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Interesting Times

Globalisation, Democracy and Terrorism

Eric Hobsbawm

ABACUS

certainly disastrous, consequences. In effect, the most obvious danger of war today arises from the global ambitions of an uncontrollable and apparently irrational government in Washington.

How shall we live in this dangerous, unbalanced, explosive world in the midst of a major shifting of the social and political, national and international tectonic plates? If I were talking in London, I would warn Western liberal thinkers, however profoundly outraged by the deficiencies of human rights in various parts of the world, not to delude themselves into believing that American armed intervention abroad shares their motivation or is likely to bring about the results they would like. I hope this is not necessary in Delhi. As for governments, the best other states can do is to demonstrate the isolation, and therefore the limits, of US world power by refusing, firmly but politely, to join further initiatives proposed by Washington that might lead to military action, particularly in the Middle East and eastern Asia. To give the US the best chance of learning to return from megalomania to rational foreign policy is the most immediate and urgent task of international politics. For whether we like it or not, the US will remain a superpower, indeed an imperial power, even in what is evidently the era of its relative economic decline. Only, we hope, a less dangerous one.

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Why American Hegemony Differs from Britain's Empire

History, we are told, is discourse. There is no understanding it unless we understand the language in which people think, talk and take decisions. Among the historians tempted by what is called 'the linguistic turn' there are even some who argue that it is the ideas and concepts expressed in the words characteristic of the period that explain what happened and why. The times we live in, and the subject of my Massey lecture, should be enough to make us sceptical of such propositions. Both are saturated with what the philosopher Thomas Hobbes called 'insignificant speech' (speech which means nothing) and its subvarieties 'euphemism' and George Orwell's 'newspeak' – namely, speech deliberately intended to mislead by misdescription. But unless the facts themselves change, no amount of changing names changes them.

The current debates about empire are good cases in point, even if we leave aside the element of advertising spin or plain

This crisis also became acute from about 1970, when even strong, stable states such as the UK, Spain and France had to learn to live for decades with armed groups such as the IRA, ETA and Corsican separatists, groups they lacked the power to eliminate. The Uppsala databank recorded incidents of armed civil war between 2001 and 2004 in thirty-one of the world's sovereign states.[2]

The fourth is the return of mass human catastrophe, up to and including the wholesale expulsion of peoples and genocide, and with it the return of general fear. We have experienced the reappearance of something like the medieval Black Death in the AIDS pandemic; the global nervousness about the potential extension of an 'avian flu' that has to date killed no more than a few dozen humans; and the equivalent of eschatological hysteria in the tone of much public discussion on the effects of global warming. War and civil war have returned, even to Europe – there have been more wars since the fall of the Berlin Wall than during the whole of the Cold War period – and though the numbers who fight and their battle casualties are small compared to the mass wars of the twentieth century, their impact on the non-combatant population is disproportionately vast. At the end of 2004 it was estimated that there were nearly forty million refugees outside and increasingly inside their own countries,[3] which is comparable to the number of displaced persons in the aftermath of the Second World War. Concentrated as they are in a few zones of the globe, and now visible on screen in our living rooms almost as they occur, these images of desolation now have a far greater and more immediate public impact in the rich countries. Think only of the reaction to the Balkan wars in the

1990s. Surely, people in the rich countries of the globe felt, something must be done about the appalling situation into which many poorer areas seemed to be plunging?

In short, the world increasingly seemed to call for supranational solutions to supranational or transnational problems; but no global authorities were available with the ability to make policy decisions, let alone with the power to carry them out. Globalisation stops short when it comes to politics, domestic or international. The UN has no independent authority or power. It depends on the collective decision of states, and it can be blocked by the absolute veto of five of them. Even the international and financial organisations of the post-1945 world, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, could take effective action only under Great Power patronage (the so-called 'Washington Consensus'). The one body that could not, GATT (since 1995 the World Trade Organisation, or WTO), has so far found state opposition an effective obstacle to agreement. The only effective actors are states. And in terms of conducting a major military action on a global scale, there is at present only one state capable of it, namely the US.

'The best case for empire is always the case for order' it has been said.[4] In an increasingly disorderly and unstable world it is natural to dream of some power capable of establishing order and stability. Empire is the name of that dream. It is a historical myth. The American empire, with its hopes of a Pax Americana, looks back to the assumed Pax Britannica, a period of globalisation and world peace in the nineteenth century associated with the assumed hegemony of the British empire, and

this in turn looked back, and named itself after, the Pax Romana of the ancient Roman empire. But this is claptrap. If the term 'pax' has any meaning in this context, it refers to the claim to establish peace within an empire, not internationally. And even then it is largely phoney. The empires of history rarely ceased to conduct military operations on their territory, and certainly they did so on their frontiers at all times, only such operations rarely impinged on metropolitan civil life. In the era of nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism, they didn't tend to count wars against non-whites or other inferiors – Kipling's 'lesser breeds without the law' – as proper wars to which the usual rules applied. Hew Strachan rightly asks, 'Where were the prisoners taken in British colonial conflicts, other than the Boer War [which was seen as a war between whites]? What judicial processes were regularly applied?'[5] President Bush's 'unlawful combatants' in Afghanistan and Iraq, to whom neither law nor the Geneva Convention applies, have their imperialist precedents.

World or even regional peace has been beyond the power of all empires known to history so far, certainly beyond all the great powers of modern times. If Latin America has been the only part of the world largely immune to major international wars for almost two hundred years, it is not due to the Monroe doctrine, which was 'for decades . . . little more than a Yankee bluff',[6] or to US military power, which was never in a position directly to coerce any state in South America. Until the time of writing it was habitually used only in the dwarf states of Central America and the islands of the Caribbean, and then not always directly. Military intervention, including attempts to impose

'regime change', was practised in Mexico – or what was left of it after the war of 1848 – between 1913 and 1915 under President Wilson.[7] Disaster followed what has been described as his 'program of moral imperialism' which 'placed the weight of the United States behind a continuous, sometimes devious, effort to force the Mexican nation to meet his ill-conceived specifications'.[8] However, Washington has since then decided, wisely, not to play armed Pentagon games with the only large country in its Caribbean back yard. It was not US military power that brought about US domination of the western hemisphere.

Britain, of course, as the phrase 'splendid isolation' suggests, was always aware that it could not control the international power system of which it was a part, and had no significant military presence on the European continent. The British empire benefited enormously from the century of peace between the powers, but it did not create it. I would summarise the relations between empires, war and peace as follows. Empires were mainly built, like the British empire, by aggression and war. In turn, it was war – usually, as Niall Ferguson rightly points out, war between rival empires – that did for them. Winning big wars proved as fatal to empires as losing them – a lesson from the history of the British empire Washington might take to heart. International peace is not what they created, but what gave them a chance to survive. That superb book *Forgotten Armies* gives a vivid picture of how European power and hegemony in south-east Asia, apparently so splendid and secure, collapsed in a matter of weeks in 1941–2.[9]

All the same, leaving aside sixteenth-century Spain and perhaps seventeenth-century Holland, Britain from the

mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century and the US since then are the only examples of genuinely global empires, with global and not merely regional policy horizons and power resources – naval supremacy for nineteenth-century Britain, air supremacy for the twenty-first century US – backed by a unique world network of suitable bases. This was and is not enough, since empires depend not just on military victories or security but on lasting control. On the other hand, nineteenth-century Britain and the twentieth-century US also enjoyed an asset no previous empire had, or indeed could have had, in the absence of modern economic globalisation: they dominated the industrial world economy. They did so not only through the size of their productive apparatus as 'workshops of the world' – the US, at its peak in the 1920s and again after the Second World War, represented about 40 per cent of global industrial (manufacturing) output[10] and in 2005 was still the largest, though with only 22.4 per cent of 'manufacturing value added'[11] – both also did so as economic models, technical and organisational pioneers and trend-setters, and as the centres of the world system of financial and commodity flows, and the states whose financial and trade policies largely determined the shape of these flows.

Both, of course, have also exercised disproportionate cultural influence, not least through the globalisation of the English language. But cultural hegemony is not an indicator of imperial power, nor does it depend much on it. If it did, Italy, disunited, powerless and poor, would not have dominated international musical life and art from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries. Moreover, where cultural power survives the decline

of the power and prestige of the states that once propagated it – the Roman empire, or the French absolute monarchy – it is merely a relic of the past, like the French-derived military nomenclature or the metric system.

We must, of course, distinguish the direct cultural effects of direct imperial rule from those of economic hegemony, and both again from independent post-imperial developments. The spread of baseball and cricket was indeed an imperial phenomenon, for these games are only played where once British soldiers or US Marines were stationed. But this does not explain the triumph of the truly global sports such as soccer, tennis and, for business executives, golf. They were all British nineteenth-century innovations, like practically all internationally practised sports, including alpinism and skiing. Some, such as thoroughbred racing, may owe their organisation and global spread to the international prestige of the nineteenth-century British ruling class, which also imposed its style of upper-class menswear on the world,[12] just as the prestige of Paris did with upper-class women's fashions. The origins of others, notably soccer, lie in the worldwide nineteenth-century diaspora of Britons hired to work for British firms abroad; yet others (golf), perhaps, to the disproportionate share of Scots in imperial and economic development. Yet they have long outgrown their historic origins. It would be absurd to see the next soccer World Cup as an example of the 'soft power' of Great Britain.

I now turn to the crucial differences between the two states. The potential size of the metropolis is the first obvious difference. Islands like Britain have fixed borders. Britain had no

frontier in the American sense. Britain has been part of a European continental empire on occasions – in Roman times, after the Norman conquest, and, for a moment, when Mary Tudor married Philip of Spain – but never the base of such an empire. When the countries of Britain generated surplus populations, they migrated elsewhere or founded settlements overseas. The British Isles became a major source of emigrants. The US was and remains essentially a receiver, not a sender, of populations. It filled its empty spaces with its own growing population and with immigrants from abroad, until the 1880s mainly from north-western and west-central Europe. With Russia (apart from the Pale of Jewish settlement), it is the only major empire that never developed a significant emigrant diaspora. Unlike Russia since its fragmentation in 1991, the US still has not got one. Its expatriates form a lower percentage of the native-born inhabitants of any OECD country than those of any other OECD country except Japan.[13]

The US empire, it seems to me, is the logical by-product of this form of expansion across a continent. The young US saw its republic as co-terminous with all of North America. To settlers who brought to it European forms of farming population density, much of it seemed boundless and under-used. Indeed, given the rapid, unintended quasi-genocide of the indigenous population by the impact of European diseases, much of it soon became so. Even so, one is surprised today that Frederick Jackson Turner's famous 'frontier thesis' on the making of American history found no place at all for Native Americans, who, after all, had been very obviously present in the America of Fenimore Cooper.[14] North America was by no means 'virgin

land',[15] but substituting the European form of economy for the indigenous and extensive use of the territory in both cases implied getting rid of the natives, even leaving aside the colonists' conviction that God had given the country exclusively to them. After all, the American Constitution specifically excluded the Native American from the body politic of 'the people which enjoyed the birthright of' the 'blessings of liberty'.[16] Of course effective elimination was possible only where the original population was relatively small, as in North America or Australia. Where it was not, as in Algeria, South Africa, Mexico and, as it turned out, Palestine, even large settler populations had to live with, or rather on top of, vast native populations.

Again unlike Britain and all other European states, the US never saw itself as one entity in an international system of rival political powers. That was precisely the system which the Monroe doctrine claimed to exclude from the western hemisphere. Within that hemisphere of decolonised dependencies, the US had no rival. Nor did it have a concept of a colonial dependency, since all parts of the North American continent were to be integrated as parts of the US sooner or later, even Canada, which it attempted but failed to detach from the British empire. So it had problems with taking over adjacent territories that did not fit the pattern, mostly because they were not colonised or colonisable by white anglos – Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Pacific dependencies, for example. Among such territories only Hawaii was to make it into a state. An independent slave South, being used to the difference between a free and a mass unfree population, and to integration into the British

global trading system, might well have become more like a European empire, but it was the North that prevailed: free, protectionist, relying for its development on the unlimited mass home market. As it was, the characteristic form of US empire outside its continental heartland was not to be either like the British Commonwealth or the British colonial empire. It could not consider dominions – i.e. the gradual separation of areas of white settlement, with or without local natives (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, even South Africa) – because it sent no settlers abroad. In any case, since the North won the Civil War, the secession of any part of the Union was no longer legally and politically possible, or on the ideological agenda. The characteristic form of US power outside its own territory was not colonial, or indirect rule within a colonial framework of direct control, but a system of satellite or compliant states. This was all the more essential because US imperial power until the Second World War was not global, but only regional – effectively confined to the Caribbean and the Pacific. So it was never able to acquire a wholly owned network of military power bases comparable to the British one, most of which is still there, though it has now lost all its old significance. To this day several of the crucial bases of US power abroad are technically on the soil of some other state which might (like Uzbekistan) withdraw their use.

Second, the US is the child of a revolution – perhaps, as Hannah Arendt argued, of the most lasting revolution in the history of the revolutions of the modern era, the ones driven by the secular hopes of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.[17] If it were to acquire an imperial mission, it would be based on the

messianic implication of the basic conviction that its free society was superior to all others, and destined to become the global model. Its politics, as de Tocqueville saw, would inevitably be populist and anti-elitist. Both England and Scotland had their revolutions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but they did not last, and their effects were reabsorbed into a modernising but socially hierarchical capitalist regime, governed until well into the twentieth century by kinship networks of a landowning ruling class. Colonial empire could easily be fitted into this framework, as it was in Ireland. Britain certainly had a strong conviction of its superiority to other societies, but absolutely no messianic belief in, or particular desire for, the conversion of other peoples to the British ways of government, or even to the closest thing to an ideological national tradition, namely anti-Catholic Protestantism. The British empire was not built by or for missionaries; indeed, in its core dependency, India, the empire actively discouraged their activities.

Third, since the Domesday Book the kingdom of England, and after 1707 Britain, was built around a strong centre of law and government operating the oldest national state in Europe. Freedom, law and social hierarchy went with a uniquely sovereign state authority, 'the king in parliament'. Note that in 1707 England entered a Union with Scotland under a single central government, not as a federal arrangement, even though Scotland remained separate from England in every other respect – law, state religion, administrative structure, education, even the sound of its language. In the US, freedom is the adversary of central government, or indeed of any state authority, which is in any case deliberately crippled by the

separation of powers. Compare the history of the US frontier with the very British history of its Canadian equivalent. The heroes of the US Wild West are gunmen who make their own law of the John Wayne kind in lawless territory; the heroes of the Canadian West are the Mounties, an armed federal police force founded in 1873 to maintain the state's law. After all, did not the British North America Act of 1867 that created the Dominion of Canada state its objective as 'peace, order and good government', not 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'?

Let me briefly mention one further difference between the two countries considered as nations: age. Like a flag and an anthem, nation-states need a foundation myth for that modern construction, the nation, which is most conveniently provided by ancestral history. But the US could not use ancestral history as a foundation myth, as England and even revolutionary France could – as even Stalin could use Alexander Nevsky to mobilise Russian patriotism against the Germans. The US had no usable ancestors on its territory earlier than the first English settlers, since the Puritans defined themselves precisely as not being the Indians, and Native Americans, like slaves, were by definition outside the Founding Fathers' definition of 'the people'. Unlike the Spanish American Creoles, they could not mobilise the memories of indigenous empires – Aztecs, Incas – in their struggle for independence. They could not integrate the heroic traditions of Native American warrior peoples, though their intellectuals admired them, if only because settler policy drove the most obvious candidates for co-option into an all-American ideology, the Iroquois

Confederacy, mostly into alliance with the British. The only people linking its national identity to American Indians was European, the small and isolated Welsh, whose romantic explorers thought they had identified the descendants of Prince Madoc – who had once, they felt sure, discovered America before Columbus – as notionally Welsh-speaking Mandans on the Missouri.[18] And since the US was founded by revolution against Britain, the only continuity with the old country that was not shaken was cultural, or rather linguistic. But note that even here Noah Webster tried to break that continuity by insisting on a separate orthography.

So the national identity of the US could not be constructed out of a common English past, even before the mass immigration of non-Anglo-Saxons. It had to be primarily constructed out of its revolutionary ideology and its new republican institutions. Most European nations have so-called 'hereditary others' – permanent neighbours, sometimes with memories of centuries of conflict, against whom they define themselves. The US, whose existence has never been threatened by any war other than the Civil War, has only ideologically defined enemies: those who reject the American way of life, wherever they are.

As with states, so with empires. Here also Britain and the US are quite different. The empire – formal or informal – was an essential element both for Britain's economic development and its international power. It was not so for the US. What was crucial for the US was the initial decision to be not a state among other states, but a continental giant, eventually with a continental