia where Russian, Chinese, and Islamic influences and interests all come together. This is a region that has also seen some recent important finds of oil and gas reserves, in which major American corporations are engaged, and it remains to be seen how long the U.S. military presence lasts.

The new Central Asian commitments swell to over 200 the number of overseas U.S. military bases around the world, some

of them dating from after the Cold War. A historian—or another great power with interests in the region—might conclude that since Saddam Hussein remained in power in Baghdad, the real result of the Gulf War of 1990–91 was to establish a lasting American military presence in the oil-rich region of the Persian Gulf. The same historian may be saying in another decade that the real result of the war on terrorism was to establish a similar lasting presence deep in the oil-rich heart of Eurasia. Indeed, media commentators in the United States and overseas already assert it, and some cheer on the process. Max Boot of the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page presented “The Case for American Empire” as a cover story in the *Weekly Standard* of October 15, 2001. “The September 11 attack was a result of insufficient American involvement and ambition; the solution is to be more expansive in our goals and more assertive in their implementation,” he maintained. Robert Kaplan, whose book *Balkan Ghosts* was cited by President Bill Clinton as a reason not to get involved in the Balkans, now suggests in his latest book, *Warrior Politics*, a new American mission “to bring prosperity to distant parts of the world under America’s soft imperial influence.” Kaplan writes in tones that recall Kipling’s call to America in 1898, as it assumed the administration of the newly conquered Philippines:

Take up the White Man’s Burden –  
The savage wars of peace –  
Fill full the mouth of Famine  
And bid the sickness cease.

(Interestingly, Max Boot’s own new book on minor U.S. military actions is titled *The Savage Wars of Peace*.)

The contrast is striking between the resolve of the Bush administration to become deeply and seriously involved in the politics and military affairs of Central Asia, and its long delay in deploying serious diplomatic commitment to the Middle East as the Is-

rael-Palestine crisis threatened to destabilize the whole region. Indeed, that commitment was only mobilized when the crisis threatened to disrupt the Bush administration’s plan for “regime change” in Iraq. This can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it represented the usual indulgence of an imperial power, permitting one of its allies to wage a brisk little war of its own. On the other hand, it suggested that President George W. Bush’s America remained a non-empire, a deeply reluctant superpower that saw no reason to intervene where vital interests were not engaged. It was only when the widespread Arab (and European) revulsion at the ruthless Israeli military response to the Intifada threatened the new vital interest of the war on terrorism and the second stage against Iraq that Washington lumbered into action.

#### *A New American Empire?*

This brings us to the third difficulty in equating the United States, which is led by a temporary elected president who is subject to the rule of law and the budgetary authority of Congress, with the classic empires of the past. Democracies tend to shun the long-term vision and sustained resolve and colonial bureaucracies that empires usually require. Looking at the way that the United States since 1945 has organized the global economy and trade rules to its broad satisfaction, it might be argued that it is fulfilling Palmerston’s dictum of “trade without rule where possible.” But it has not moved on to “trade with rule where necessary.” Remarkably, the United States, with the temporary exceptions of the occupation forces in Japan and Germany after the Second World War, has not ruled others and shows little intention of doing so.

But equally, looking at the new organizing principle of American policy that the war on terrorism appears to represent, and the new military bases mushrooming across Central Asia, it may be that September 11 has triggered something dramatic, a serious

determination to accept the new challenge and play the role and assume the burdens of empire. So it seemed to some participants at a conference earlier this year at Ditchley, a stately country house in the Oxfordshire countryside.

Churchill took refuge there on moonlit nights during the Second World War, lest German bombers target his official country residence at Chequers. It has since become celebrated to its initiates as the spiritual home of the Anglo-Saxon alliance that has endured since Churchill's day. It is a discreet and very up-market conference center, supported by Britain's Foreign Office, where powerful officials and politicians from London and Washington, plus a handful of selected academics and journalists, have for more than 60 years met to discuss the state of the world, and then don black tie for a splendid dinner in a stately hall on Saturday nights, before gathering around the piano in song. In such convivial ways is the British conception of the "Special Relationship" studiously tended, although in recent years the ranks have widened to include other NATO allies, and even the occasional Russian.

But the Ditchley conference in question was less amicable than most. From reports that have leaked from the usually confidential sessions, senior Bush administration officials had a blunt message to deliver. The European allies (the British excepted) were not pulling their weight in the alliance. Their defense budgets were far too low and they deployed too little fighting power from what they did spend. (This is true; Germany, for example, currently spends 1.5 percent of GDP on defense, less than half of America's 3.4 percent. Britain barely scrapes a passing grade with a whisker under 3 percent.) Moreover, those European allies that were members of the European Union were playing a dangerous game by courting a new EU Rapid Reaction Force, designed to be separate from NATO, although typically still relying on NATO (by which they meant

American) assets to be remotely effective. The Americans suspected that the Europeans were downgrading NATO, and if so, they could hardly expect the Americans to award the alliance its traditional weight. The Americans made no final judgments. The Europeans, whose waspish comments about Texas cowboys and unilateralism and Israel had not passed unnoticed in Washington, had to show that these suspicions were misplaced. Conveniently, a litmus test was at hand: the determination of the Bush administration to take its war on terrorism to Iraq. If the Europeans played the supportive role expected of allies, fine. If not, Washington would draw the proper conclusions about NATO's future.

#### *Europe in Disarray*

The chancelleries of Europe, to resurrect an ancient phrase, were swiftly abuzz. Within the week, it was the talk of an Eastern European security conference in Prague, and then another in Florence. Checking with the usual contacts, an inquisitive journalist could establish the following broad reactions. The French, until distracted by the embarrassing success of Jean-Marie Le Pen in the first round of the French elections, with the prospect of unemployment for Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine, detected an outrageous threat. Some officials at the Quai d'Orsay, the French foreign ministry, spoke off the record of "unilateralism escalating into autocracy and imperialism." Even the moderates in the French Ministry of Defense (which has usually been less suspicious of *les Anglo-Saxons*) grumbled that this extended Bush's with-us-or-against-us challenge to roguish states to censuring allies who could count Lafayette, Clemenceau, and de Gaulle in their common battle honors.

The French had a point. This was a disagreeable way to speak to allies, even at a closed and informal gathering. And in Paris, it seemed to pile yet another layer of authoritarian intransigence upon the wall that was growing between the United States and its

European allies. From a French, and often from a wider European viewpoint, the Americans seemed to be steadily abandoning their traditional loyalty to the Atlantic Alliance and to the West as a whole. From the Kyoto Protocol on global warming to the International Criminal Court, from the biowarfare protocol to tariffs on steel, the Bush administration seemed careless of any idea of the common good, when this might appear distinct from American interests. (By contrast, from suppressing piracy and the slave trade to building lighthouses and publishing marine charts, the British Empire had seen the common good as a serious responsibility.)

It was ironic that the French were the most blunt in suggesting that America was shifting from unilateralist hegemony to full-blown imperialism. The clearest distinction between the Western alliance and the Soviet Empire during the Cold War had emerged when France's president Charles de Gaulle took France out of the NATO joint military command in 1966 and asked all American troops to leave the country. The Americans duly complied (as they also left the Philippines on request). The Soviets, by contrast, sent tanks into Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968 to ensure that they remained dutiful satellites of the Warsaw Pact. The French above all had reason to know that NATO was an alliance of sovereign volunteers facing the sullen conscripts of the Warsaw Pact.

But the French did not speak for Europe. Other allies were far less critical of the American arguments at Ditchley, noting that the Europeans indeed shared much of the blame for the American perception that NATO was no longer as reliable or as useful as it had once been. (Indeed, had the May 8 slaughter of a dozen French naval engineers in a terrorist bombing in Pakistan taken place a month earlier, the French might have taken a far more robust and supportive view of the war on terrorism.) The British were characteristically smug, knowing that

Iraq was a test that Prime Minister Tony Blair was already determined to pass, but uncomfortable, since it would make life difficult with the Europeans yet again, and the British always like to have it both ways. The Germans were all over the place. Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (of the Green Party) trotted out his well-honed "we are allies, not satellites" phrase to one East European ambassador. But Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who had already signaled his intentions by sending a battalion of chemical warfare troops to Kuwait, simply dreaded the prospect that D-Day might come before his reelection bid in September. He thought there had been an understanding that the Pentagon needed the summer months to prepare for the battle of Baghdad. The two southern and conservative governments, those of Italy's prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and Spanish premier José Maria Aznar, were robustly pro-American, although officials in their foreign ministries were nervous of getting out of step with "Europe." Since Berlusconi was his own foreign minister, and since Spain held the rotating presidency of the European Council (making Aznar into a temporary Mr. Europe) these diplomatic quibbles had only moderate effect.

In short, Europe was in disarray over the merits of the American argument about NATO and Iraq, and also deeply divided about the broader implications of the new American stance. On the whole, just as the Europeans had come to accept the Bush administration's determination to proceed with its plans for a national missile defense system, most of them seemed ready to acquiesce in "regime change" in Iraq, so long as the usual rituals of United Nations mandates and inspections were observed.

Whether the Europeans freely changed their minds, or felt constrained to follow where Washington led, is beside the central point. The Bush administration left the decision to the Europeans, and said it would draw the proper conclusions. This may be unusually firm leadership, backed

up by vague menaces to downgrade the Atlantic Alliance. It is not, journalistic exaggeration and Parisian posturing notwithstanding, the rule of empire.

### *The Meaning of Imperialism*

This brings us back to the nineteenth-century British colonial secretary who wanted to know the meaning of imperialism. Lord Carnarvon was no fool, even though his prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, bestowed on him the nickname “*Twitters*.” Carnarvon had been schooled in the classics and edited a scholarly work on the Gnostics of the first and second centuries. Empire for him meant the Rome of the caesars, quasi-divine rulers who variously extended and mismanaged the conquests of the earlier Roman Republic. He saw few parallels between the imperial caesars and the indefatigably bourgeois figure of Queen Victoria. Disraeli had bowed to her wishes in naming her empress of India, largely because he thought it might help cement the loyalty of the Indian maharajahs. Carnarvon also knew that Disraeli’s view of the imperial question was that colonies were “*millstones round our neck*.”

The one considered public statement that Disraeli made on the British Empire that he did so much to build came in his Crystal Palace speech of 1872, which was mainly an attempt to rally the new working classes, enfranchised by the 1867 Reform Bill, to the conservative cause. Most of the speech was a ferocious attack upon Gladstone’s Liberal government as “*a range of exhausted volcanoes*,” accompanied by election pledges to improve the public health and sanitation. On the theme of empire, Disraeli remarked that the new voters were conservative in the “*purest and loftiest sense*.... [They] are proud of belonging to a great country, and wish to maintain its greatness; they are proud of belonging to an Imperial country and are resolved to maintain, if they can, their empire; they believe on the whole that the greatness and the empire of Eng-

land are to be attributed to the ancient institutions of the land.”

Disraeli went on, almost casually, to sketch the desirable characteristics of this empire. It should be based on colonial self-government, in which the colonial governor appointed from London should place the same largely honorific role of the constitutional monarch in London. These self-governing colonies “*ought to have been accompanied by an Imperial tariff and by the institution of some representative council in the metropolis*.” With the exception of a brief aside on the need for “*a military*” code to spell out the respective responsibilities in the common defense, that was the sum of Disraeli’s imperial thinking. And he did nothing to act upon these ideas of an imperial trade system, an imperial council, and an imperial defense policy—ideas that were to lie fallow for another political generation until Joseph Chamberlain tried, and failed, to revive them.

“*No Caesar or Charlemagne ever presided over a dominion so peculiar. Its flag floats on many waters, it has provinces in every zone, they are inhabited by persons of different races, different religions, different laws, manner and customs*,” Disraeli observed. The British Empire, sprawling and messy, would have been baffling to the caesars, or to any other properly planned imperial bureaucracy. The queen was empress only in part of her realms, and only a constitutional monarch everywhere. The usual benefits of empire, common laws and coinage and system of government, simply failed to emerge.

Parts of it, like Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and later South Africa, were self-governing. Some colonies, like the newer African conquests and the islands scattered around the globe, were ruled from London. India, the Jewel in the Crown, was run by a viceroy appointed from London and a professional Indian Civil Service, although many of the Indian states were administered by their own local monarchs with British

advisers. Egypt was nominally independent, with its own king, army, and government, although the presence at court of British financial and political advisers and a British sirdar to run the military allowed London to govern with minimal expense. (Since the British had landed in Egypt to demand payment of Egypt's defaulted debts, expense was important. Once ashore, the British troops installed a British clerk to run the Egyptian Customs, with the tariffs assigned to pay off the defaulted debts.) Similar systems of "protectorates" were established along the Persian Gulf, and when the British Empire reached its greatest extent after its victory in the First World War, the booty of the former German and Ottoman Empires fit comfortably enough into this ramshackle structure as new mandates of the League of Nations.

The essential point is that the British Empire we now believe we knew was invented after the fact by poets like Rudyard Kipling and Alfred Austin. It was never planned, but grew in fits and starts, sometimes restrained by Liberal or parsimonious governments in London, sometimes extended by ambitious officials in the field. Any logic in its expansion came from technology. The sail-powered Royal Navy of the early nineteenth century had little need for bases; the steam-driven navy after the 1850s needed regular coaling stations along the sea routes, and coaling stations required forts and garrisons to protect them. So dominant that its power was never seriously challenged between Napoleon's defeat in 1815 and the rise of Imperial Germany after 1900, the Royal Navy's most frequent duty in the nineteenth century was to suppress piracy and the slave trade and enforce the freedom of the seas that benefited all trading nations, including the very competitors who were steadily overtaking Britain's initial lead in industrialization. And unlike Rome, Britain did not even mandate a single currency. Its subjects used annas and rupees, dollars and thalers, and even cowrie

shells, and some kept their wealth in cattle and camels.

Just as the British Empire was not the Rome of the caesars, twenty-first-century America is not the classic British Empire, and it is high time a new metaphor was coined to describe it with more precision, or at least with less of the unsavory baggage that "empire" hauls in its wake. One of America's distinguished Founding Fathers understood the difference. The future fourth president, James Madison, a serious constitutional scholar as an author of *The Federalist*, clearly understood the distinction between Rome and Britain. Writing in reflection, almost a generation after the American Revolution, Madison observed: "The fundamental principle of the Revolution was, that the Colonies were co-ordinate members with each other and with Great Britain, of an empire united by a common executive sovereign, but not united by any common legislative sovereign. The legislative power was maintained to be as complete in each American Parliament, as in the British Parliament. And the royal prerogative was in force in each Colony by virtue of its acknowledging the King for its executive magistrate, as it was in Great Britain by virtue of a like acknowledgement there."<sup>1</sup>

Madison was challenging John Adams's view that the British Empire in America was "introduced in allusion to the Roman Empire, and intended to insinuate that the prerogative of the imperial crown of England was absolute."<sup>2</sup> Madison and Adams were both right. The Britain of King George III or Queen Victoria was not ancient Rome, but a frail thread does connect Rome, London, and Washington. One way to comprehend it is to think in terms of progression. Rome, at least under efficient emperors like Trajan, was the classic empire; centralized, authoritarian, bureaucratized, and so rooted in military power that the legions were not just the guarantors of power but often the springboard to imperial rule. Rome fell when the legions were defeated

and was sacked by barbarians. Britain's was a commercialized empire, concerned more with profit than with power, remarkably unmilitarized for the scale of its sway, lightly bureaucratized and variously, if pragmatically governed. Above all, once the burden became insupportable, the empire was let go, by the vote of a democratic parliament, and with strikingly little bloodshed and a minimum of ill will.

### *The Virtual Empire*

To answer Lord Carnarvon's question today, it could be said that America is a virtual empire, whose power is so evident and so sweeping that it does not need to be formally exercised. It has grown beyond Palmerston's dictum, enjoying trade without the expense and burdens of rule because rule is hardly necessary when so many of the goods that flow from the virtual empire are too desirable or essential to be adjured. The virtual empire can thus maintain its preeminence with more than a degree of courtesy for the rest of the international order. The forms of the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and other international bodies are usually observed. Allies are treated with the respect due to sovereign states, although enemies get short shrift. Old enemies like Germany and Japan after 1945, and Russia after the Soviet collapse, are routinely invited and even helped to become new friends, and most of them find it profitable and congenial to agree. And the policies of the virtual empire are extraordinarily open to argument and persuasion, whether by foreign lobbying, commercial pressures, or the assiduous cultivation of influence by domestic interest groups, a process that is kept reasonably open by a free and inquisitive media.

This is a new beast, the like of which the world has not seen before. We may grope among the historical precedents to find some useful clues in classical Rome or Victorian Britain, in Periclean Athens or in the enlightened despotism of Enlightenment Europe without finding any satisfactory parallel. Even if one were to ring true, it might not hold for long because it is in the nature of this beast to change its defining features, shifting from manufacturing dominance to services, from naval power to aerospace, from Coca-Cola to MS-DOS, and constantly luring an enthralled world to follow in its consuming wake. And this inherent compulsion to change its nature may yet prove to be the virtual empire's besetting weakness. We do not yet know into what new forms and new commitments the war on terrorism will drive it. The new Central Asian bases for the Afghan war may prove to be temporary utilities, but they may also become the sinews of a longer and more intrusive occupation, engendering the same resentments that have made the Saudi bases so problematic. If the war on terrorism shifts the virtual empire into the reality of rule, just as the traditional allies are being told their services may no longer be necessary, the new beast is likely to find its rule as vulnerable as the empires that have disappeared. ●

### Notes

1. *The Writings of James Madison*, vol. 6, ed. Gaillard Hunt (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1900–10), p. 373.

2. See John Adams, "Political Points of Controversy," February 6, 1775.