

The future of the American empire

by John Holmes

Empires, like generals, do not usually die, they just fade away, leaving, as did the Romans and the British, a lasting radiance as well as a considerable mess. The Romans left us an inheritance of law and governance on which we are still building. The British empire did not fall; it was sublimated into a Commonwealth. The American Empire is unlikely to last as we have known it during this past half-century. It is tired and a bit senile, but there has been so much good in it that I think we can hope or at least work for its sublimation, a transfiguration into a wider world order.

One must first ask whether this Empire is an empire. I would call it an empire, because it shares with the great empires of history a global thrust, military, economic and cultural influence well beyond the borders of its sovereign sway. The extent to which its hegemony is voluntary or imposed is a matter of fierce dispute, with no simple answer. How do you calculate the inevitable intimidation of power, whether or not it is intended? This empire is not run by satraps, and there is a kind of absent-mindedness about it that makes it hard to define. It is stretched so thin that there must be a considerable degree of willing collaboration. To some extent it is the English-speaking world writ large, no longer Anglo-Saxon, its language and habits become universal.

Empire of contradictions

It is not just because history comes more easily than prophecy that I propose here to take the historical look. It is too tempting to focus on this present phase with its obvious symptoms of decay, all there on television. The Americans are so condescending and bossy it is hard to resist the temptation to score points, get belly laughs and feel morally superior over their hypocrisies in Central America, their two-faced postures on agricultural and other subsidies, their unshakable conviction that their culture is internationalist and ours is nationalist, and their incurable habit of seeing the world in black and white. The American Empire is beset with contradictions, and that is my main theme. When we Canadians talk about that empire, it is well to bear in mind also that if it were not for the ambivalence of the American imperialists Canada would not exist. We defied the revolution that set this empire on its way and got away with it. Living with the Messiah has not been easy, but it beats living with the other one.

The great American sin is overstatement. They are blessed and cursed with a messianic complex. We would find it easier to acknowledge their great services to mankind if they would not insist on their moral uniqueness. The United States was conceived by its founders more as a crusade than as a country. The New England puritans believed that they had a "mission of cosmic significance"

and would provide a "moral example to all the world." John Adams said that the United States "will last forever, govern the globe, and introduce the perfection of man." (I doubt if he had in mind Ollie North.) For their first century or two Americans regarded themselves as too virtuous to get mixed up in the power struggles of a wicked world. So they nobly eschewed foreign conquest and slaughtered each other in the bloodiest war of the century — and managed to interpret that ghastly failure of democracy as a heroic epic. Woodrow Wilson, after bringing his country into the First World War in its last months, prescribed for the benighted Europeans the American dream — impossible formulas of universal collective security and the self-determination of peoples, from which the US Senate promptly withdrew, holding its nose. (They watched the League they had largely fashioned disintegrate and fascism breed on the excessive application of self-determination.) Then, having been booted by the Japanese into the second great crusade against tyranny, Roosevelt fashioned another world order on the American plan.

Canadians believe in the American mission — up to a point. We are especially vulnerable to those illusions of New World innocence and Anglo-Saxon superiority. But we too have built a remarkably successful democracy against greater odds and without a civil war. (Not Gettysburg, but Meech Lake.) We set an example of peaceful disengagement from the imperial power, a process on which a great Commonwealth was founded and which meant, among other things, that the history of India was not the history of Vietnam. The missionary spirit, you see, is catching. That is okay provided we are content to be a medium messiah, moderate and mediatory, of course, bearing in mind always Daedalus's advice to Icarus before his flight: "You will go most safely in the middle." Icarus got illusions of grandeur, flew too near the sun and you know what happened. We Canadians are not likely to be tempted into overseas imperialism; it is much too expensive. But we have to tune our mission to our capacity. Our diplomacy must be intrinsically different from that of a superpower. We are much more dependent than they are — or think they are — on coalitions, alliances and international institutions. We must always, however, bear in mind the awesome responsibility of being a superpower and alone.

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