

EMPIRE AS A WAY OF LIFE



BY WILLIAM APPLEMAN WILLIAMS

From the beginning, our imperial way of life seduced us into assuming that we could go on forever projecting the present into the future: that we could start over again and again. F. Scott Fitzgerald understood that when he had Jay Gatsby speak these lines: "Can't repeat the past," he cried incredulously. "Why of course you can."

That traditional assumption was elevated into a blind faith by the tremendous absolute and relative power that we Americans enjoyed after 1945. We came to think of ourselves as being beyond history — beyond being human. Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson expressed the feeling perfectly in his attitude that "only the United States could get hold of History and make it conform." It was not simply our military and economic power over other societies; it also, and perhaps more importantly, involved the way we allowed our technological accomplishments to fragment the essential continuity—the process—of life. The most obvious example is television, which defines experience as disconnected episodes without significant relationships or consequences. A terrifying distortion of reality certified by Walter Cronkite's daily Hail Mary: "And that's the way it is." But in truth it is extremely difficult to imagine anything further from the way it is.

We can see that dramatically illustrated by our response to events in Iran, the West Bank, Afghanistan, and in America itself. Our intellectual, political and psychological confusion is the result of our ahistorical faith that we are not now and ever have been an empire. Yet there is no way to understand the nature of our predicament except for confronting our history as an empire. That is the only way to comprehend the Iranian demand that we acknowledge our long-term interference in their affairs, the widespread anger about our acquiescence in the progression of Israel's settlements on the West Bank, the Russian charge that we apply one standard to them and another to ourselves and the deep resentment of us among the peoples of the poor countries. The only way we can come to terms with those matters is to look our imperial history in the eye without blinking, flinching or walking away into the wonderland of Woodrow Wilson's saving the world for democracy.

Let us start with a workable definition of empire: the use and abuse and the ignoring of other people for one's own welfare and convenience. Now in truth, America was born and bred of empire. That does not mean we are unique; indeed, just the opposite. We are part and parcel of the imperial outreach of Western Europe that came to dominate the world. But therein lies the irreducible cause of our present predicament. We have from the beginning defined and viewed ourselves as unique. The differences between ourselves and other nations are not incidental but they are irrelevant to the fundamental issue. We are different only because we acquired the empire at a very low cost, because the rewards have been enormous and because until now we have masked our imperial truth with the rhetoric of freedom.

But we do have a benchmark. Once upon a time, about a century before America was rediscovered by Christopher Columbus, at least the fifth time someone had done it, the Chinese sent seven massive fleets westward to Africa and perhaps on into the Atlantic Ocean. The ships measured between 400 and 500 feet, and there were enough of them to carry upward of 37,000 people. Their so-called junks were impressive intercontinental missiles. The Chinese came, they traded, they observed. They made no effort to create an empire or even an imperial sphere of influence. Upon returning home, their reports engendered a major debate. The decision was made to burn and otherwise destroy the great fleets and concentrate on developing Chinese society and culture.

The point is not to present the Chinese as immaculately disinterested, or whiter than white. It is simply to note that we now know that the capacity for empire does not lead irresistibly

or inevitably to the reality of empire. The Chinese, driven south by the Mongols and other invaders, could easily have rationalized empire as necessity. They chose instead to defeat the invaders and develop their own culture in its almost infinite variations on the two themes of Confucianism and Taoism.

No so with Western Europeans, including our (primarily) English forefathers. They were not content with exploration and nonviolent intercourse with other cultures. From the beginning, the Western Europeans went for global empire. We Americans were conceived and born and bred of that imperial conception and way of life. We can explain that, even defend it, but we cannot deny it.

That phrase, that idea — way of life — puzzles some people and upsets other people. A way of life is the pattern of assumptions and perceptions, and values, methods and objectives, that characterize and guide the actions of a culture. Here are three amplifications of that definition:

"We stabilize around a set of concepts...and hold them dear. At each moment of each day we make the same mistakes."

"Those unconsciously accepted presuppositions which, in any age, so largely determine what (people) think about the nature of the universe and what can and cannot happen to it."

"Ideas that we do not know we have, have us. And they shape our experiences from behind, unbeknown."

Within that framework, let us examine certain ideas that guided the development of our imperial way of life. Christianity was once a vital part of Western European expansionism. It provoked and justified all kinds of imperial activity: accumulating capital by conquest, striking terror into the hearts and minds of the heathens who wanted to keep their wealth for themselves, and forcibly changing others people's ways of life the better to convert them to the true religion. I am more concerned here, however, with three ideas developed by secular British leaders that came to define so much of our own imperial outlook.

John Locke provided a fine summary of two of them in one classic paragraph. Wealth, he explained, was not defined by having what one needed but by having more than one's neighbor. That neatly doubled the relative advantage. The third proposition was most strikingly formulated by Sir Francis Bacon. The worst kind of domestic disorder was caused by "the rebellion of the belly." Expansion was the only sure way to prevent that kind of threat to the social order. It not only generated economic growth, it dispersed potential troublemakers and decreased the density of discontent.

The American leaders who made the Revolution and the Constitution were familiar with all those imperial ideas. And in Virginia, for example, men of property had realized the value of imperial expansion for controlling the white poor long before Patrick Henry began talking about liberty or death. Indeed, the dialogue between other Virginians provides an excellent insight into the development of an imperial way of life.

James Madison never discounted the importance of economic expansion, commercial or territorial, but he stressed the need for surplus social space to avoid political turmoil when he advanced his famous argument about extending the sphere in defense of the Constitution. In denying the conventional wisdom that a republican government could survive only in a small state, Madison was implicitly arguing that empire is the price of freedom.

It is sometimes maintained, of course, that Madison was never explicitly imperial. Not only do his actions deny that but so do all the contemporary arguments against his theory. Robert Yates, along with many other critics of the Constitution, saw immediately that it would create an empire. A Northerner noted in sadness, "We wish to make a noise in the world," and pleaded with his readers to face up to the truth that "extensive empire is a misfortune." George Clinton of New York reasserted the validity of the classic argument about size and democracy in a stinging analysis of Madison's imperial logic. But, as with others, he ruefully concluded the appeal of empire would carry the day.

For his part, John Taylor of Caroline County, Virginia, was devastating. He began by mocking Madison's euphemism for imperial expansion — "extending the sphere." Of course, agreed Taylor, republicanism could in theory be extended over "spacious spheres." But only if one did not count other cultures as involving real people, only if the added spheres were truly equal republics, and only if the central government was predicated upon an effort to encourage humanity's good propensities rather than control its evil tendencies.

He then warned that Madison's Constitution satisfied none of these requirements. It created an "iron government" guaranteed to favor "evil moral qualities" and to generate war upon war. And since the decision for war was in the end "unsubordinated to public opinion," opposition to war was in effect defined as "an opposition to the nation itself." That rendered "useless of impracticable the freedoms of speech and of the press."

Whatever the sometimes almost incomprehensible convolutions of his prose or the embittered railings of his frustrations, Taylor understood that America had embraced an imperial way of life. He knew, Thomas Paine to the contrary notwithstanding, that the United States had not begun the world over again. No wonder he ultimately lost his respect for Thomas Jefferson.

Jefferson was far too intelligent not to understand Taylor. Indeed, too smart not to recognize the meaning of the Chinese decision that I have described. He alluded to that in one letter and, sensing the implications, quickly dropped the subject. In that respect, and it is an important one, Jefferson was much more like us ordinary folk than either Madison or Taylor.

Jefferson wanted to have it every way imaginable. He wanted to be the best hope on earth. He wanted to civilize the heathen. He wanted Florida and Canada and the rest of the continent. And he wanted to institutionalize the decentralized face-to-face community as opposed to the impersonal society. That brought Jefferson eyeball to eyeball with Madison and Taylor: settle for what one needed or go for empire.

He knew the meaning of the anguish about it all, but he went for empire. Half honestly and half dishonestly. The honest part was saying empire is necessary for freedom and social order as defined by Locke and Bacon. The dishonest part was asserting empire did not subvert freedom. So between them, Jefferson and Madison used their sixteen years as President to institutionalize empire as a way of life. Taylor went home and gave it all up for lost.

Make no mistake about it: the imperial way of life produced the promised rewards. It generated great economic wealth and effectively limited the scope and intensity of social discontent. By the time James Monroe left the White House, the United States had asserted its predominance throughout the Western Hemisphere and was well entrenched in Hawaii.

But we must also report the costs. I do not for a moment dismiss the people killed and the property stolen, but I would suggest the greatest price was paid in the coin of our sensitivity about what we were doing and how that was understood by

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