

American Empire: the history and future of an idea

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Current debates over both American global power [1] and its quasi-'imperial' character, and the new strategic doctrines [1] and ambitions of its political leadership, need to be informed by a particular kind of historical thinking which has been too little in evidence so far. Consideration of parallels between old European empires and contemporary developments – such as the central question of the US empire – needs four fresh elements.

First, it needs to focus more on the history of *informal* empire, less on historic models of *formal* colonialism.

Second, it should direct attention to the peripheries of imperial systems, at least as much as to their cores, to the points of impact where external forces and local collaborators – or resisters – interact. It should see here sources both of weakness and of strength, but with the emphasis perhaps more on the former, on the delicacy of the balances and bargains on which informal empire must always rest.

Third, it should think harder about the relationships between military, economic and cultural spheres of power, and about the contingency and instability of all power.

Fourth, it needs to factor in the wealth of debates on this question, which has been preoccupying historians for generations.

Almost all the more historically informed US commentators, from Philip Bobbitt [1] to Joseph S. Nye [2] stress the limits and the dangers of long-term unilateralism. Tom Nairn [2] goes considerably further, arguing that in the long run all the major globalising trends will prove to be at odds with the imperatives of US power.

I will argue in this essay that there are dangers in a one-sided stress on the capacities or the strategies of the powerful – a trend characteristic of the most influential thinking in the US today [3]. Informal empire may be not only a matter of subtle, always potentially unstable equilibria, but subject to a great deal of contingency, drift, and opportunism. All this is just as true of modern American world power as it was of British and other earlier imperial systems.

The return of empire

Very few modern political words have had such complex and contested histories as have [4] 'empire', 'imperial' and 'imperialist'. In the political discourse of the second half of the 20th century they were almost always used pejoratively. Even the rulers of systems which everyone else thought of as empires denied that the label applied to them. British publicists insisted that their fast-declining global system was no longer an empire, but a 'Commonwealth'. Soviet ones urged that by definition – a definition formulated by Lenin early in the century – their expansionism was not imperial, since only capitalist states could be imperialist.

Anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism were perhaps the most globally ubiquitous ideologies, or slogans, of the post-1945 world. It followed almost inevitably that only the fiercest, most hostile critics of United States foreign policy described it as either imperial or imperialist.

All this has changed rapidly and radically. The notion of an American empire has become a central figure in contemporary, global political discourse – and employed from a far wider range of viewpoints. It is, naturally, still favoured by many negative critics of the phenomena concerned. But it is now used also by those who seemingly intend the term in a neutral, essentially descriptive way, like Andrew J. Bacevich [5], Charles S. Maier [6], or Michael Ignatieff [7]. Most strikingly, it is employed in tones of warm approval, not only by people like the neoconservative American polemicist Dinesh D'Souza [8], but also by less didactic commentators like Robert Kagan [9], Sebastian Mallaby [10] and the senior British foreign service official Robert Cooper [11].

Beginnings: the inland empire

Yet some of the current debates about whether the US is an empire are very far from being new. This is, rather, the third or fourth period of intense contention over conceptions of an American empire. Early American writers and politicians occasionally [12] called their newly sovereign country an 'empire'. This, though, alluded to the tradition deriving from ancient Rome and revived in the era of the Reformation, by which 'empire' meant merely 'fully sovereign state'.

The usage was a linguistic accompaniment to the declaration of independence itself. Far more typical, far more powerful, were explicit repudiations of any desire for external expansion. Both George Washington [13] and Thomas Jefferson [14] warned against foreign 'adventures', seeing overseas empire as necessarily threatening republican virtue and freedom.

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Westward expansion [15] within continental north America aroused few such fears, yet offers striking parallels with land-based imperial enlargement elsewhere: perhaps most obviously, in modern times, parallels with the growth of the Tsarist empire and, in different respects, with European colonisation in southern Africa. Many historians, especially since the 1960s, have attempted comparative histories utilising each of these parallels.

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The late 19th century: splendid little wars

Yet when, from the late 19th century, radical American writers began to attack their country's policies for turning towards empire, they were thinking not of its now largely completed conquest of Native Americans, nor the position of black and other minorities, nor indeed of its rapidly growing 'informal empire' of trade and diplomacy across the hemisphere and beyond. They meant, rather, its overseas expansionism in places like Cuba [17] and the Philippines [18]: a burst of overt, formal conquest and intervention at the end of the 19th century and beginning of

the 20th, which seemed to critics at the time to be both singular and in some sense aberrant, un-American even.

Certainly this fairly brief period witnessed an aggressive enthusiasm for the acquisition of overseas territory, which had few obvious precedents or parallels. One sharp critic today, Philip S. Golub [19], sees trends in US policy in the early 21st century as strikingly similar to those of a century ago.

Internal opponents of such aggression back then certainly tended to view it as a temporary as well as an undesirable phenomenon. Activists in the US anti-imperialist [20] movement against the Philippine war just over a century ago seemed confident that their movement had time on its side. Soon, they believed, the country would wake up to the wrongness, the foolishness, the basically un-American nature, of a policy of aggressive foreign expansion.

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The dominant view, among those who used terminology like 'imperialism' and 'empire' at all, was of course to stress the informal and free trade character of American imperialism, driven above all by sectional economic interests, and to see the short burst of direct colonial conquest at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th centuries as a deviation from this, for specific short term reasons. Others, though, sought to place the supposedly short 'colonial moment' in a much longer trajectory – even, in the phrase which gave a title to one of the most powerful works making such a case, seeing 'empire as a way of life' [21] across much of modern American history.

Such interpretations, strongly pressed in the 1960s and after by historians like William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko [22] and Walter LaFeber [23], were closely linked to a fierce contemporary opposition to US involvement in 'imperial' wars, especially that in Vietnam [24], and to 'revisionist' interpretations of the origins of the cold war.

In some cases, too, a strong influence of Marxist theories of economic imperialism was evident – though even less obviously politically-engaged scholars, like the eminent German historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler [25], made similar arguments. And some contemporary advocates of expansion in the 1890s clearly did not see their 'moment' as an exceptional one, but as the outgrowth of a long prior history of conquest and, perhaps, the progenitor of future, yet more dramatic triumphs.

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The mid-20th century: a moment of transition

The US only became the main focus for international 'anti-imperialist' rhetoric and campaigning in the 1960s – indeed mainly from that decade's second half, as American involvement in Vietnam deepened. But, already before that, the notion of the US as embodying 'imperialism' whereas the European powers' continuing enclaves of direct power represented a less embracing 'colonialism' had become a mainstay of official communist argument. Indeed, the Communist Parties of declining colonial powers like France and Britain began to argue soon after 1945 that the peoples of colony-owning and of colonised countries could and should have a common interest in opposing US imperialism.

Around the same time, attention began to focus ever more closely on relationships or parallels between declining European global power and increasing American strength. In 1953 (in a seminal article in the *Economic History Review*) Ronald Robinson and Jack Gallagher produced the most pervasively influential interpretation of Britain's 19th century expansion, and did so in large part under the prompting of their concerns about a new US informal empire, of which they saw the Marshall Plan [27] as a key part, and which threatened (so they thought) to make Britain itself a semi-colony.

Since then historians of the British empire especially have, for decades, engaged in a dialogue, sometimes overt, sometimes surreptitious, about American 'imperialism' – arguing for or against connections, parallels, comparisons between past British global power and its strategies, and present or possible future American ones.

Their concerns have interacted, albeit not always as closely as they might have done, with those of historians and political analysts of America and its foreign policies. While numerous writers have also engaged with issues of the interaction of US policy and the colonial projects of other European powers – and although echoes of ancient Rome have also sounded ever louder in current debates about America's role – by far the most popular and perhaps most interesting reference points in thinking about American 'empire' have been British-imperial ones. It is on these that I shall now focus.

An arc of history: from British to American empire

The differences between British and American forms of global power are in many respects striking and often very obvious. Yet the two most often remarked 'differences' prove, on closer inspection or from an alternative viewpoint, not to reveal quite so strong a dissimilarity after all.

One of these is in the sphere of ideology and self-image. American world power (according to its advocates) rests on a belief in free trade and open markets, on defense of human rights and the gradual extension of democracy among people who would otherwise not know it. It is wielded by people who see their own nation as embodying a unique spirit of freedom, forged early in their history, and who aspire to spread that spirit of freedom everywhere.

Many supporters of this position associate their idea of freedom with a specific religious tradition in which they passionately believe, in origin distinctively Protestant but latterly with many enthusiasts among Catholics, Jews and others. Many, moreover, do not regard themselves as engaged in empire-building. Extensions of power or rule are – at least in their own eyes – rarely driven by aggressiveness, the lust for wealth or domination. Defensive reactions to unforeseen crisis, or a reluctantly acknowledged duty to maintain or create order out of chaos, are far more typical justifications. There is puzzlement that these good intentions or unavoidable responses are often so widely misinterpreted and resented.

All the foregoing, though, would be just as apt descriptions of British imperial ideology across the 19th and early 20th centuries as they would be of US self-perceptions in the early 21st. The summary by one prominent current historian [28] of the former would certainly be judged as unduly favourable by many of his colleagues, but is probably quite accurate in describing at least the self-image – and the sincere beliefs – of Britain's rulers at the height of their power:

“Without the influence of British imperial rule, it is hard to believe that the institutions of parliamentary democracy would have been adopted by the majority of states in the world, as they are today...the 19th-century Empire undeniably pioneered free trade, free capital movements and, with the abolition of slavery, free labour. It invested immense sums in developing a global network of modern communications. It spread

and enforced the rule of law over vast areas. Though it fought many small wars, the Empire maintained a global peace unmatched before or since.” [Niall Ferguson [29], *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London, Penguin, 2003) pp.358-9.]

In another major modern study, Phillip Darby argues for a great deal of similarity and continuity – not least in the ‘extraordinary optimism’ of both British and US thinking about the ‘third world’ in the periods of their greatest power. In this regard he finds it striking that US policymakers ‘largely ignored’ the lessons to be drawn from interwar British experience and thus replicated many of the faults of British thinking before 1914. The biggest difference, he suggests, is that US thinking was more abstract and doctrinaire, British more empirical, pragmatic and historically oriented. [*Three Faces of Imperialism: British and American Approaches to Asia and Africa 1870-1970* (Yale University Press, 1987) pp.221, 222. The ‘three faces’ are power, moral responsibility, and economic interest.]

From the American side, William Appleman Williams [30] stressed British influences on American expansionism, including the intellectual legacies of Adam Smith and John Locke. But he also saw an early US ‘anti-British nationalism’ and desire to emulate and surpass British achievements in both global trade and conquest as keys to American expansion. Williams’s term for the dominant US expansionary pattern, ‘open door imperialism’, was a close analogue to Robinson and Gallagher’s British ‘imperialism of free trade’.

Formal and informal empires

The other great difference between British and American ‘empires’, and indeed between the latter and all the other, earlier imperial systems with which it has been compared, is usually thought to be that US world power is seen to rest very little on physical conquest or direct colonial rule. Neither its objective nor its means is territorial acquisition: it exercises control or influence through local client regimes, and through less formalised, less obvious economic, diplomatic, cultural and other means of control.

The US has ordinarily operated through informal empire, not formal colonialism.

To a certain point, this contrast is evidently correctly drawn. The US has indeed ordinarily operated through what Robinson and Gallagher [31] so influentially dubbed informal empire, not formal colonialism. Around a century ago, that pattern seemed to be changing, but the change turned out to be temporary. (Few observers think that recent events are likely to mark a long-term alteration in this regard either.)

US willingness to intervene directly with military force has, since the end of the cold war and more especially since September 2001, increased sharply. But most analysts concur that this is not likely to result in a disposition to maintain long-run occupation or establish permanent protectorates in the regions concerned.

Some, indeed, suspect that reluctance to accept the costs, risks and responsibilities which this would involve may prove to be a crucial weakness of American power. It also, however, reflects the continuing strength of ideologies of nationalism and self-determination: the incentive of a fairly rapid ‘return’ to self-rule has to be held out to local elites, or further instability and danger will soon ensue.

Recall, however, that Robinson and Gallagher’s theory may have been prompted partly by their thoughts about US ‘informal empire’ after 1945, but it was designed to explain patterns of British policy in the Victorian era. The contrast between a formal British or wider European colonialism

and an informal American imperium should not be overstated. British imperial power at its height also operated informally at least as much as it did formally.

Britain's informal or free trade empire, in Latin America, the Middle East or east Asia, was more extensive and often more profitable than its formal one, and statesmen generally preferred it, resorting to the expense and danger of formal conquest only when forced to do so.

Informal empire, in Robinson's words, operates through such means as:

“Coercion or diplomacy exerted for purposes of imposing free trading conditions on a weaker society against its will; foreign loans, diplomatic and military support to weak states in return for economic concessions or political alliance; direct intervention or influence from the export-import sector in the domestic politics of weak states on behalf of foreign trading and strategic interests; and lastly, the case of foreign bankers and merchants annexing sectors of the domestic economy of a weak state.” [‘Imperial Theory and the Question of Imperialism after Empire’ in Robert F. Holland and Gowher Rizvi [32] eds., *Perspectives on Imperialism and Decolonization* (Frank Cass, 1984)p. 48]

It is obvious enough that such a sketch fits both earlier British and modern American actions fairly well.

It follows that it is such ideas about earlier informal empire – and the closely related notion of ‘excentric imperialism’ which Robinson developed after Gallagher’s early death – which have the greatest relevance to thinking about US power today and its likely future. Indeed Robinson argued that the model of formal imperialism is irrelevant to the post-colonial era, at least for the time being; whilst theories of neo-colonialism assume too much direct continuity between past and present.

The model of the imperialism of free trade, and the ‘excentric’ theory, however, do work quite well for the post-colonial era – indeed the former may perform better for developments after 1945 than for the Victorian era. The role of imperialism in international relations, he suggests, has nonetheless diminished out of all recognition in comparison with the colonial era. But if Robinson were alive and reworking his theory today, especially after 2001, one suspects that he would feel forced to revise that judgment.

The 21st century: an unprecedented hyperpower

A little further on, I shall seek to pursue that train of thought slightly further. It should first be emphasised, however, that the argument so far about similarities between old and new ‘empires’ is far from implying that there are no important differences. One that is also, and rightly, often noted is that the US today is simply more powerful than Britain ever was.

The US’s global reach – military, economic and cultural – is so great, so lacking in serious rivals, that it vastly outranges that exercised by Britain at its peak, or those of Spain and France in earlier eras. Paul Kennedy [33] echoes many other analysts in urging that nothing has ever existed before in history like the disparity of power in the current world system. A century ago, Britain’s share of world output was only about a third of what the US’s is today, and the proportionate differences in military spending are considerably greater still.

Not all comparative historians of empire agree. Dominic Lieven [34] argues that in its global role the US cannot be defined as a truly imperial power – such a definition would greatly exaggerate its real strength, especially in economic terms. But this is for Lieven not necessarily a good

thing, since (like Ferguson) he thinks it 'is arguable that a Western community that really took seriously its duty to impose a regime of human rights – economic as well as legal – on the rest of the world would be more imperialist and more virtuous.' [*Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (London, John Murray [35], 2000, p 73).

Lieven was, however, writing before 11 September 2001, after which his view that no sane American could 'believe that territorial expansion will enhance his or her country's wealth or security' may be far more problematic.

It is intriguing, moreover, that his brother Anatol, also a major scholar of international relations, has taken a starkly different view. In a series of articles [35] for **openDemocracy** and the *London Review of Books* (LRB [36]), he has tended to stress the classically imperialist character of US policy and seen many, close parallels with the Victorians. ('The Push for War', *LRB* 3 October 2002; 'A Trap of their Own Making', *LRB* 8 May 2003.].

For now, and despite the numerous warnings about possible imperial hubris or 'overstretch' already to be encountered in US and even more in European journalistic comment, those who emphasise American strength rather than potential weakness hold the intellectual high ground.

Other major differences may also be marked. Britain in its era of imperial expansion and hegemony was a major exporter both of capital and of people: the US today is a significant net importer [36] of both. Indeed the contrast in terms of population movements may be the most striking difference of all between modern American 'empire' and almost all earlier imperial systems. They involved – indeed their expansion was often in significant part driven and sustained by – major flows of migrants or settlers from imperial centre to colonised peripheries.

The US today, as throughout its history, presents precisely the reverse pattern. Indeed one very influential, sweeping, almost apocalyptic radical vision of contemporary world *Empire*, Hardt & Negri's book of this title (Harvard University Press, 2000) sees mass migration [36] from poor countries to rich as perhaps the most likely source of effective opposition to imperial power.

Yet similarities are likely, on balance, still to seem more striking than divergences. In addition to those already sketched, we might suggest that the present imbalance of military force between dominant powers and potential opponents is matched only by that which was briefly obtained in the late 19th century.

At that time technological inequalities, especially in military hardware, made it for a few decades comparatively easy, cheap and risk-free for some societies to dominate others. Rifled, breech-loading, repeating firearms, armoured steamships, perhaps above all machine guns, were during that late Victorian 'window of opportunity' almost exclusively possessed by colonising powers, and not by those who resisted them. Casualties in imperial wars were, on the colonisers' side, usually very low – and largely borne by local auxiliaries.

The smart bomb is the contemporary equivalent of the Maxim gun.

For much of the 20th century, this technological gap in conventional warfare capacities tended to narrow: not least because of the Soviet bloc's willingness to supply modern firearms to anti-colonial guerrillas. But today the gap yawns wide again, with the 'military revolution' of recent years again making it possible to contemplate going to war without serious risk of large-scale fatalities among one's own forces: or with such risk, once more, likely to be incurred mainly by locally-raised troops. The 'smart bomb' is, perhaps, the contemporary equivalent of the Maxim gun.

Less encouragingly for would-be world hegemon, we might seek further parallels between British and US 'empires' in a relative domestic indifference to their fates. Most historians of the British empire have concurred that the mass of Britain's own population was not very keen on, interested in or knowledgeable about empire, except when some particular crisis aroused strong but usually rather short-lived passions.

Domestic politics continued to revolve mostly around internal, and especially economic, issues. Although it seems to be the case that self-conscious patriotism is stronger in the contemporary United States than in most western European countries, it is likely that there too electorates are far less intensely engaged with global or foreign policy questions than has often been thought, and less so than their leaders might wish.

Empire yes, imperialist no?

So far, I have deliberately evaded the question of whether the US's current world role *is* aptly to be described as imperial or imperialist. I have repeatedly placed such words in quotation marks. It has clearly been implied, however, that if there is an American empire it is essentially an informal one, and that despite an increased incidence of direct interventions it is likely to remain so.

But equally clearly – and, as we have seen, in concurrence with a growing range of analysts – it has been suggested that if we are to define such informal empire simply (and relatively neutrally) in terms of the ability to project power and pursue one's interests on a global scale, then the US-led system not only fits that bill but does so more fully than any other world power has ever done.

The US-led system fits the bill (of informal empire) more fully than any other world power has ever done.

It might be possible, all the same, to recognise the US as an empire but deny that it is imperialist. That is very much what several of the more conservative American analysts cited above have sought to do. Few of them, though, have been analytically explicit or systematic in their attempts to argue the distinction. Rather, they have apparently been moved mainly by the different emotional overtones carried by the two words.

It may be possible – indeed as I have noted, it may now be easier than for many decades – to use the idea of empire in a non-emotive or non-normative way. 'Imperialism', by contrast, still carries far stronger negative connotations. Nonetheless, attempts have been made to offer a more analytical kind of distinction.

German historian Klaus Schwabe distinguishes between an 'imperialist' policy, one aiming systematically to found an empire, and an 'imperial' policy, which the international role of a superpower (one, moreover, asserting a sense of responsibility for world order) must inevitably be. The US, he says, was only briefly the former, at the end of the 19th century.

Subsequently the strength of its founding, and Wilsonian, principles of self-determination have made it imperial (and thus engaged in informal empire) but not imperialist. [Klaus Schwabe 'The Global Role of the United States and its Imperial Consequences, 1898-1973' in Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jurgen Osterhammel eds. *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities* (Allen and Unwin for German Historical Institute, 1986).

More recently and with very different intentions, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri [37] have also sought to establish a crucial difference between 'imperial' and 'imperialist' policies. In their

eloquent and suggestive if also often impressionistic and even internally inconsistent argument, old-style, territorially based imperialism has been replaced by a new, de-territorialised, 'network power' of Empire [38] (which they invariably capitalise, to underline its novelty and singularity). Although Hardt and Negri [39] seem uncertain how far this new empire can be associated specifically with the state power of the US, they insistently deny that 'the tactics of the great empires dismantled after the First World War [are] being replicated by the US', and urge that 'Empire is not a weak echo of modern imperialisms but a fundamentally new form of rule.' [*Empire* pp. xiv, 160, 146]

Informal empire is expensive and potentially dangerous. The key questions are how closely the costs and dangers today resemble those of the past, and whether they are most urgently posed in military, in economic, political or in cultural terms.

This is not the place to debate the strengths and weaknesses of Hardt and Negri's immensely influential but contentious argument. We may, though, note an intriguing and possibly significant paradox. On the view of US power suggested by them or indeed by Klaus Schwabe, what we see today is empire without, or after [40], imperialism. By a different set of definitions and perspectives, as for instance those of Ronald Robinson, the case is reversed: we are faced with 'imperialism after empire'.

According to both views, the age of formal empire is dead. Direct physical control of territories outside one's own, except as a temporary expedient in response to crisis (as in Afghanistan and Iraq) is nearly always a burden rather than an asset. Yet informal empire [41] is also expensive and potentially dangerous. The key questions are how closely the costs and dangers today resemble those of the past, and whether they are most urgently posed in military, in economic, political or in cultural terms.

Empires of the mind

Empire, whether formal or informal, depends on local allies [42]. Robinson's 'excentric' theory – followed by many other historians of past empires – saw the key to understanding imperialism as lying always in the bargains struck between imperial centre and local collaborators. No empire could depend solely on physical force exerted from the centre outwards.

The changing patterns of collaboration defined the working of imperialism at its 'point of impact'. They were of necessity asymmetrical: if they were not, it would make no sense to talk of imperialism at all. But 'the "bargains" of collaboration were not, and could not be too one-sided or they ceased to be effective.' The exercise of imperial power thus always involved delicate, ever-shifting balances – even when the subordinate party to the relationship was a white settler community, which Robinson called 'the ideal, prefabricated collaborator'.

On this view, the problems of informal empire – or of imperialism after [43] empire, if one prefers that terminology – closely resemble those of formal colonial rule: but they are likely to be more severe, the balancing acts involved more difficult. This implies, among other things, that in thinking about the likely character and future of US empire we shall need – as did 'excentric' or 'peripheral' theorists of past European empires [44] – to think far more about the 'points of impact'.

We cannot, of course, neglect what goes on in the White House or Pentagon, in the boardrooms of transnational corporations or amidst the varying currents of American public opinion. But we need to know far more about the image of America in the minds of other peoples, especially those at impact points where US power is or might be most directly exercised. And this applies far beyond the often simplistic or moralising claims which have been so widely deployed since

11 September 2001, in works [45] whose burden or even titles revolve around the badly-posed question 'Why do they hate us?'

We need instead an Annales-type [46] investigation of collective mentalities, one possessing considerable historical depth and conceptual sophistication. Understanding would benefit, too, if there were more fruitful interaction between political, economic and strategic studies of US global power on the one hand, and work by literary and cultural studies scholars interested in the cultures and discourses of imperialism, on the other. These spheres of research have operated in too much of an atmosphere of mutual indifference or even antagonism, in relation to the study of both past European and present American empires.

The American political climate is of course unpropitious for such probing but empathetic investigations. Indeed neo-conservative polemicists like Daniel Pipes [47] and Martin Kramer [48] fiercely attack those who do or might produce them for failing to provide the kind of 'knowledge' which effectively serves imperial power, or even for actively undermining or sabotaging it.

Such attacks are, quite rightly, scorned by most academic specialists. They do, however, at least have the merit of pointing towards another striking contrast between the British Empire [49] at its height and American power today. In the former, the main currents of scholarship were broadly supportive of the imperial mission. In the US today, 'area studies' specialists are mostly hostile or indifferent towards it, and historians as we have seen have also taken mainly critical views, or have tended to trace and indeed celebrate anti-imperialist rather than expansionist traditions in US politics.

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But in the gaps thus left open, and especially in relation to the Arab and the wider Islamic worlds, wild homogenisation, sweeping scorn and endemic despair have characterised much of the writing recently most influential in the US. Its mirror images, no more nuanced, no less homogenising and ahistorical, have dominated much that has been written from 'the other side'.

There is a need for more subtle, imaginative studies [50] of how attitudes and policies toward international questions are formed in America, as well as how perceptions of America are shaped elsewhere. We can usefully pose of the US system today the same kind of question which another historian of Britain's empire, John Darwin [51], asks about his subject: 'Did the strange course of Victorian imperialism derive mainly from the logic of the policy-makers or was it really the outcome of a decentralized and pluralistic political system only occasionally capable of imposing discipline and direction on its external activity?' ['Imperialism and the Victorians: the dynamics of territorial expansion' *English Historical Review* cxii, 447 (1997) p.614.]

We need, equally, to probe further the weaknesses and insecurities, as well as the strengths, of the new global power – whether we think of ourselves as its friends or its enemies, or for that matter as detached academic analysts. The emphasis in much recent commentary on US strength, especially in military terms, might obscure sources of vulnerability which become more evident when we take the 'excentric' view.

In rather the same way, many studies of past European imperialisms have been open to the charge of greatly overestimating the transformative capacity of European rule, understating the degree of agency among its subjects. Imperial strategies and endowments may be unduly homogenised, made to seem too much like a single, conscious, cohesive and all-powerful entity.

Questioning such views will always be contentious. Arguments stressing the weakness of imperial power, the extent to which much initiative, agency, wealth and influence remained in the hands of the colonised – or at least of elites among them – have come under fierce attack from some scholars who say they amount to little more than pleas in extenuation for the colonial record, exercises in ‘blaming the victim’.

Similar arguments are bound to surface in evaluating contemporary US power and its limits. Yet some of that power’s most influential proponents are overtly anxious about those limits. Samuel Huntington [52], for instance, is less impressed by the strength of the US’s global cultural influence (which he thinks is superficial and confined mainly to elites), more by the degree of resentment it stirs up in Islamic and Confucian ‘civilisations’.

Others note that the creation of lasting ‘imperial’ order in the Middle East and beyond will depend on a wide range of essentially civilian tasks, involving development aid, diplomacy and cultural outreach. Yet US spending in these spheres has been cut quite drastically over the years, leaving its presence in many troubled areas an overwhelmingly military one. In Afghanistan during 2002, the US spent approximately forty times as much on military operations [52] as on aid, even after the collapse of the Taliban regime.

It may be that US policymakers anticipated that a division of labour could be instituted within the western alliance, with America bearing the military costs [53] of imposing order, Europe dealing with the civilian tasks of reconstruction or reconciliation. If that is so, then ever-growing strains between US strategies and much European opinion clearly call the calculation into doubt.

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