

America's neo-conservative world supremacists will fail

Current US megalomania is rooted in the Puritan colonists' certainties

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Three continuities link the global US of the cold war era with the attempt to assert world supremacy since 2001. The first is its position of international domination, outside the sphere of influence of communist regimes during the cold war, globally since the collapse of the USSR. This hegemony no longer rests on the sheer size of the US economy. Large though this is, it has declined since 1945 and its relative decline continues. It is no longer the giant of global manufacturing. The centre of the industrialised world is rapidly shifting to the eastern half of Asia. Unlike older imperialist countries, and unlike most other developed industrial countries, the US has ceased to be a net exporter of capital, or indeed the largest player in the international game of buying up or establishing firms in other countries, and the financial strength of the state rests on the continued willingness of others, mostly Asians, to maintain an otherwise intolerable fiscal deficit.

The influence of the American economy today rests largely on the heritage of the cold war: the role of the US dollar as the world currency, the international linkages of US firms established during that era (notably in defence-related industries), the restructuring of international economic transactions and business practices along American lines, often under the auspices of American firms. These are powerful assets, likely to diminish only slowly. On the other hand, as the Iraq war showed, the enormous political influence of the US abroad, based as it was on a genuine "coalition of the willing" against the USSR, has no similar foundation since the fall of the Berlin wall. Only the enormous military-technological power of the US is well beyond challenge. It makes the US today the only power capable of effective military intervention at short notice in any part of the world, and it has twice demonstrated its capacity to win small wars with great rapidity. And yet, as the Iraq war shows, even this unparalleled capacity to destroy is not enough to impose effective control on a resistant country, and even less on the globe. Nevertheless, US dominance is real and the disintegration of the USSR has made it global.

The second element of continuity is the peculiar house-style of US empire, which has always preferred satellite states or protectorates to formal colonies. The expansionism implicit in the name chosen for the 13 independent colonies on the east coast of the Atlantic (United States of America) was continental, not colonial. The later expansionism of "manifest destiny" was both hemispheric and aimed towards East Asia, as well as modelled on the global trading and maritime supremacy of the British Empire. One might even say that in its assertion of total US supremacy over the western hemisphere it was too ambitious to be confined to colonial administration over bits of it.

The American empire thus consisted of technically independent states doing Washington's bidding, but, given their independence, this required continuous readiness to exert pressure on their governments, including pressure for "regime change" and, where feasible (as in the mini-republics of the Caribbean zone), periodic US armed intervention.

The third thread of continuity links the neo-conservatives of George Bush with the Puritan colonists' certainty of being God's instrument on earth and with the American Revolution - which, like all major revolutions, developed world-missionary convictions, limited only by the wish to shield the the new society of potentially universal freedom from the corruptions of the unreconstructed old world. The most effective way of finessing this conflict between isolationism and globalism was to be systematically exploited in the 20th century and still serves Washington well in the 21st. It was to discover an alien enemy outside who posed an immediate, mortal threat to the American way of life and the lives of its citizens. The end of the USSR removed the obvious candidate, but by the early 90s another had been detected in a "clash" between the west and other cultures reluctant to accept it, notably Islam. Hence the enormous political potential of the al-Qaida outrages of September 11 was immediately recognised and exploited by the Washington world-dominators.

The first world war, which made the US into a global power, saw the first attempt to translate these world-converting visions into reality, but Woodrow Wilson's failure was spectacular; perhaps it should be a lesson to the current world-supremacist ideologists in Washington, who, rightly, recognise Wilson as a predecessor. Until the end of the cold war the existence of another superpower imposed limits on them, but the fall of the USSR removed these. Francis Fukuyama prematurely proclaimed "the end of history" - the universal and permanent triumph of the US version of capitalist society. At the same time the military superiority of the US encouraged a disproportionate ambition in a state powerful enough to believe itself capable of world supremacy, as the British Empire in its time never did. And indeed, as the 21st century began, the US occupied a historically unique and unprecedented position of global power and influence. For the time being it is, by the traditional criteria of international politics, the

only great power; and certainly the only one whose power and interests span the globe. It towers over all others.

All the great powers and empires of history knew that they were not the only ones, and none was in a position to aim at genuinely global domination. None believed themselves to be invulnerable.

Nevertheless, this does not quite explain the evident megalomania of US policy since a group of Washington insiders decided that September 11 gave them the ideal opportunity for declaring its single-handed domination of the world. For one thing, it lacked the support of the traditional pillars of the post-1945 US empire, the state department, armed services and intelligence establishment, and of the statesmen and ideologists of cold war supremacy - men like Kissinger and Brzezinski. These were people who were as ruthless as the Rumsfelds and Wolfowitzes. (It was in their time that a genocide of Mayas took place in Guatemala in the 1980s.) They had devised and managed a policy of imperial hegemony over the greater part of the globe for two generations, and were perfectly ready to extend it to the entire globe. They were and are critical of the Pentagon planners and neo-conservative world supremacists because these patently have had no concrete ideas at all, except imposing their supremacy single-handed by military force, incidentally jettisoning all the accumulated experience of US diplomacy and military planning. No doubt the debacle of Iraq will confirm them in their scepticism.

Even those who do not share the views of the old generals and proconsuls of the US world empire (which were those of Democratic as well as Republican administrations) will agree that there can be no rational justification of current Washington policy in terms of the interests of America's imperial ambitions or, for that matter, the global interests of US capitalism.

It may be that it makes sense only in terms of the calculations, electoral or otherwise, of American domestic policy. It may be a symptom of a more profound crisis within US society. It may be that it represents the - one hopes short-lived - colonisation of Washington power by a group of quasi-revolutionary doctrinaires. (At least one passionate ex-Marxist supporter of Bush has told me, only half in jest: "After all, this is the only chance of supporting world revolution that looks like coming my way.") Such questions cannot yet be answered.

It is reasonably certain that the project will fail. However, while it continues, it will go on making the world an intolerable place for those directly exposed to US armed occupation and an unsafer place for the rest of us.

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