Empire as a state of being

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The US came into being within an empire, alongside other empires, and found its place in a world order rooted in European-Atlantic expansion. So, while President Obama has changed the tone and emphasis of foreign policy, his overall goal remains to ensure US power and authority

In the 1990s, after decades of hand-wringing over American "decline", influential parts of the US power elite began dreaming of a new "American century" and an expanded "American peace". This was a broad ideational trend, encompassing nationalist and internationalist segments of the foreign policy and security establishment. Despite varying prescriptions for world order and ways to assert American preferences, these segments saw the end of the cold war as a historic opportunity to reaffirm and expand US power and authority. By the end of the decade the main strands of elite opinion, casually comparing the US to the Roman or British empires at their heights, were celebrating the United States' "unparalleled ascendancy around the globe...unrivalled by even the greatest empires of the past" (1).

Imperial imaginings were particularly pronounced in the national security complex and the neo-conservative right, which harboured extravagant visions of "global empire" and lasting strategic monopoly. At the turn of the century imperial outlooks pervaded a new administration that sought, in Condoleezza Rice's words, to "capitalise on [the opportunities offered] by the shifting of the tectonic plates in international politics" and establish a new world order under exclusive US authority (2). Striving for unbounded autonomy, the Bush administration launched a methodical assault on the UN system, abandoned international law, and initiated a new phase of military and imperial expansion in Central Asia and the Gulf. The unintended but predictable result was a severe erosion of US legitimacy.

Today, in conditions of crisis and under more enlightened leadership, visions of empire have been replaced by greater realism and concerns of decline. Elected on a wave of rejection of the ruinous policies of the Bush administration, Barack Obama has shifted the tone and emphasis of US foreign policy in positive ways. He has made significant gestures to repair the fracture between "Islam and the West" and acted to reduce tensions in various world regions. Yet at the same time he has slipped effortlessly into imperial presidency and framed his agenda as a way to restore US world power and authority (damaged under Bush). During the presidential campaign, in a little noticed statement, he urged American voters to "unite in a common purpose,

to make this century the next American century". Once elected he reiterated this message, calling upon members of Congress to join him to "make this century another American century". In his 2010 State of the Union address, comparing the US's economic performance with that of China, India and Germany, he was more specific: "These nations aren't playing for second place... I do not accept second place for the United States of America" (3).

Appeals to national greatness have always been part of American political discourse in times of perceived decline or ascent. But coming from a cosmopolitan president with multicultural sensitivity, this language of national power and primacy is a troubling reflection of the weight of history on the shaping of worldviews and policy. Obama, like his predecessors, has inherited and will briefly preside over an imperial system with worldwide reach. Whatever his intimate convictions and preferences, he is caretaker of the set of interlocking institutions that have underpinned the post-1945 imperial presidency and the country's transcontinental strategic commitments.

This constraint helps to account for the continuity of US foreign policy over long periods and the difficulty of translating democratic change at home to the international level. The policy emphasis may vary from one administration to another according to prevailing social forces and international circumstances, resulting in policies that are more or less cooperative or coercive. These variations matter. As the Bush administration's behaviour shows, they matter a great deal in their impacts and outcomes.

Nonetheless, new leaders, however liberal and democratic, cannot erase the past or simply decide to liquidate the imperial system of which they become managers, and from which they derive their power and authority. They are caught in the same bind as British Liberal and Labour leaders who, in the late 19th and 20th centuries, sought to liberalise the empire and found, in Elizabeth Monroe's words, that "a worldwide Empire…cannot change direction overnight". Successive British governments found "that more has gone before than [they] imagined – too much to alter quickly" (4). Leaders of dominant countries are wedded to the accumulation of power, profit and prestige of the imperial state.

Imperial cosmologies

The persistence of imperial self-conceptions should be traced back to a remoter past. Underlying the idea of the "American century" is a set of axiomatic assumptions about historical purpose, world order and international hierarchy, an imperial cosmology that crystallised well before the mid-20th century. The notion that the present world order is a necessary one derives from historical experience of nearly continuous expansion and ascent. Erected on the debris of the 19th century European imperial order, the post-1945 American pax was the outcome of a long movement of formal and informal expansion that shaped the American historical imagination of world-empire as destiny.

The US came into being within an empire, alongside other empires, and found its place and space in the hierarchical world order that resulted from the global movement of Euro-Atlantic expansion. Fostered by transatlantic linkages, relentless US economic and territorial expansion in the 19th century was an integral, dynamic part of this global movement. Rooted in material forces and notions of cultural hierarchy common to all imperial societies, it was consistently coercive. In the course of the century, the US became an active participant in the inter-imperial system, engaging routinely in worldwide interventions in the colonial periphery, often alongside the European colonial states. Empire became a way of life, a state of being.

By the end of the century, along with the growth of the US's relative power and its new industrial ascendancy, influential segments of the American elite began dreaming of supplanting Europe and becoming "a seat of wealth and power greater than ever was England, Rome or Constantinople" (5). Victory in war with the decaying Spanish empire in 1898 and the weakening of Europe with the first world war confirmed this vision, and fuelled the hope. By the late 1930s, American elite opinion entertained no doubts that the US had indeed become the "heart of the world". In 1939 Walter Lippmann wrote: "In the lifetime of the generation to which we belong there has been one of the greatest events in the history of mankind. The controlling power in western civilisation has crossed the Atlantic... What Rome was to the ancient world, what Great Britain has been to the modern world, America is to the world of tomorrow" (6). Surveying the post-war world landscape in 1946, Harry Truman said: "From Darius I's Persia, Alexander's Greece, Hadrian's Rome, Victoria's Britain... no nation or group of nations has had our responsibilities" (7).

This vision of historical process through imperial selection is at the root of the pervasive assumption, shared by historical actors and mainstream theorists, that pluralism is risk-laden, and that world peace requires an authoritative centre of gravity, a "benevolent despot". The corollary is that the perpetuation of hegemony or empire is in the universal interest. The problem for American leaders according to Stephen Walt is to get the "rest of the world to welcome US primacy" by encouraging other "states to see its dominant position as beneficial (or at least bearable)" and by convincing them that "American power…will be used judiciously and for the broader benefit of mankind" (8). Used to being at the apex, US elite opinion appears incapable of thinking outside this conceptual box.

Long exit from empire

As Peter Cain and Anthony Hopkins point out in their study of the British empire, the spokesmen of leading powers "do not take readily to the idea that the end of their period of dominance is not necessarily the end of the world [and] find it hard to envisage pluralistic alternatives to the rule of a single power" (9). If Britain's long exit from empire is anything to go by, transformation of the way the US views and deals

with the world will be a difficult, drawn-out process. Late 19th-century imperialists believed that Britain had received from the "Almighty a gift of a lease on the universe forever". Though economically weakened by the first world war, Britain maintained its world position and empire. Indeed, Britain's "continuing ambition and success as an imperialist power" can be seen in its expansion in the Middle East.

The decisive turn came with the second world war, which led to Britain's financial and economic exhaustion, and the re-centring of the world capitalist economy from Europe to the US. But even then, despite the urgent need to restore the war-torn economy, in the words of Michael Blackwell, post-war "Labour leaders sought energetically to maintain and in some cases to expand Britain's imperial role, and in so doing they used up resources that might otherwise have been allocated to domestic expenditures" (10). So did the Conservatives, leading to Britain's ill-fated adventure in Egypt in 1956. The afterglow of empire is still not entirely gone, as shown by the revival of liberal-imperialism during Tony Blair's tenure.

The US's present position is hardly comparable to Britain's in 1945. Despite the present economic crisis, the country still accounts for over a fifth of world gross domestic product. It is the dominant world military power and remains the primary source of scientific innovation. Though it faces growing financial constraints, it is not about to become a secondary power. Unless forced to do so, it will not suddenly dismantle the internationalised security structure that gives it world leverage.

However, the coming century will not be American, and the emerging world order will not be centred. As the historical rebalancing towards non-western world regions unfolds, the US will be faced with a novel de-centred and plural configuration of world politics. How will the US accommodate itself to this new order?