

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

Strategic Factors Influencing the British and American Empires

by

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ABSTRACT

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Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States has been the sole remaining superpower. It is not a stretch of the imagination to consider it an empire. America dominates the world culturally, politically, economically, and militarily, in much the same way as a traditional empire, although without the direct possession of territory. The last global power was Great Britain during the reigns of Victoria and Edward. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the British Empire was the envy of the other great powers; the greatest empire the world had ever seen to that time; the time of the Pax Britannica. Since the end of World War II, America and the West generally have enjoyed peace and prosperity. Despite the Cold War, occasional regional wars, and a variety of local conflicts and revolutions, this era is often referred to as the "Pax Americana" in view of the protection and stability provided by American military and economic power. This paper will examine four factors that influenced the strategic environment and the development of the British and American empires.

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STRATEGIC FACTORS INFLUENCING THE BRITISH AND AMERICAN EMPIRES

England, England, England, girdled by ocean and skies, and the power of a world and the heart of a race, and a hope that never dies.

—Wilfrid Campbell

We must shoulder our burden with our eyes fixed on the future, but recognizing the realities of today, not counting on mere hope or wishes. We must be willing to carry out our responsibility as the custodian of individual freedom. Then we will achieve our destiny to be as a shining city on a hill for all mankind to see.

—Ronald Reagan

SETTING THE STAGE

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States has been the sole remaining superpower. It is not a stretch of the imagination to consider it an empire. America dominates the world culturally, politically, economically, and militarily, in much the same way as a traditional empire, although without the direct possession of territory.

The last global empire was Great Britain during the reigns of Victoria and Edward. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the British Empire was the envy of the other great powers. It was the greatest empire the world had ever seen. Although little more than 10 percent of its people were of British and European origin and although there were more Hindus and Muslims in the British Empire than Christians, it was in a very real sense British. It was an empire held together by the purely symbolic institution of the monarchy, by the English language, and by the British legal and administrative systems. And it was watched over by the world's largest navy.¹ It was the time of the "Pax Britannica." In setting the context for Britain's rise to "greatest power" status, Paul Kennedy wrote:

The international system, which developed in the half-century and more following Napoleon's downfall possessed an unusual set of characteristics, some merely temporary, while others became permanent features of the modern age. ...The first was the steady, and then spectacular, growth of an integrated global economy, which drew ever more regions into a transoceanic and transcontinental trading and financial network centered upon western Europe, and in particular Great Britain. These decades of British economic hegemony were accompanied by large-scale improvements in transport and communications, by the increasingly rapid transfer of industrial technology from one region to another, and by an immense spurt of manufacturing output, which in turn stimulated the opening of new areas of agricultural land and raw-materials sources. The erosion of tariff barriers and other mercantilist devices, together with the widespread propagation of ideas about free trade and international harmony, suggested that a new international order had arisen, quite different from the eighteenth-century world of repeated Great Power conflict. The turbulence and

costs of the 1793-1815 struggle ... caused conservatives and liberals alike to opt as far as possible for peace and stability, underpinned by devices as varied as the Concert of Europe or free-trade treaties. These conditions naturally encouraged long-term commercial and industrial investment, thereby stimulation the growth of a global economy.²

In many ways, Britain's position at the beginning of the twentieth century is similar to that of ours today and, with only a few minor word changes, Kennedy could have been writing about the United States' situation *vis a vis* today's global environment. Since the end of World War II, America and the West generally have enjoyed peace and prosperity. Despite the Cold War, occasional regional wars, and a variety of local conflicts and revolutions, this era is often referred to as the "Pax Americana" in view of the protection and stability provided by American military and economic power.

This paper will examine the period of the "Pax Britannica," generally defined as 1815 to 1914, from a strategic environment perspective. What influence did geography, military composition, economics, and ideology have in the development of the British Empire and how did those same factors influence the rise of today's American Empire?

THE STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

There are probably as many methods of studying grand strategy as there are strategic theorists. For example, one can look at the effects of the "ends, ways, means" triad on the strategy. By looking at each piece of the triad separately and then in conjunction with the whole, the student can determine whether there is synergy or dissonance: why a strategy succeeded or failed. He or she can then overlay this triad with the specific use of the four instruments of power and build a picture of how the grand strategy was developed and implemented. Another model approaches analysis from three different levels: the international system, the state, and the individual. In this model, grand strategy is predicated on the balancing of power among states (international) or on the system of governance of a particular state (state) or on the belief that one individual (or group of individuals) with big ideas can wrest changes in the political climate. Students can then analyze the state's grand strategy from each of these levels separately or as a whole.

These are but two of many different methodologies available to the student of grand strategy and while they are extremely valuable in determining the "who, what, where, when, and how" of the strategy, they often do not fully address the "why." They do not set the context in which decisions are made and actions taken. What is needed to complete the picture is a firm understanding of the external factors that shape the period in question: the strategic

environment. Williamson Murray and Mark Grimsley, in their essay "Introduction: On Strategy," from The Making of Strategy, discuss the influence of external factors on the development of grand strategy. These factors include, among others, the state's geographical setting, its religious and cultural outlook, its history and form of government, and the impact of its economy. While, at times, each factor will have a greater or lesser impact than others, all combine to provide a holistic framework within which to study the impact of the strategic decisions made. Since strategy does not occur in a vacuum, understanding the interplay of these factors is important.

Reality weds strategic planning tightly to its larger context. Political objectives play their role, of course, as do diplomatic, economic, and military resources. These elements are obvious, but other factors also influence strategic thinking in subtler but equally vital ways. Geography helps determine whether a given polity will find itself free from threat or surrounded by potential adversaries. Historical experience creates preconceptions about the nature of war and politics and may generate irresistible strategic imperatives. And ideology and culture shape the course of decision-makers and their societies in both conscious and unconscious ways. Not only may ideology and culture generate threats where a different perspective would see none, but their influence usually shapes perceptions about alternatives. Moreover, the nature of a government's organization may largely determine the sophistication of its strategic assessments and the speed with which it can respond to new threats and opportunities.³

PAX BRITANNICA

Many factors shaped the strategic environment in which the British Empire developed. Those that best illustrate the unique characteristics of the empire are geography leading to an island mindset, the growth of the Royal Navy protecting overseas trade, a burgeoning economy capable of reaping the benefits of the Industrial Revolution, population growth fueling overseas migration, and, finally, an indomitable belief in the British way of life leading to a zealous need to improve the lot of the lesser peoples of the world.

THE ISLAND MINDSET

Geography may be the most significant factor that influenced the development of the British grand strategy, both before and during the imperial period. The British were strongly influenced in their outlook by the fact that they lived on an island and that attitude determined greatly how they were to interact with the rest of the world. Great Britain was close enough to the continent of Europe "to participate fully in its economic and intellectual developments"⁴ but had the advantage of the English Channel and North Sea as natural barriers – ones that had successfully protected them from foreign invasion for centuries (and in living memory,

Napoleon). However, proximity to the continent made British governments acutely conscious of the possibility of invasion. Hence, the British since the time of Elizabeth I “sought to maintain England’s independence by diplomacy,⁶ but, if necessary, took advantage of their naval power to harass political adversaries at sea (a tactic that often proved profitable to the crown). That is not to say that England was incapable of intervening militarily on the Continent, proven by British involvement in the long Napoleonic Wars, just that its preferred method of dealing with continental powers was to use other instruments of national power.

Britons of the mid-nineteenth century recognized three sources of “that peculiarly British power which was currently transforming the world.”⁶ One was the British belief in their native inventiveness and the diligence of the British people, which led to the second cause – the growth of the British manufacturing industry. But the third was the paramount cause, Britain’s naval supremacy, which made it possible for it to expand its markets and “to count for something in the world.”⁷

BRITANNIA RULES THE WAVES

An island nation, especially one with overseas colonies, limited natural resources and an ambitious desire for the riches gained through overseas trade,⁸ needed the development and employment of a strong navy to protect the sea trade routes so vital to the its interests. Alfred Thayer Mahan, in writing about British naval supremacy, put it this way:

The security of the British Empire, taken as a whole with many parts, demands first the security of the British Islands as the cornerstone of the fabric; and, second, the security of each of the outlying parts. This means substantially British control, in power if not in presence, of the communications between the central kingdom and the Dominions.⁹

Thus, a strong Royal Navy was the second factor (the military one) that played a major role in the strategy of the empire.

As a general rule, Britain did not maintain a relatively significant standing army as compared to the other European powers.¹⁰ After the victory in the Napoleonic Wars, the British thought it unlikely that it would need to mobilize its resources to fight an all-out war.¹¹ Hence, while the ranks of the British army numbered over 255,000 at the time of Waterloo, those numbers dropped dramatically by 1830 (to 140,000 men). While the army increased in size to a height of 347,000 in 1860 as a result of the Crimean War, by 1880 it was again reduced by 100,000.¹² The Army steadily increased in size to 212,000 by 1897 – still an amazingly small number considering the vast territory under British protection.¹³

One would have expected an imperial army would be needed to hold the empire together; however, the British extensively used the practice of indirect rule to manage colonial affairs, either by granting some measure of autonomy, establishing proconsuls, or collaborating with existing leaders. This hands-off policy was “cheap, the natives were appeased, and the Empire was relatively peaceful.”¹⁴ The white colonies were allowed small militias, commanded by British officers, for local protection, but since they had no say in the formulation of policy, they had no formal obligations of imperial defense (That said, the white colonies did often provide soldiers in support of the British Army, the Boer War being a prime example.). The British Army itself was drawn from two sources - half from Britain, half from India and was not composed of conscripts. Most of this force was needed for the protection of Britain’s overseas colonies, since they had little responsibility for their own defenses, with fully a third stationed in India (paid for by Indian, not British, taxes¹⁵), a quarter in other colonial areas, and the remainder back in Britain.¹⁶ Since it was small, its soldiers were constantly rotated through various empire outposts and England. “It was said that the British Army was the hardest worked in the world.”¹⁷

Thus, the British people did not feel the direct burden of defending the empire. Even the majority of small colonial wars fought throughout this time were “relatively cheap – and often financed by the Indian rather than the British taxpayer.”¹⁸ Hence, Britain avoided the trap that snared many land empires, which overextended themselves by having to defend ever-wider frontiers. Not needing to pay for a large standing army meant that Great Britain could invest elsewhere; in particular, the Royal Navy. Sea power allowed the British Empire to rule by something very close to bluff.¹⁹

The Royal Navy was the empire’s true military jewel. Expanded under Henry VIII, the British Navy reached its zenith after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 and remained there until the outbreak of World War I. During that period Britain was acknowledged as the greatest maritime nation in the world.²⁰ Britain’s stated strategy was to maintain a huge navy with “a high level of technological and managerial efficiency that was capable of defeating the combined fleets of any two potential rivals. Maritime supremacy also involved sustaining high levels of public investment in the fleet during decades of peace.”²¹

A strong, wide-flung navy also required access to distant bases for support. Hence, the relationship between the growth of the navy and the growth of the empire was symbiotic: the strength of the Royal Navy contributed significantly to the expansion of the empire and the empire expanded, in part, because of the need for distant bases to provision and harbor a navy whose presence was felt throughout the globe.

The Royal Navy was often used as a diplomatic instrument. The mere presence of a British fleet offshore was often a sufficient factor not only in Continental but colonial politics. While the British government preferred the use of diplomacy, it was willing to back persuasion by the threat of force, and often that force was needed for a suitable (from the British perspective) solution. It was not unusual for Royal Navy ships to put into port merely to remind Latin American, Chinese, Arabs, and Africans of the power of Britain. It was during this time that Britain developed what came to be known as 'gunboat diplomacy' – which was, in large measures, a means of ensuring British equities were protected throughout the world.²² While the Royal Navy was used to open reluctant markets, rarely did it interfere with the overseas trade of other nations and, in fact, the Royal Navy provided the protection of the seas. "In short, British naval power, funded by British taxes, guaranteed secure passage and uninhibited freedom to sail and to engage in trade by sea."²³

The importance of not having to spend a lot on the military cannot be underestimated. The costs of maintaining sizable armies and navies contributed immensely to the downfall of many European regimes. Funds that might have paid for internal economic stability, not to mention growth or the reduction of crippling debt, were not available to many of these powers that struggled militarily for supremacy on the continent. Great Britain learned this lesson, and though it maintained a strong navy (and a comparatively small army), it did so not at the expense of the economy, but rather in support of it. It was a delicate balance, but one it was able to continue until the crushing costs of World War I.

WORKSHOP OF THE WORLD

The next factor to influence the empire was economic. During much of the nineteenth century, Great Britain had the world's strongest economy. It was the most rapidly growing country in the world. From the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, Great Britain was responsible for approximately two-thirds of Europe's industrial growth. By 1860 it was producing over 50 percent of the world's iron, coal, and lignite and consuming 50 percent of the world's cotton.²⁴

Much of this success was fueled by the benefits of the Industrial Revolution; and Britain was one of the major leaders in that revolution. Britain reaped the rewards of its pioneering role in the creation of the industrial society; it had become the 'workshop of the world.' With a worldwide shipping industry – protected by the strength of the Royal Navy – the British developed sources for raw materials as well as markets for its finished goods. The middle decades of the century were an age of cotton, coal, and iron. In the production and export of

cotton goods as well as iron and coal, Britain led the world “with no visible challengers to its pre-eminence anywhere on the discernable track.”²⁵

By the close of the eighteenth century, London had replaced Amsterdam as the world’s financial center.²⁶ It was the home of the great overseas trading companies as well as the many banking and business houses which financed the activities of overseas planters and traders and provided the capital to help them market their goods in both Britain and elsewhere. Britain’s economic success had a great impact on the expansion of its empire; as did the expansion of the empire impact its burgeoning economy. Understanding this, the British leadership dropped the mercantilist trading policies of the eighteenth century, embracing the concept of free trade, which not only aided Britain’s economic growth but also that of other countries. London and other British cities – Bristol, Liverpool, Portsmouth, Glasgow – were home to extensive and busy ports through which all manner of people, supplies, and products flowed to worldwide destinations.²⁷ The British attitude towards free trade was what was good for Britain was good for all. And while the colonies continued to conduct most of their trade with Britain (up to 20 percent of British imports and 33 percent of exports),²⁸ Britain itself was increasingly expanding its trade with the rest of the world. The United States, in particular, continued to be Britain’s single most important trading partner until well into the twentieth century.²⁹

Trade was a praiseworthy activity in everyone’s mind. It meant not only the enlargement of British wealth, obviously no minor consideration, but in addition it was, to many, a means for the advancement of civilization and a major contribution to world peace. It was the faith of many ardent free traders that people who traded together by mutual interests did not fight each other, for they were bound together by mutual interests that precluded war.³⁰

The decisions of successive British governments from 1846 to 1914 to keep the markets of both Britain and the colonies open is one of the important factors behind the growth of international trade (the protection of sea trade routes by the Royal Navy being the other major factor). This is not to be misconstrued, however, as altruistic. In 1842, with the lowering of trade barriers, British leaders were not claiming to open imperial markets to benefit the world economy; but rather their own national self-interest. The fact that they continued to pursue this policy at the end of the century even amid calls for trade protection had as much to do with their political situation at home, i.e., maintaining Liberal ideals, than with the ramifications on world trade.³¹

The burgeoning economy also meant that there was money to be invested overseas, and throughout the century British investments continued to rise. The accumulated private wealth of the country, drawn from both industrial and agricultural products, was channeled into foreign

and imperial investments. This investment was not altogether philanthropic. By injecting large sums of money into undeveloped and developing economies, British investors were “stimulating new demands and drawing new countries into its global network of trade.”³² No economy has ever placed such a large proportion of its capital funds in investments in other lands as Britain did in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³³ Since Great Britain generally imported more than it exported, it was the revenues from these investments that kept the British economy solvent, especially in the years between 1891 and 1906.³⁴

The export of goods and money led to the development of an ‘informal’ empire, as important, perhaps more so, to the British than were its official colonies.³⁵ In the scramble for new markets, it was inevitable that British merchants would face local opposition or local governments unable to protect them or their goods. Again, it was the Royal Navy to the rescue, with a show of force that served to emphasize British power.

At no time in the history of the relations between Europeans and non-Europeans peoples was the gap between European technology and that of other peoples as great as in the mid-nineteenth century, and for Britain it was the greatest of all. Britain had the power to guide and affect the affairs for foreigners; the fact that the power she held had been achieved by the hard work, thrift, ingenuity, and enterprise of Britons in itself gave substantial justification for its use over those who had not demonstrated these same sterling virtues.³⁶

The growth of the large scale manufacturing capabilities of the Industrial Revolution was accompanied by a population explosion within the British Isles. Had Britain remained a largely agrarian country, it is believed that there would have been widespread famine.³⁷ Instead, the Industrial Revolution provided the factories that absorbed much of the excess population. Many, however, migrated overseas; an exodus created in part by a desire to be part of the British governing experience, but also by dreams of fame, fortune and glory, fueled by numerous accounts of adventures carried in both the newspapers and popular books of the day. Average migration in the middle of the eighteenth century was about 214,000; by the early twentieth century, it had risen to over 280,000. Not all of the British emigrants went to the colonies; a significant portion went to the United States, in particular the Irish. However, by the close of the 1800s about 50 percent were migrating to lands under the British flag, continuing to strengthen the imperial connection.³⁸ This directly relates to the next factor, ideological and cultural: that of bringing the British way of life to those not fortunate to have been born in Britain.

THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN

The British attitude towards the empire was often contradictory. Depending on which decade one studies, British political society was, at turns, anti-imperialistic, ambivalent about the empire, or zealously imperialistic. Lack of faith in the empire, lack of belief in its value, lack of interest in its continuance, and lack of desire for its enlargement characterized the first half of Queen Victoria's reign –the years from her coronation to the early eighteen-seventies.³⁹ However, if the British government appeared markedly unenthusiastic about imperial adventure for much of the nineteenth century, the British people felt otherwise – so much so that imperialism became a real force in British politics when Benjamin Disraeli declared it to be one of the three planks of the Conservative platform in 1872.⁴⁰

Partly fostered by the success the British achieved in expanding their empire (proof to the average Briton that the British way was the right way), partly due to the growing religious zeal to convert the heathen, and partly resulting from the dominant attitudes of the day of the superiority of the white race to the colored, the mood within Britain was that the British had a responsibility to bring their lifestyle, education, and system of laws and government to the non-British peoples of the Far East, Asian sub-continent, and Africa. "Greed, humanitarianism, missionary zeal, fear of foreign intervention, and that curious phenomenon 'prestige imperialism,' which toward the end of the nineteenth century filled Englishmen with an inordinate yearning to paint the map red, all played their part"⁴¹ in inculcating this attitude. So while adventure, fame, and fortune often drove Britons to the distant parts of the empire, many others went seeking conversion of the heathen – whether religious or ideological (and often both).

"The missionary was not simply the herald of a new religion; he was the emissary of the whole set of values, ideas, and practices that he and those who sent him believed to be vastly superior to the ideas and practices of those amongst whom he labored."⁴²

And James Anthony Froude, a leading historical commentator of the day, spoke of the duty of Britain to lead as Rome had done in its heyday:

[B]ut for the Britons of the nineteenth century it was the best they had, and all things considered, it was sufficient for its purpose. ... in the certain faith and conviction that he was an instrument for the bringing of civilization to those who stood most direly in need.⁴³

Thus, there emerged during the nineteenth century the sense of duty, of trusteeship, toward those over whom Britain had established its political authority. This included the responsibility of not merely bringing the British way of life to the empire, but also a British way of governance with the hope that the unlearned peoples would one day be qualified and capable to

rule themselves in the appropriate (or British) manner. Even the Liberals, where disagreement with (if not outright hostility to) the empire should have been more pronounced, bought into the notion of Britain bearing the white man's burden.⁴⁴ Alfred Milner, British high commissioner in South Africa, believed in the genius of the British 'race' for ruling, but he also felt that the British must share the secret of how to rule with those they governed. This sharing of the secret was "peculiar to the British Empire among Empires, and to the British nation as an Empire-building race."⁴⁵ But perhaps the most eloquent expression of this type of thinking was written, not by an imperial official, but by the novelist Anthony Trollope in Australia and New Zealand (1873), when he declared:

We are called upon to rule [the colonies] as far as we do rule them, not for our glory, but for their happiness. If we keep them, we should keep them – not because they add prestige to the name of Great Britain, not because they are gems in our diadem, not in order that we may boast that the sun never sets on our dependencies, but because by keeping them we may assist them in developing their own resources. And when we part with them, as part with them we shall, let us do so with neither smothered jealousy nor open hostility, but with a proud feeling that we are sending a son out into the world able to take his place among men.⁴⁶

In governing themselves and much of the rest of the world, the British adhered to a limited number of principles, practices, and perceptions that were long-standing and deeply rooted.

From the time of the Tudors, those with the highest social prestige assumed the responsibility of local government. Great Britain was a hierarchical society, and those at the top of the social hierarchy were also those who wielded power. And when Britons turned their attention to those wider worlds that they colonized and conquered, it was with these views of how society was, and how it should be administered, very firmly embedded in their minds.⁴⁷

Hence, the British Empire was generally built around the principles of replicating and supporting a hierarchical social structure modeled on that which was thought to exist in Britain itself.⁴⁸ This also led a considerable smugness on the part of the ruling British: they occupied a preeminent place among colonial powers, while those subjected to colonial rule were ranged below them, in varying degrees of supposed inferiority.⁴⁹ This attitude was reinforced by the fact that their subjects seemed to accept their rule quietly. "Nothing was more potent in giving the British a good opinion of themselves and their conduct, and a condescending opinion towards those who acquiesced in a status of political subordination that Britons themselves would have struggled against bitterly."⁵⁰

British rule took many and varied forms in different regions of the empire but there were two basic approaches. By the late 1890s, the white colonies – in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the Cape Colony in South Africa – were granted significant autonomy, basically

internal self-rule with Whitehall responsible for foreign policy. Elsewhere, the colonies were administered directly without consultation with the colonized.⁵¹ These non-white colonies, of which India was the largest and most egregious example, were considered ill equipped to govern themselves. It was, therefore, the responsibility of the British to remain in charge until such time as that situation changed and there were many in Great Britain who believed that such capability would be a long time coming.

India was Britain's largest, richest, and most problematic colony. British rule there was also fairly typical of how other non-white colonies were treated. Britain did not intend to colonize India, but the success of the East India Company encouraged exploration, and exploitation, of the sub-continent. To ensure the safety of both Britons and natives (especially after the Indian Mutiny of 1856), an increasing British military presence was required, followed by the need for greater civil control by the Crown. So by 1876, when Prime Minister Disraeli declared Queen Victoria 'Empress of India', the governor general there believed that the British were the "true heirs to the Moguls"⁶² who had ruled previously. The Liberal Party leader, William Gladstone, and others in political society, believed that India should be ruled for the good of Indians, not for the greater glory of the British.⁵³ So there was an element of hope that sooner or later India might be brought to the same level of civilization as the home country. Indians could learn to emulate their 'masters,' in all sense of that word. That, coupled with their conversion to Christianity, would mean no essential difference between Britons and subjects. Thus, the rulers looked to the day "when England would have created in India a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect."⁶⁴ But, while the Indians paid for British administration and for the army, they had no say whatsoever in how the country should be run,⁵⁵ leaving Gladstone to deplore "that Britain had not been able to give India the benefits and blessings of free institutions."⁶⁶

Contradicting this sentiment from Parliament was the British attitude in India itself. British authorities felt any demands, however, moderate, by educated Indians were impertinent. They believed they had "manfully shouldered the white man's burden and ruled an inferior race fairly and selflessly."⁵⁷ However, rulers lived apart from "the hot, dirty superstitious, and disease-ridden India in their cantonments and hill stations and had little to do with them, no matter exalted or highly educated."⁵⁸ Liberal ideas of improving the lot of the less fortunate were one thing, actually living among them as equals or near-equals was something entirely different.

PAX AMERICANA

The same factors that shaped the strategic context of the British Empire can be examined relative to the strategic context of what some might term an “American Empire.” In his essay “American Grand Strategy, Today and Tomorrow: Learning from the European Experience”, Paul Kennedy wrote this about the United States:

Since its early decades, the United States has been the beneficiary of a cluster of highly favorable geographical and technical factors. Protected by the Atlantic Ocean – and the Royal Navy – from serious external threat, the nation could divert its energies from swords into ploughshares throughout most of the nineteenth century. Rich in raw materials and food, but relatively sparse in population, it possessed resources which could only be properly exploited by the introduction of labor-saving machinery, which thereby gave its entrepreneurs an advantage over foreign rivals; and by a communications revolution which vastly enhanced its position in the global marketplace. Moreover, while it held itself aloof from Europe’s political and military quarrels, the United States always benefited from an enormous two-way economic relationship. It did not grow up in a vacuum.⁵⁹

He could have also added the profound impact on the deeply held belief in the unique and exceptional place Americans believe is theirs in history.

FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA

Just as Britain’s geography shaped the mindset of the British people and government, playing a significant role in its development as a great power, so too did distinct geographic advantages contribute to America’s growth. While the United States has enjoyed a long period relative of geographic invulnerability, with the protection provided by the oceans giving it a sense of security,⁶⁰ this was not always the case. During the first fifty years of the republic, there had been danger of European invasions (by many different powers), especially as the effects of the Napoleonic Wars spilled across the Atlantic Ocean.⁶¹ However, by the mid-nineteenth century, the European powers were generally focused (or perhaps consumed is a more apt description) on Continental struggles. Just as Britain took advantage of the English Channel to stay, for the most part, out of Continental struggles, America was able to use the Atlantic as a buffer against the “Continental powers dueling over Europe like scorpions in a bottle.”⁶² The ocean kept the United States out of the bottle and, thus, free to expand its power.

To the United States, the North American continent was justifiably hers and the government took advantage of the many opportunities available to expand its boundaries. Even Canada, long a colony of Great Britain, was not immune to being coveted. This expansion – generally westward, but with eyes to the south – only fed the new nation’s appetite for growth.

As a way of explaining America's drive for expansion, in 1845, newspaper editor John L. Sullivan coined the phrase "Manifest Destiny" which came to embody the beliefs that powered American life and culture.

"[T]he right of our manifest destiny to spread over and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federalive development of self government entrusted to us. It is right such as that of the tree to the space of air and the earth suitable for the full expansion of its principle and destiny of growth."⁶³

While European powers continued to maintain colonies throughout the Caribbean, Central, and South America, the United States went to great lengths to ensure that no new moves were made by the Europeans to acquire more land or colonies. In his 1823 State of the Nation address, President James Monroe initiated a policy aimed at limiting European expansion into the Western Hemisphere. In the resulting Monroe Doctrine, the United States accepted the "responsibility of being the protector of independent Western nations and affirmed that it would steer clear of European affairs."⁶⁴

The citizens of the United States cherish sentiments the most friendly in favor of the liberty and happiness of their fellow men on that side of the Atlantic. In the wars of the European powers in matters relating to themselves we have never taken any part, nor does it comport with our policy so to do... We owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and those powers to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety.⁶⁵

The Monroe Doctrine made a "moat of the ocean which separated the United States from Europe."⁶⁶ Though in 1823, and for several decades afterward, the Monroe Doctrine was perceived, both in the United States and abroad, as having transitory significance, it eventually was cited as precedent for the America's proprietary attitude towards the hemisphere.⁶⁷ An example occurred when American expansionists, wanting to oust Britain completely from the Pacific Northwest, were willing to provoke a war with Great Britain over the boundary between the Oregon Territory and Canada. Only after intensive diplomatic negotiations was war averted. A treaty with Great Britain, beneficial to the United States, was adopted in 1846 dividing the territory at the 49th parallel.⁶⁸ This concession by the British was to the dismay, and over the objections, of the Canadians.

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the United States was well and truly in charge of the Western Hemisphere. The United States had no compunction about interfering in the internal processes of the western hemisphere countries – and felt no problem in preventing European powers from doing precisely the same thing. An example of internal interference

almost led to war again between the United States and Great Britain in 1895 over a boundary dispute between British Guiana and Venezuela. Great Britain eventually backed down and the United States continued to flex its not inconsiderable muscles. By 1895, Britain, the world's greatest power, had been forced to acknowledge American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere.⁶⁹

What allowed the United States to achieve these gains, without appearing to be imperialistic (at least to Americans), was the noticeable lack of another regional power that could challenge the United States' moves at expansion. There was no real competition to maintain a balance of power within the hemisphere and the United States used that lack to become a great power within its immediate sphere.

CITIZEN SOLDIERS

Based on its experiences before and during the American Revolution, the United States had an inherent dislike of maintaining a large standing army. With the capability to mobilize significant numbers of troops in time of need and an equal capacity to reabsorb them back into civil society once the need passed, the United States neither required nor expended vast sums of money on a large army. Nor, paradoxically, did it need a large sea-going navy, at least initially. Though there had been considerable westward expansion, the United States was a coastal power for much of the nineteenth century and the navy was relatively small, manned and equipped primarily to patrol and protect the coastline. However, fear of a foreign invasion was often present, even as late as the 1880s.⁷⁰ This was not to mean, however, that the United States did not send ships abroad – even Monroe noted that the “usual force has been maintained in the Mediterranean Sea, the Pacific Ocean, and along the Atlantic coast, and has afforded the necessary protection to our commerce in those seas.”⁷¹

What the United States did have – as did much of the world – was the protection on the high seas afforded by a very strong and unchallenged British Navy.⁷² So while Great Britain spent a not insignificant amount to maintain the largest and best navy in the world, the United States was able to invest the money not spent on a burgeoning military (outside of what was needed for the few real conflicts of the century) on domestic growth.

Instead of having to divert financial resources into large-scale defense expenditures, therefore, a strategically secure United States could concentrate its own funds upon developing its vast economic potential. Neither conflict with the Indians nor the 1846 war with Mexico was a substantial drain upon such productive investment. When war broke out in 1861, the United States possessed a regular army of a mere 26,000 men. During its four years, the Civil War had catalyzed the latent national power which the United States possessed,

transforming it (at least for a short while) into the greatest military nation on earth before its post-1865 demobilization.⁷³

However, the United States was not content to remain behind the protection of the Royal Navy forever. By 1898, the United States was no longer merely a western hemisphere power; it had joined the ranks of the other imperialist countries. As a result, it had to start acting as an imperial power, which meant a sizable naval presence. By 1907, America was third in the world in terms of battleships built and being built.⁷⁴ The driving force behind this expansion was the acquisition of far-flung territories during the Spanish-American War and the need to protect them. But, perhaps, the greatest influence on developing the United States into a maritime power was Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, who believed in “the profound influence of sea commerce upon the wealth and strength of countries,”⁷⁵ in American expansion, and who saw the need for a navy “sufficient to make its influence felt.”⁷⁶

These national and international functions can be discharged, certainly, only by command of the sea. The Pacific, the Atlantic, and the Caribbean, with the great controlling stations, Porto Rico, Guantanamo, The Canal Zone, and Hawaii, depend upon this command, the exponent of which is the navy, and in which ships and stations are interdependent factors. To place the conclusion concretely, and succinctly, the question of command of the sea is one of annual increase of the navy. The question is not ‘naval,’ in the restricted sense of the word. It is one of national policy, national security, and national obligation.⁷⁷

By the 1920s American naval policy was explicitly directed against Britain’s maritime supremacy. While the American presence in the Pacific meant that its most probable threat would come from Japan, it was Britain with whom the United States strove to compete. The United States believed that

[P]ossession of a fleet equal to Britain’s would enable the United States to conduct her overseas trade at will and ‘wage neutrality’, defying, if she wished, not only Britain’s belligerent rights but international sanctions mounted against a peace-breaker by the League of Nations. All other naval powers had to take the United States into account between the [two world] wars; her land and air potential were largely discounted, because of her political detachment and supposed lack of ambition.⁷⁸

During World War II, as previously, the United States was able to harness its tremendous capability to mobilize. The difference, though, was that afterward the United States did not entirely dispense of its military force. As a result of obligations incurred by the strategy of Soviet containment – not to mention several small wars – the United States chose to maintain a significant military presence both at home and abroad. Even the end of the Cold War, with its resulting so-called “peace dividend,” was not impetus enough for a full scale military

demobilization. And today's strategy, articulated by President George W. Bush in June 2002 is "America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge."⁷⁹

THE BUSINESS OF AMERICA

Economically, the United States had many advantages – and she made the most of them. Initially, the solvency of the new republic was often precarious; however, by the mid-nineteenth century, that situation had changed significantly. While it can be said the Industrial Revolution began in Europe, most notably in Great Britain, it came to full fruition in the United States. Taking advantage of its abundance of raw materials, a growing population (fueled by vast influxes of immigrants), a growing global free trade environment, comparative peace, and an entrepreneurial spirit that seemed quintessentially American, the Industrial Revolution flourished in the United States, and likewise, so did the United States economy. As a result, the United States' place in the world hierarchy began to slowly change.

Much of the success in the American economy can be attributed to significant foreign investment, in particular, British. This investment was importance in terms of increasing and improving infrastructure – that network of roads, canals, and railroads that allowed for easy movement of raw materials to production plants and finished goods to market, not to mention food stuffs to cities and ports.⁸⁰ This fueled a growth in the domestic market so that by the turn of the century, it approximated the domestic markets of Great Britain, Germany, and France combined. Due to the combined effects of production efficiency and geographic size, American national and per capita income surpassed the rest of the world.⁸¹ Just as a century earlier, London had replaced Amsterdam as the financial center of the world, by the end of the nineteenth century, the balance of financial power had shifted again.

Sometime around 1895 there occurred one of those subtle shifts in the Archimedean world fulcrum that signals the turning of an epoch. For the first time in a history stretching over four centuries capital flows between America and Europe reversed, and America ran its first annual net credit balance with the rest of the world – i.e., it had lent more than it owed. The importance of the change did not sink in until Europe was forced to tap American capital to finance and supply World War I, the shift in power was irreversible.

If London symbolized the old money power, New York was the center of the new, the more so since the national government in Washington had abjured any substantial role in directing or regulating the economy or the flows of investment capital.⁸²

Of the powers the fought in the First World War, only the United States had the fiscal wherewithal the war with not only its economy intact, but flourishing (of course, unlike Europe,

the United States did not have to contend with the destruction of its agricultural and manufacturing capabilities, as well as the tremendous loss of life).

Emerging from the war as the lead economic power, the United States chose not to “participate in the ordering of European affairs.”⁸³ Despite President Wilson’s appeal before the end of the war to remain involved on the world stage for the sake of peace, the United States retreated into diplomatic and economic isolation. Even though Wilson’s Fourteen Points Speech had called for the “removal of economic barriers and of an equality of trade,”⁸⁴ the United States, not overly dependent on foreign commerce, began turning inward; yet, at the same time, the American economy continued to grow. However, the stock market crash of 1929, ushering in the Great Depression, forced the United States even further into protectionism.⁸⁵

The depression, affecting the United States more seriously and far longer than any other country, was still not enough to bring the United States to complete financial ruin. With large infusions of government-backed capital, the United States was pulling itself out of the throes of depression when the Second World War began in Europe.

While perhaps it might seem callous to say, the European misfortune of the early stages in that war was to the benefit of the United States. It was able to harness its potential industrial capacity so that by the time the war was over, it had the strongest economy in the world – a position that has been maintained over most of the following decades.

MANIFEST DESTINY

The mid-1900s was an age of American Romanticism. Along with economic development, western expansion, and political maturation was a feeling of boundlessness – there were no limits on what an individual, society, or the nation could achieve. “There was a reform spirit involved in the spirit of the age. It was a period of tremendous change.”⁸⁶ It was also a heady, optimistic time. Yet, simultaneously, the changes occurring so quickly caused anxiety, restlessness, and concern. But even more important than the exhortation for expansion, the notion of “manifest destiny” became part of the American psyche – America was imbued with a special providence from God. With it came both the need and the responsibility to spread the “good news” throughout the world. Manifest destiny was an ideal that captured the spirit of the nation.

This notion of the United States as a model to be emulated by the world was not new. In 1804, James Madison proclaimed the “the United States owed to the world as well as to themselves to let the example of one government at least protest against the corruption which

prevails.⁸⁷ Yet this attitude was not immediately translated into overt action, at least not internationally.

In the isolation America came to enjoy in the nineteenth century, its statesmen elaborated two themes which would have appeared contradictory in any other society: that America's values and institutions were applicable universally but, also, that their spread would be all the more certain if America refined them at home without contaminating them by extensive political interaction with the rest of the world.⁸⁸

What changed was the incorporation of the notion of Social Darwinism into the previous ideal of manifest destiny. The result was a new fervor for America to spread the benefits of its republicanism and way of life to other countries. Added to this curious mix was a growing missionary movement within the United States. This often-ignored segment of society was central to bringing about American engagement with the world. Even President McKinley responded to the controversy over the annexation of the Philippines by emphasizing the duty of Americans to civilize and evangelize the Filipino people.⁸⁹

But no one exemplified the spirit of American exceptionalism as did Woodrow Wilson nor has anyone ingrained his ideals so firmly on the national character. Walter Russell Mead in his book Special Providence describes this Wilsonian streak as:

[A] view that insists that the United States has the right and the duty to change the rest of the world's behavior, and that the United States can and should concern itself not only with the way other countries conduct their international affairs, but their domestic policies as well.⁹⁰

This attitude of spreading American democracy and American ideals was not merely rhetoric. Even while he was proclaiming the right of self-determination of other peoples, Wilson was using troops to ensure democracy prevailed in Haiti (1914) and the Dominican Republic (1917). Wilson's meddling in the internal affairs of Mexico (complete with armed expeditions) in 1914 and 1916 soured relations between the two countries for decades.⁹¹ But more importantly, Wilson added the notion of enforcement by force to the idea of Americanization.

But Wilson did not look merely to the Western Hemisphere. His "Fourteen Points" speech to Congress outlined an ambitious plan to reform, democratize, and Americanize the international system in the post-World War I era.⁹² However, the notion of American international involvement on the scale envisioned by Wilson ran counter to another key American precept – avoidance of entangling alliances. This latter notion won the day and America slid into diplomatic isolation.

While the Wilsonian desire for involvement in the international arena lay dormant through the interwar period, it did not die. As the United States helped rebuild the modern international

order after World War II, the realist orientation of containment, deterrence, and balance of power worked remarkably well with the Wilsonian ideals of open trade, democracy, and rule-based international order.⁹³ Wilson's high moral principles remain today as a part of the American foreign policy tradition.

Both the first Bush and the Clinton administrations attempted to articulate a vision of world order that was not dependent on an external threat or an explicit policy of balance of power. In Bush the strategy offered a positive vision of alliance and partnership built around common values, tradition, mutual, self-interest, and the preservation of stability. In the Clinton vision, democracy provided the foundation for global and regional community, and trade and capital flows were the forces for political reform and integration.

Over the last 50 years they have worked remarkably well together. The realist grand strategy created a political rationale for establishing major security commitments around the world. The liberal strategy created a positive agenda for American leadership. The result has been the most stable and prosperous international system in world history. But new ideas ...are unsettling this order and the political bargains behind it.⁹⁴

THE SETTING SUN

Looking at the factors that led to Great Britain's rise to world preeminence, it's hard to say that it had a singular grand strategy. In many respects, the empire happened by accident. There is no single written document outlining a vision for expansion of the British Empire. In fact, there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. The Liberal Party, in particular, was anxious to shed imperial trappings. However, by Queen Victoria's jubilee, the British were more than just resigned to their fate, they reveled in it. Maintaining, and expanding, the empire became a goal in and of itself. The pride and prestige of being the world's hegemon became the driving force behind imperial policies. The British delighted in seeing the map painted red.

Because the empire became an end in itself, the British were unprepared for and unwilling to accept its decline. British success fed the attitude that the British way must be the right way. All one had to do was look around. If the British were wrong, if God was not on their side, then why were they so successful? Why were they so powerful? Obviously, they were doing something right. As a consequence, it was their obligation to bring this 'British-ness' to the rest of the world, even if the rest of the world did not necessarily want it. The British had a very paternalistic attitude about their empire – they knew better than anyone else what was right for a colony or people. Therefore such people should be smart enough to accept British patronage. If they weren't, then the British would do what any good father would do – enforce it, by

whatever means necessary. In the end, it was this heavy-handedness that became the empire's legacy.

In retrospect, Britain's military and economic capacities were far less capable of sustaining a vast world-wide empire, nor was it in Britain's own best interests to try to do so. Instead of over-extending its resources in a commitment to an empire that could not solve its problems anyway, Britain had no real alternative to coming to terms with its diminished status and seeking closer connections with the United States or Europe. Even if Britain did not heed the promptings of its own interests, nationalist pressure within the empire would eventually force it to do so.⁹⁵

The British Empire was at its height when Queen Victoria celebrated her diamond jubilee in 1897⁹⁶ and effectively ended in the 1960s. Looking back, a pattern of decline appears stretching back to well before World War I. However, the change from being the world's greatest power to being a lesser one was gradual – so gradual that many did not realize it was occurring or did not acknowledge that it had occurred. By the end of World War I, Great Britain no longer sat atop the world but no one was willing to admit to this change.⁹⁷ Several factors contributed to Great Britain's descent from world leadership. Taken separately, no one of them caused its decline, but together they contributed immensely.

The end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth saw important changes in international politics. European rivalries were reflected in imperial activities in Africa and Asia. The United States, too, increasingly asserted power in the western hemisphere and began activity in the Pacific. Britain, as a power with literally worldwide interests, was affected by all these developments and had to make adjustments.⁹⁸

At the height of its empire, Britain had by far the best navy in the world. By the end of the century, however, several countries had begun to challenge this supremacy. Russia and Japan were turning their attention towards improving their navies to better support their own imperial ambitions. The United States had also begun a significant naval buildup, in part to support and defend the territories gained during the Spanish American War. Finally, Germany was spending considerable sums to enlarge its fleet, posing the greatest threat to British naval supremacy – a threat merely 400 miles from the British coastline. By 1897, the battleships of the other powers outnumbered the Royal Navy by 96 to 62. Britain had lost its naval monopoly.⁹⁹ The result of these foreign naval increases meant that Great Britain would either have to spend more on its navy or accept a change in its naval strategy. A Navy League was formed to press for more and better battleships and to “spread information as to the vital importance to the Empire of naval supremacy, upon which depends its trade, food supply, and national existence.”¹⁰⁰ In 1904, Britain embarked on an ambitious restructuring and modernization program for the Royal

Navy. A significant development of this program was the *Dreadnought*-class battleship, which rendered all other battleships obsolete.¹⁰¹ This was an early salvo in a naval arms race between Britain and Germany that proved to be “cripplingly expensive to both countries.”¹⁰²

By the end of the nineteenth century, Great Britain was also challenged as the world’s economic powerhouse. The United States economy was burgeoning and Germany had replaced Britain as Europe’s greatest industrial power.¹⁰³ There were many within the British government, encouraged by the business community who felt the threat acutely, who began to push for restrictions to the free trade policy that had fuelled the British economy for the majority of the nineteenth century.

Many felt that perhaps it was just as well to have satellite and subordinate states in which British goods had either legal or sentimental advantage over those of competing states. The slogan that ‘trade follows the flag’ expressed the new attitude in its crudest form; at the highest political level efforts to weld the empire into a form of commercial union revealed the uncertainty about British capacity to compete in world trade against Germany and the United States without some form of political advantage.¹⁰⁴

However, this turning away from a free trade policy only served to worsen the economic situation and to alienate not only British colonies (by cutting off their trade with other countries) but also other trading partners, who reacted in a similar vein. A trade war would not be in anyone’s best interest, especially a country so reliant on foreign trade to both supply raw materials and serve as a market for finished goods. In the end, Great Britain was forced to maintain at least a semblance of a free trade policy.¹⁰⁵

Imperialism had never sat comfortably on the shoulders of the British government, especially when the Liberals were in power. While by the time of the queen’s jubilee, the prestige of empire was great, there was still lurking in the background the notion that once the colonies were capable of self-government, it should be granted to them. Debates raged in Parliament over the issue of home rule and were not always settled to everyone’s satisfaction. So while Canada, Australia, and New Zealand were first granted autonomy, then independence before or right at the turn of the twentieth century, India, the African, the Middle Eastern, and Caribbean colonies were not – often with disastrous and bloody results. And then, of course, there was also Ireland which, while conceivably as much a domestic as an imperial issue, was a precedent for other national independence movements.¹⁰⁶ This issue of granting home rule and independence continued to dog British foreign relations well into the twentieth century. It is also a legacy, for good or bad, which continues to color perceptions of how the British managed not only the acquisition of its empire but its dissolution, too.

World public opinion towards the empire had gradually changed over the decades. Not only were other nations staking out colonies themselves – with the attendant rhetoric that accompanies such moves – but many were tiring of British hegemony. Many countries were seeing Great Britain as a bully that needed to be put in its place. Whether this view was the natural result of a latent jealousy against British power or in fact caused by British heavy-handedness depends on one's point of view.

George Burton Adams, professor of history at Yale, pointed out the widespread belief that: "England is thoroughly selfish...She is trying to secure everything for which she can advance a plausible pretext, or, in a somewhat literal sense of the slang phrase, she 'wants the earth', and she will stick at nothing in her efforts to get it...There is on the part of many a positive dislike of England, a readiness to accept the worst interpretation of any act of hers, a belief that she is particularly our enemy and would do anything that she can to embarrass or injure us...On the part of many more, probably a much larger number, who do not feel positive dislike or actual hostility, there is still a feeling of suspicion, a conviction that England is capable of much evil, that she is not kindly disposed towards us, and that she must be carefully watched."¹⁰⁷

That is not to say that the perception of the British as bullies was not based in reality – it was real and a factor in the start of the war against the Boer settlers of the Transvaal. Great Britain felt its dominance in South Africa was threatened by a rising Transvaal power. Britons believed that action was needed to reassert British authority. As tensions rose during the latter half of the 1890s, a cause was needed for Britain to rally behind. That cause was championing the rights of Uitlanders (British settlers in the Transvaal) to vote that had been denied them by the Boer government. Defending Britain's historic influence in the region added power to the cause. "Ironically, both the British and Boers imagined themselves specially chosen races whose right to govern rested on the dispensation of Providence. Boer preachers and newspapers constantly reiterated claims that the British were an ungodly people, while British propagandists dismissed the Boers as a backward, semi-barbaric race."¹⁰⁸ War was seen as both inevitable and necessary. The Boer War was Britain's last "great imperial conflict."¹⁰⁹ While early in the war British public opinion ran high in favor of the government's action,¹¹⁰ world public opinion held a different view.

The Boer War captured the imagination of the world. It seemed to have been started by the British with little provocation and appeared to pit a vast and populous Empire against a small group of independent, freedom-loving folk. The Boers' fighting ability won them universal sympathy, and the revocation of civil rights, the burning of farms, and the establishment of concentration camps by the British caused revulsion both within and without Britain. The Boer War disillusioned even the most utopian, intellectual imperialists and destroyed for good the dream of an Empire dedicated to liberalism and humanitarianism.¹¹¹

The biggest factor in Great Britain's demise as a world power, however, was World War I. Its motives in entering the war had been "to preserve a political status quo in which she was the dominant global power."¹¹² This status quo had been increasingly threatened by German ambitions. Britain's contentions that it was fighting for its empire were not merely rhetorical.

Germany's specific target was seen by the British, on the evidence of the German naval building program and domestic propaganda, to be not only Britain herself but the entire Pax Britannica, the system whereby British power dominated the extra-European world; a system a rising power of Germany would replace.¹¹³

Once again, Britain's failure to stay on the periphery of continental struggles had embroiled it in a major war, this time with disastrous results. While the war ruined all of the continental powers, for Great Britain the aftermath was especially brutal. Its economy was in tatters, a generation of young men had been killed, and the upstart United States had replaced it on the world stage. The latter made even more galling by the fact that it was United States support that guaranteed an allied victory. Britain's self confidence about its place in the world had been shattered; it never really regained it. It would be another forty tumultuous years, and another world war, before the sun finally set on the empire, but by 1920 it was hanging low on the horizon.

THE INDISPENSABLE NATION

In 1941, Henry Luce published an article in Life Magazine admonishing the American people (and the electorate) to abandon isolationism, enter and win the war against fascism, and accept the challenges and realities of what he termed "The American Century."

In the field of national policy, the fundamental trouble with America has been, and is, that whereas their nation became in the 20th century the most powerful and the most vital nation in the world, nevertheless Americans were unable to accommodate themselves spiritually and practically to that fact. Hence they have failed to play their part as a world power – a failure which has had disastrous consequences for themselves and for all mankind. And the cure is this: to accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and in consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit.¹¹⁴

By the end of the war, America had embraced Luce's admonition. Yet, at least initially, it was a reluctant embrace. While such efforts as the establishment of the Bretton Woods system and the International Monetary Fund kept the United States deeply involved economically in the international realm, it was the twin threats of Soviet expansion and widespread social discontent in Europe that led to the creation of the Marshall Plan and the development of the policy of containment, which formed the basis of American grand strategy for remainder of the century.

The former ensured the United States would be actively engaged in Europe economically while the latter involved America in an “array of military-base and security treaties around the globe.”¹¹⁵ Just as Britain a century earlier possessed naval and military garrisons throughout the world, so too did America find its forces spread throughout the globe. And, just as the Royal Navy made the world safe for trade, so, too, did American military might make the world safe for democracy. In doing so, America established itself as an imperial power, albeit one without territorial designs. In his article, “New Rome, New Jerusalem,” Andrew J. Bacevich discusses the qualities that characterize the American Empire.

Indeed, the peculiar American approach to empire offers a striking affirmation of American exceptionalism. For starters, that approach eschews direct rule over subject peoples. ...We prefer access and influence to ownership. Ours is an informal empire, composed not of satellites or fiefdoms but of nominally coequal states. In presiding over this empire, we prefer to exercise our authority indirectly, as often as not through intermediary institutions in which the United States enjoys the predominant role but does not wield outright control. ...Although we enjoy unassailable military supremacy and are by no means averse to using force, we prefer seduction to coercion. Rather than impose our will by the sword, we count on the allure of the "American way of life" to win over doubters and subvert adversaries. In the imperium's most valued precincts, deference to Washington tends to be rendered voluntarily. Thus, postwar Europe, viewing the United States as both protector and agent of economic revival, actively pursued American dominion, thereby laying the basis for an "empire by invitation" that persists even though European prosperity has long since been restored and threats to Europe's security have all but disappeared. An analogous situation prevails in the Pacific, where Japan and other states, more than able to defend themselves, willingly conform to an American-ordered security regime.¹¹⁶

As the Cold War ended, the United States dominated politically, economically, militarily, and culturally. Pundits and scholars who had predicted the decline of the United States as a great power in the 1980s never anticipated the economic boom of the 1990s which increased the gap between the United States and other economic rivals. America as the great power was not replaced but became even more powerful. In 1998, Madeleine Albright said it was the responsibility of “the indispensable nation to see what we can do to make the world safer for our children and grandchildren, and for those people around the world who follow the rules.”¹¹⁷ The Europeans sought American leadership in intervening in the Balkans and Asian nations are demanding American involvement in the search for a peaceful solution to the current crisis with North Korea.¹¹⁸

PARALLELS AND CONTRADICTIONS

While, during its heyday of empire, the British might have seen themselves as the heir of Rome, there are some who see the American empire as the heir to Britain. There are many similarities. Where British naval power allowed for the spread of trade, American military might protects the development of democracy. Where the British had an informal empire of nations with similar economic interests, the United States has an informal empire of nations with similar values and ideals of government. Where the protection of the Royal Navy allowed the United States to focus its attention on continental expansion and economic growth, eventually rivaling Britain, so, too, has the United States defense protection allowed Europe and Japan to develop into economic rivals.

Great Britain developed as an empire with no grand strategy to become one; likewise, the United States stumbled into superpower status. However, Britain acknowledged itself as an empire when Disraeli named Queen Victoria “Empress of India”¹¹⁹ and put the maintenance of the empire into the Conservative Party platform. It is more difficult to find a similar defining moment for the United States; however, the new National Security Strategy puts it this way:

This is also a time of opportunity for America. We will work to translate this moment of influence into decades of peace, prosperity, and liberty. The U.S. national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better. Our goals on the path to progress are clear: political and economic freedom, peaceful relations with other states, and respect for human dignity.¹²⁰

While not expressly stated, the United States is an empire.

But there are also stark differences. Britain during its prime did not overly involve itself with international institutions; unlike the involvement the United States has with myriad economic, political, and collective security arrangements.

It is much more difficult to draw parallels to the decline of the British Empire. Britain’s stated military strategy was to have a navy comparable to the combined size of the next two and when it was challenged by Germany, Britain began an arms race that was economically draining. The United States has a military far superior to any in the world and, yet with no peer competitors on the horizon, still has embarked on a strategy to maintain military supremacy with massive increases in funding and technology improvements. Yet military spending is a smaller percentage of gross domestic product than twenty years ago, making it less likely that the United States can be spent out of existence in an arms race.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Britain had lost economic supremacy. But American economic power has become even more dominant than a decade ago and economies are so interrelated and international that it is difficult to foresee a major economic rival not closely entwined with the United States and other economies.

While it might be appropriate to speak of an American Empire, strains have developed. Many were inevitable: with the loss of the threat came a perceived reduction in the need for allies to keep funding militaries to counter the Soviets, leaving a significant capabilities gap between the United States and other armed forces. While Europe acknowledged the requirement for a transatlantic collective security arrangement under American leadership during the Cold War, their attention has turned inward towards uniting Europe in a way never before seen – and without direct involvement from the United States. In other regions, countries are focusing elsewhere, not always looking to the United States for guidance, answers, or even input. As yet there is not an overt coalition of powers forming to counter United States hegemony, but the stirrings of discontent are out there. There is sufficient power in regional coalitions that that could some day directly challenge American authority and leadership. The question remains “how will the United States respond?”

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