

The Necessity of American Empire

By Bruce Gilley

Responses to President Trump's imperial agenda have reflected a shared hostility of both Left and Right toward our history.

For the Left, American history is a sorry tale of imperial greed and oppression, and thus any revival of expansionary aims must by definition be a call to evil. The contemporary Left wants decolonization, land back, and imperial guilt, quite the opposite of our commander-in-chief's train of thought.

For the Right, American history is a heartening story of a virtuous republic that despised the lure of empire. On this account, our history is an epic of righteous demurring from the vices of the Old World. The contemporary Right wants deglobalization, foreign aid back, and imperial inoculation, no less inconsistent with an expansive and expanding nation.

Both approaches represent a misunderstanding of American history and greatness, and thus by needs both represent an appeal for American decline.

The United States is an inheritor of the British imperial tradition, and despite our self-image as revolutionaries, we embraced that tradition from the get-go. Americans in the colonial period thought of themselves not just as British but as British imperialists.

Benjamin Franklin lobbied London to acquire Cuba, seeing himself as a sort of frontier agent for colonial acquisitions.

Our "dedication to the enduring values of American civilization," as Frederick Merk noted in his seminal 1963

work on Manifest Destiny, was a continuation of the same English civic pride that had produced the expanding rule of Britannia.

French, Swedes, Dutch, and Spanish gave way to the early American colonists in North America amidst what the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Bernard Augustine DeVoto called “a growing cult of empire” in the 1700s.

When the long-running English civil war spilled into America in 1776, the same proportion of Americans opposed a break with Britain as supported it, and as many Brits supported it as opposed it.

In the event, the reborn imperial state in the New World was anything but revolutionary. Hamilton appealed to “the genius of the British constitution” while Churchill called the Declaration of Independence “the third great title-deed on which the liberties of the English-speaking people are founded.”

Because of this fundamental continuity with the British inheritance, empire was baked into the American republic from the start. So much land was grabbed during the “anti-imperial” war that Jefferson wrote of a new “empire of liberty” in 1780 while Washington referred to “our rising empire” in an address to officers in 1783.

For the next century, American territorial expansion was embedded in the national project. And, like the British imperial project, it succeeded because it won local converts everywhere it went.

Whether native or European, the prospects of economic dynamism, political stability, and social freedoms under American rule were far preferable to the failed polities it replaced – culminating in the rescue of the feuding Polynesian kingdom in Hawaii in 1898 that was being swamped by migrants from Asia.

Native Americans in particular escaped from brutal pre-literate societies where war, slavery, and cannibalism were common. From Jamestown to Wounded Knee, the average annual number of Native Americans killed resisting the American imperial state was a minuscule 25, vastly outnumbered by the thousands who joined the American empire every year. After declining precipitously due to disease and assimilation, the American Indian population swelled, its landholdings expanded, and its cultural production blossomed – not quite evidence of American misrule.

There was only one serious and sustained insurgency against American imperial rule in the entire 19th century, and this was defeated with a good old-fashioned colonial war from 1861 to 1865. Much as the British were subduing an ugly mutiny of illiberal gangsters in India at about the same time, the American defeat of the illiberal project of the Confederacy was of a piece with the “empire of liberty” that the United States had inherited from the mother country.

Even the gentle Canadians, mostly unobserved even to this day in the United States, were expanding their empire at this time, buying in 1869 the entire the Hudson’s Bay Company territory (Rupert’s Land), an area 80% bigger than the Louisiana Purchase (with apologies to the eminent Allen Guelzo’s claim that the latter was “the greatest land deal in the history of the world”).

Where permanent inclusion in the American nation as a state was not warranted, due either to local preference or American prudence, the empire of liberty offered several bespoke options.

One was territorial status, as with Puerto Rico, Guam, or the U.S. Virgin Islands. Another was “free association” as with the Pacific Island nations that the U.S. governed under a UN mandate after World War II. Temporary American occupation was offered to many countries suffering the throes of collapsed

regimes – first in the Philippines and then with greater vigor in Japan, Germany, and Iraq. In some cases, the United States guaranteed local sovereignty against vicious totalitarian movements without being the sovereign itself – unsuccessfully for the Republic of Vietnam but successfully for the Republic of Korea, the Republic of China, and today’s Israel.



W hat unites these disparate strands of an American imperial history is their necessity to the American story. Wrapped up in the Puritan ideals that shaped the American sense of mission was the quest for vindication, to prove worthy in the eyes of God. The “errand into the wilderness” that began in New England and continued to expand was justified as good works. The day that America proved unworthy of her expanding empire was the day that she had failed on her errand.

A second and related imperative was the need to be animated by this outward mission, the better to avoid falling into local or sectional strife. “The larger our association, the less will it be shaken by local passions,” Jefferson promised in

his inaugural of 1805. In short, to be American is to be imperial, to be daily exercised by the formation of a more perfect union that is vindicated by the legitimacy of its expansion.

Which brings us to the filibustering of The Donald. With his genius for anti-intellectual understatement, our new president has revived a deep and enduring question that is central to the American experiment: what are the natural limits of American empire?

At the very least, Founders like John Adams, and generations of American thinkers since him, believed that Canada would be as easy to digest as oatmeal or applesauce. That's why it was pre-approved for statehood under the Articles of Confederation. Several times in the 1800s, the British considered handing Canada over, and the Canadians often responded with rapture – as when William Seward was greeted as a conquering hero in Victoria, B.C. in 1869 after making his first visit to the recently acquired Alaska. Enthusiasm for union with Canada did not so much wane in absolute terms as in relative terms. The two countries got along so famously, and American imperial responsibilities elsewhere had become so demanding, that there was little appetite to formalize the love affair.

Trump's rhetoric about "the Great State of Canada" is an important reminder that we are a worthy neighbor of this northern twin of British empire.

The Panama Canal zone, on the other hand, became a natural part of American empire out of necessity. With new imperial responsibilities in Hawaii and the Philippines, the U.S. could not allow a chokehold on access to the Pacific. Washington stepped in to rescue a bankrupt French canal project from the strife-torn Colombia in 1904. Panama was a creation of the United States, and there American control created Spanish America's only stable state, good works if ever they existed.

It is no wonder that both Honduras and Nicaragua were begging for American annexation at the same time.

But whereas the British retreat from Suez reflected a loss of imperial capacity, the American surrender of the canal zone reflected a loss of imperial will under Jimmy Carter.

With imperial China now buying its way into influence in Panama, Trump's proposal to resume administration of the canal zone is natural because it is necessary.

And thus the question of Greenland. Imagine for a moment a "compact of free association" with a newly-independent Greenland. As has been the case every time the U.S. found itself with a new imperial task, the energy and enthusiasm of an adventurous people would be boundless. The larger association would also redirect our local passions.

A little remarked point is that our Canadian brothers, honorary members of American empire, would benefit immensely from the economic flows. And, acting with the consent of the Greenlanders through a wise stewardship, it would redound to the health of the republic.

The strategic case for closer association with Greenland dominates discussions and, to be sure, it is important because of China's attempt to draw the island into its orbit and Russia's submarine threat.

But it misses the point because it is possible to solve the strategic question of Greenland without American empire.

What is less possible is for the United States to pass up the opportunity to extend its sovereign protection to a proximate land that is in dire need of a new governing framework. Americans don't sit on the sidelines when it comes to a feasible and legitimate imperialism. It should come as no surprise that our return to exuberant empire now includes the Gaza Strip, a beckoning white man's burden if there ever was

one. American empire is necessary to the American creed, and the historical engine of our free nation.

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