

## The sun sets early on the American Century

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The 'American Century' only began 60 years ago. But it seems already to be over, with the disaster of Iraq forcing some of the United States' ruling elites to realise that its hegemony has been severely weakened. But nobody seems to know what to do next, or even how to behave.

The disastrous outcome of the invasion and occupation of Iraq has caused a crisis in the power elite of the United States deeper than that resulting from defeat in Vietnam 30 years ago. Ironically, it is the very coalition of ultra-nationalists and neo-conservatives that coalesced in the 1970s, seeking to reverse the Vietnam syndrome, restore US power and revive "the will to victory", that has caused the present crisis.

There has been no sustained popular mass protest as there was during the Vietnam war, probably because of the underclass sociology of the US's volunteer army and the fact that the war is being funded by foreign financial flows (although no one knows how long that can continue). However, at the elite level the war has fractured the national security establishment that has run the US for six decades. The unprecedented public critique in 2006 by several retired senior officers over the conduct of the war (1), plus recurrent signs of dissent in the intelligence agencies and the State Department, reflects a much wider trend in elite opinion and key state institutions.

Not all critics are as forthright as retired General William Odom, who tirelessly repeats that the invasion of Iraq was the "greatest strategic disaster in United States history" (2), or Colonel Larry Wilkerson, Colin Powell's former chief of staff, who denounced a "blunder of historic proportions" and has recently suggested impeaching the president (3), or former National Security Council head Zbigniew Brzezinski who called the war and occupation a "historic, strategic and moral calamity" (4).

Most public critiques from within the institutions of state focus on the way the war and occupation have been mismanaged rather than the more fundamental issue of the invasion itself. Yet discord is wide and deep: government departments are trading blame, accusing each other of the "loss of Iraq" (5). In private, former senior officials express incandescent anger, denounce shadowy cabals and have deep contempt for the White House. A former official of the National Security Council compared the president and his staff to the Corleone mafia family in *The Godfather*. A senior foreign policy expert said: "Due to an incompetent, arrogant and corrupt clique we are about to lose our hegemonic position in the Middle East and Gulf." "The White House has broken the army and trampled its honour," added a Republican senator and former Vietnam veteran.

### No doves

None of these, nor any of the other institutional critics, could be considered doves: whatever their political affiliations (mostly Republican) or personal beliefs, they were – and some are still – guardians of US power, managers of the national security state, and sometimes central actors in covert and overt imperial interventions in the third world during the cold war and post-cold war. They were – and some are still – system managers of a self-perpetuating bureaucratic national

security machine – first analysed by the sociologist C Wright Mills – whose function is the production and reproduction of power.

As a social group, these realists cannot be distinguished from the object of their criticism in terms of their willingness to use force or their historically demonstrated ruthlessness in achieving state aims. Nor can the cause of their dissent be attributed to conflicting convictions over ethics, norms and values (though this may be a motivating factor for some). It lies rather in the rational realisation that the war in Iraq has nearly “broken the US army” (6), weakened the national security state, and severely if not irreparably undermined “America’s global legitimacy” (7) – its ability to shape world preferences and set the global agenda. The most sophisticated expressions of dissent, such as Brzezinski’s, reflect the understanding that power is not reducible to the ability to coerce, and that, once lost, hegemonic legitimacy is hard to restore.

The signs of slippage are everywhere apparent: in Latin America, where US influence is at its lowest in decades; in East Asia, where the US has been obliged, reluctantly, to negotiate with North Korea and recognise China as an indispensable actor in regional security; in Europe, where US plans to install missile defence capabilities in Poland are being contested by Germany and other European Union states; in the Gulf, where longstanding allies such as Saudi Arabia are pursuing autonomous agendas that coincide only in part with US aims; and in the international institutions, the UN and the World Bank, where the US is no longer in a position to drive the agenda unaided.

Transnational opinion surveys show a consistent and nearly global pattern of defiance of US foreign policy as well as a more fundamental erosion in the attractiveness of the US: the narrative of the American dream has been submerged by images of a military leviathan disregarding world opinion and breaking the rules. World public opinion may not stop wars but it does count in subtler ways. Some of this slippage may be repairable under new leaders and with new and less aggressive policies. Yet it is hard to see how internal unity of purpose will be restored: it took decades to rebuild the shaken US armed forces after Vietnam and to define an elite and popular consensus on the uses of power. The mobilisation of nationalist sentiment to support foreign adventures will not be so easy after Iraq. Nor can one imagine a return to the status quo in world politics.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq is not the sole cause of the trends sketched. Rather, the war significantly accentuated all of them at a moment when larger centrifugal forces were already at work: the erosion and collapse of the Washington Consensus and the gradual rise of new gravitational centres, notably in Asia, were established trends when President George Bush went to war. Now, as the shift in the world economy towards Asia matures, the US is stuck in a conflict that is absorbing its total energies. History is moving on and the world is slipping, slowly but inexorably, out of US hands.

### **Destined to act as hegemon**

For the US power elite this is deeply unsettling. Since the mid-20th century US leaders have thought of themselves as having a unique historic responsibility to lead and govern the globe. Sitting on top of the world since the 1940s, they have assumed that, like Great Britain in the 19th century, they were destined to act as hegemon – a dominant state having the will and the means to establish and maintain international order: peace and an open and expanding liberal world economy. In their reading of history it was Britain’s inability to sustain such a role and the US’s simultaneous unwillingness to take responsibility (isolationism) that created the conditions for the cycle of world wars and depression during the first half of the 20th century.

The corollary of this assumption is the circular argument that since order requires a dominant

centre, the maintenance of order (or avoidance of chaos) requires the perpetuation of hegemony. This belief system, theorised in US academia in the 1970s as “hegemonic stability”, has underpinned US foreign policy since the second world war, when the US emerged as the core state of the world capitalist system. As early as 1940 US economic and political elites forecast a vast revolution in the balance of power: the US would “become the heir and residuary legatee and receiver for the economic and political assets of the British Empire – the sceptre passes to the United States” (8).

A year later Henry R Luce announced the coming American Century: “America’s first century as a dominant power in the world” meant that its people would have “to accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation and exert upon the world the full impact of our influence as we see fit and by such means as we see fit”. He added that “in any sort of partnership with the British Empire, America should assume the role of senior partner” (9). By the mid 1940s the contours of the American Century had already emerged: US economic predominance and strategic supremacy upheld by a planetary network of military bases from the Arctic to the Cape and from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

The post-war US leaders who presided over the construction of the national security state were filled, in William Appleman Williams’s words, with “visions of omnipotence” (10): the US enjoyed enormous economic advantages, a significant technological edge and briefly held an atomic monopoly. Though the Korean stalemate (1953) and the Soviet Union’s nuclear weapons and missile programmes dented US self-confidence, it took defeat in Vietnam and the domestic social upheavals that accompanied the war to reveal the limits of power. Henry Kissinger’s and Richard Nixon’s “realism in an era of decline” was a reluctant acknowledgement that the overarching hegemony of the previous 20 years could not and would not last forever.

But Vietnam and the Nixon era were a turning point in another more paradoxical way: domestically they ushered in the conservative revolution and the concerted effort of the mid-1980s to restore and renew the national security state and US world power. When the Soviet Union collapsed a few years later, misguided visions of omnipotence resurfaced. Conservative triumphalists dreamed of primacy and sought to lock in long-term unipolarity (11). Iraq was a strategic experiment designed to begin the Second American Century. That experiment and US foreign policy now lie in ruins.

## **Britain’s long exit**

Historical analogies are never perfect but Great Britain’s long exit from empire may shed some light on the present moment. At the end of the 19th century few British leaders could begin to imagine an end to empire. When Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee was celebrated in 1897, Britain possessed a formal transoceanic empire that encompassed a quarter of the world’s territory and 300 million subalterns and subjects – twice that if China, a near colony of 430 million people, was included. The City of London was the centre of an even more far-flung informal trading and financial empire that bound the world. It is unsurprising that, despite apprehensions over US and German industrial competitiveness, significant parts of the British elite believed that they had been given “a gift from the Almighty of a lease of the universe for ever”.

The Jubilee turned out to be “final sunburst of an unalloyed belief in British fitness to rule” (12). The second Boer war (1899-1902) fought to preserve the routes to India and secure the weakest link in the imperial chain, wasted British wealth and blood and revealed the atrocities of scorched-earth policies to a restive British public. “The South African War was the greatest test of British imperial power since the Indian Mutiny and turned into the most extensive and costly war fought by Britain between the defeat of Napoleon and the First World War” (13). The war that broke out in 1914 bankrupted and exhausted its European protagonists. The long end of the British era had started.

However, the empire not only survived the immediate crisis but hobbled on for decades, through the second world war, until its inglorious end at Suez in 1956. Still, a nostalgia for lost grandeur persists. As Tony Blair's Mesopotamian adventures show, the imperial afterglow has faded but is not entirely extinguished.

For the US power elite, being on top of the world has been a habit for 60 years. Hegemony has been a way of life; empire, a state of being and of mind. The institutional realist critics of the Bush administration have no alternative conceptual framework for international relations, based on something other than force, the balance of power or strategic predominance. The present crisis and the deepening impact of global concerns will perhaps generate new impulses for cooperation and interdependence in future. Yet it is just as likely that US policy will be unpredictable: as all post-colonial experiences show, de-imperialisation is likely to be a long and possibly traumatic process.

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