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The US: An 'Empire in Retreat'

In his new book, Victor Bulmer-Thomas argues that the US needs to accept its imperial decline and reinvent itself

The United States has long shied from naming itself an empire, even though it has been one – in practice quite explicitly – since its founding. This is no excuse for serious scholars and other observers to have trodden so warily around the category for so long. Today, with the US empire in slow-motion fade-out, this is no longer the case, and Bulmer-Thomas's *Empire in Retreat* is one of several fresh and worthy books examining the phenomenon.

In a dispassionate, finely grained analysis, the British historian dissects more than 200 years of US history, illustrating that though the term 'empire' was only sporadically employed, the US has consistently behaved like an empire and justified its extraterritorial affairs with ideas and rationale very similar to those of other empires.

From early on, the US imperial project was justified by a sense of American exceptionalism, moral superiority and righteous destiny that persisted into the 21st century in the foreign policies of presidents of both parties, including those of Barack Obama. Behind it lay commercial advantage for the US, in particular its elites. Though he embraces American exceptionalism, Donald Trump is the first president, ever, not to conclude that this implies pro-active meddling in every corner of the world.

Classic territorial expansion

Bulmer-Thomas divides the history of American empire into three stages. The first is a classic imperialism of territorial expansion, which entailed the conquering of the western territories that became most of the 50 states of the union, and lasted, roughly, until the 20th century. The Founding Fathers drove this stage of empire-building from the start, almost all of them having economic interests in land to the west. Although the explicit use of the term Manifest Destiny – an ideological, racist and quasi-religious doctrine that underpinned a US claim to all lands in North America from the Atlantic to the Pacific – didn't enter

the American vocabulary until later, it was there in various spectres from day one.

While the duping, expulsion and murder of the Native Americans is not a secret, Bulmer-Thomas's detached description of the cruel, lethal process is sobering. It wasn't one genocide but many, and proceeded with few qualms and little reflection. The principal architect was Andrew Jackson, president from 1829 to 1837, who ethnically cleansed about 100 million acres of Indian land up to the Mississippi.

At the century's turn, there had been talk in the highest circles about Native American autonomy or even the statehood of Indian nations. It was conceivable and doable. The idea was to 'civilize the Indians', not exterminate them – the former preferable if one has to choose. But Jackson crushed any thought of Indian nationhood and the native Americans themselves, too. (New to me: it was the deep racism of the southern, slave-owning states that rejected living side by side with Indians, as well as, later, of offering statehood to Haiti and Santi Domingo, today's Dominican Republic.)

The US, he argues, can live on post-empire in the form of a perfectly functional nation-state, one among many in the world, if it plays its cards right.

Although territorial expansion marked this first phase of empire, the creation of client states, colony-like protectorates, and spheres of influence picked up as the frontier was closing. The Monroe Doctrine (1832) and the 1904 Roosevelt Corollary asserted America's right to hegemony in the Western hemisphere and thus laid the groundwork for US expansionist and interventionist practices beyond the continental US in the decades to come. In the Caribbean and Latin America, as well as Africa, Asia and Europe, the US intervened militarily, economically and politically to secure positions of privilege that opened up export markets.

A semi-global empire

The US's global geopolitics through most of the 20th century resulted in what Bulmer-Thomas calls a 'semi-global' empire. Though interventions and puppet regimes did some of this work, the US used self-constructed institutions as well as other non-state actors and multinationals to extend its influence. There is no better example than postwar western Europe, which gladly signed up to the American-made Bretton Woods system of global institutions that ensured the prosperity of US export industries. In exchange, Europe received access to commodities, security, aid and

democracy – all on US terms.

The third phase began with a burst of self-confidence when Soviet communism fell and the US experienced a short-lived 'unipolar moment', when it was the lone global superpower. This didn't last for long, though, as the US empire was already in retreat – it just didn't know it. The rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, the shrinking of US markets, the botched post-9/11 wars, and the election of Trump were all nails in the coffin.

The draw back is well under way, argues Bulmer-Thomas, but this doesn't mean the US will suffer the fate of Rome and the Ottomans, at least not right away. 'When it reaches its 250th anniversary in the 2030s, [its empire] will still be in operation,' he writes, but 'a pale shadow of its former self.'

An illusion of autonomy

The US, he argues, can live on post-empire in the form of a perfectly functional nation-state, one among many in the world, if it plays its cards right. This means accepting its imperial decline instead of fighting it with more futile escapades such as those in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

Its allies in the imperial project, such as the Europeans, will have to redefine themselves too, which might be an even tougher task than the US's. (It is certainly a dud at the moment.) The institutions that the US created for Europe no longer function, and US security pledges are no longer reliable. Russia alone has struck out for itself. The illusion of Europe's autonomy is now clear for all to see and, ironically, most European elites pine for the comfort of the US-led imperial order.

Through the lens of the US as empire, the world looks quite different, including the Trump era. *Empire in Retreat* is a read for those who dare to question how they've long viewed the US, and what's going to happen as it sheds the skin of its imperial self.



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