

Alastair Haythornthwaite's address - Joseph Mairs Memorial - 2013



For nations seeking to dominate other peoples, there is one fundamental instrument, the projection of power. The Legions of Rome, the horsemen of Genghis Khan, the galleys of Venice, the Royal Navy - all of these are mechanisms to an end...the domination of others over vast distance. With that domination comes tribute and trade plus the ability to exclude rivals.

Human history is replete with empires. From humble origins, these varied realms broke out to dominate neighbours, growing to controlling ever-increasing territories and great numbers of peoples. At some point, a high water mark was reached and the empire decline, some slowly or some precipitously. Some Empires were little fish consumed by larger fish, others collapsed under the unsustainable weight of Empire. The challenge for a dominate Power is to retain military superiority over rivals who plow their resources back into development rather than squander their treasure on the force of arms.

Today, one power stands above all others, dictating international and national policy to its allies, dependent states and neutral nations . Dubbed by Groucho Marx 'the United Snakes of America', the evolution of the US from the first republic of the modern era to world dominator is a tale of lost opportunities driven by what that other Marx characterised as the 'inexorable laws' of capital.

For the first 100 years, America focused on securing North America. Though the War of 1812 thwarted their hegemony of the whole continent, there were many independent nations to crush, opening up territory for land speculators and resource extraction. By the late 19th century, America's economic and industrial power had grown to rival England and Germany.

But, though American expansion was celebrated domestically, there was considerable resistance to expanding internationally. Many American still held with the foundational myth America was different from the corrupt powers of Europe, a beacon of light and democracy not rapacious commerce.

Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1787:

When we get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, we shall become corrupt as in Europe.

and

Experience declares that man is the only animal which devours his own kind; for I can apply no milder term to the governments of Europe, and to the general prey of the rich on the poor.

These are the words the leader of an agrarian and artisan state, out of sync with the demands of industry for markets. As early as 1823, the Monroe Doctrine delineated the Americas, excluding Canada, as America's sphere of influence, to the exclusion of the European powers. A crucial lever was missing for America, the ability to project power, which in the 19th Century was defined as battleships.

The expense of developing a world class navy is prohibitive and it was not until the final subjection of the Native Nations that America turned its eyes to the possessions of the decrepit Spanish Empire. One man was key to changing public opinion, Rear Admiral Alfred Mahan. His book, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, published in 1890, galvanized the proponents of Imperialism and Colonialism.

Having therefore no foreign establishments, either colonial or military, the ships of war of the United States, in war, will be like land birds, unable to fly far from their own shores. To provide resting-places for them, where they can coal and repair, would be one of the first duties of a government proposing to itself the development of the power of the nation at sea....

Congress authorised the construction of 14 battleships from 1890 to 1899 and, within two decades, the US Navy challenged all other Navies. The first task of the buttressed navy was to wrest away Spain's possessions in the Caribbean and Pacific, providing colonies and bases. In a pattern repeated again and again, America allies with the indigenous rebellions and then, after the defeat of the rival power, crushes the nationalists' dreams.

It continues to this day. Airpower allows Gunboat Diplomacy to extend the reach of America inland to the most remote corners of the world. The unmanned drone has become the terror weapon of choice of America to kill and cow, in complete contempt for the rule of law. But America is having trouble carrying the burden alone.

America needs its allies and vassal to contribute blood and treasure for her ambitions now outstrip her resources. The interests of our Western leaders are closely aligned with those of the American elite, unlike the populations, whose interests are in diametrically opposition to Wall Street. So our nation again and again participates in aggression against countries and peoples on the other side of the world, all in the service of the greater Empire.

Not only is America feeling the strains of the burden of Empire but as the economic system of the West has been so hollowed out in the interests of financial speculation, Europe is falling into an existential crisis. The decline of a major power and its system of allies is a most dangerous time. Rash and catastrophic decisions are being made in a panic to retain a slipping

supremacy. The lure of booty from the Iraqi oilfields, wrapped in a delusional optimism, increased rather than reversed the downward spiral.

The Great Game unfolding today to strip Africa of any vestige of independence and block the Chinese from further influence, is sowing tragedy at every hand. The denial to a rising power of access to markets and resources is the precursor to war. The danger to every person in the world is palpable and, everyday, less remote.

But we are not without hope. Our leaders can be pressured to work for solutions rather than confrontation if we speak with a unified voice. The greatest hope lies in the Sleeping Giant, the American working class. Can it awaken from its slumber or will its overweight lethargy be its epitaph?