

Though Cracks Appear Empire Remains the U.S. DNA



U.S. hegemony is now in decline, as a new more diversified global order is emerging, yet, empire remains deep in the U.S. national DNA. The U.S. has been an empire based on conquest and expansion from the first colonial settlements before its creation as a nation-state. It has been expanding as an empire ever since. The U.S. will continue to act as an empire at home and abroad unless and until profound changes are made in the U.S. itself, or it falls apart as a consequence of its imperial ways.

The 9-11 attacks 20 years ago today, themselves blowback from imperial wars, spurred a "war on terror" that led to those lost wars, soaking up trillions that might have otherwise gone to meet critical needs and heal divisions in U.S. society. The wars, grounded in lies, along with the erosion of civil rights under wartime conditions, have diminished the credibility of national institutions and their ability to create national unity. Osama Bin Laden claimed that the attacks were meant to draw the U.S. into bankrupting wars that would cause its collapse, just as the Soviet Union's Afghanistan defeat led to its collapse. Whether or not that's true, the wars have certainly eroded the U.S. internally and internationally.

Empire as a way of life is at the center of the critical challenges facing us, none more than climate. The lines of power between fossil fuel corporations, U.S. militarism and global empire are transparent. The way 9/11 was used as a pretext for a war to control Iraq's oil is the poster. Moving beyond empire as a way of life is crucial to address climate and the range of our crises.

EMPIRE FROM THE START

Our empire as a way of life began with the first colonies planted on the Atlantic coast by what was to become one of the world's great empires, the British. The imperial aspirations of colonial ruling classes were no different than those on the home islands. While Britain and other European nations pursued colonies around the world, the U.S. colonized the continent. Wars to displace the natives began in 1610, three years after the Jamestown colony was founded in Virginia, and continued to Wounded Knee in 1890 (though in many ways the wars continue, as pipeline struggles show today). On a wide swathe of those lands, the U.S. created the internal empire of Black slavery and cotton, the source of much of national wealth not only for slaveholders, but also for Northeast financial and trade interests, and Northern farms and industries selling to Southern plantations.

From the beginning, the U.S. and its predecessor colonies used expansion to allay social conflicts. Disaffected people could find their way on the frontier, carving farms and towns out of formerly native lands. Later, industrial and commercial growth would be the tide that raises all boats. Generally increasing prosperity would turn the attention of those who could only afford rowboats away from those who could buy yachts. Expansionism without limits was and is the driving ideology of empire as a way of life. We have never mastered the wisdom to say at some point enough is enough.

U.S. expansion continued unabated through most of its history. It secured its territorial empire by pushing back the natives and taking half of Mexico.

When it had filled out the continent it moved to build a global economic and military empire. The process was shaped and driven by three significant crises of expansion.

The greatest national crisis, the Civil War, was about expansion. The South did not secede because the North was ready to abolish slavery. Abolitionism was a distinctly minority view. The North was perfectly willing to let slavery remain in the South. The South seceded because Lincoln was insistent slavery could not expand into those newly conquered western lands. The South's ruling classes imbued with expansionist ideology regarded that as an existential threat. After the region was restored to the Union, the North proved the war was not about Black freedom by letting the same ruling class return to power with a system of sharecropping, segregation and chain gangs little changed from slavery. In the 1890s, the U.S. faced the next major crisis of expansion, its greatest economic depression to that point. There had been depressions before. But the intensity of labor and political upheaval spurred by the 1890s depression shook the national ruling class to the bone. The 1892 Homestead strike at the Carnegie steel works culminated in a gun battle. The 1894 Pullman rail car strike turned into a national rail shutdown. Federal troops were called out to put it down. The Populist Party mounted a smallholder challenge to the corporate powers that were emerging to control the economy. Frederick Jackson Turner was proclaiming the closing of the frontier. A small group of the U.S. elite led by Theodore Roosevelt conceived it was time for the U.S. to move fully into the global market to absorb its surplus industrial and agricultural production. They feared revolution. Their contrivances led to the Spanish-American War. The Philippines were seen as a launch pad for the China market.

The U.S. then issued what are known as the Open Door notes, proclaiming open access to trade and investment for all nations in China. It was a warning that U.S. would not tolerate China being cut up into exclusive economic zones by other colonial powers. U.S. leaders knew that in an open system the sheer bulk of the U.S. economy, already the largest in the world, would dominate all others.

The U.S. increasingly exerted itself on the world stage, but it was not until the third great crisis of expansion, the Great Depression of the 1930s leading to war in 1940s, that Theodore's cousin Franklin fully consolidated the U.S. global order. Again, the crisis was about the inability to expand the market, and FDR saw international trade and investment as a key solution. The drive of the Germans and Japanese to create self-contained economic systems in Europe and Asia represented a proximate threat. Victory in World War II gave the U.S. the chance to build the global Open Door economic order, which encompassed the world outside the socialist countries. Through the 1950s and 1960s, as the world rebuilt, the rising tide indeed lifted many boats.

NEW CHALLENGES TO EMPIRE

But by the mid-1960s the U.S. began to hit three distinct limits to expansion, rooted in those previous crises. These roadblocks are the origination point for today's deterioration of the U.S. empire, domestically and internationally.

First, Black people moved beyond the political and legal agenda of the Civil Rights Movement to demand the fair share of the economic pie they were denied by the restoration of the old order in the South. Martin Luther King Jr. exemplified this with his 1968 Poor People's Campaign. Blacks called for a redistribution of economic power, coming right up against the recalcitrance of a system that had avoided the issue through expansion. The result was urban upheaval and white backlash, the origin of today's reactionary Republican Party. It also spurred the population-controlling "war on drugs," building an internal police and prison empire against which prison abolition and Black rights movements today struggle.

Second, the U.S. empire was facing rising resistance in Asia, Latin America and Africa to colonialism.

Its first outright overseas war against an anti-colonial indigenous resistance, the Philippines Insurrection that followed the conquest in the Spanish-American War, ended in victory for the U.S. after years of struggle and the death of 200,000 Filipinos. The Philippines won nominal independence after WWII, but the U.S. still conducted a neocolonial war against insurgent leftists. Again, it was successful, but when the U.S. tried to apply those lessons to a deeper national resistance in Vietnam, it faltered. Finally, outright military aggression could no longer secure unlimited expansion in formerly colonial nations. The lesson remained unlearned though, leading to further defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Third, the rising competitors that the U.S. incorporated into its empire, Germany and Japan, fully recovered by the 1960s, and were beginning to offer stiff competition to the U.S. in global markets. From 1870 to 1970 the U.S. consistently ran a trade surplus. Since then it has consistently run a deficit. The Open Door order the U.S. created was beginning to turn against it, leading to the beginning of the rust belt, the export of jobs overseas, and the long-term stagnation in U.S. wages that began in the 1970s. The rise of China and the drain of jobs and income are a continuation writ far larger. U.S. financial and corporate elites have increasingly moved their interests into the global sphere, leaving behind much of the working and middle classes. Expansion under the current system of economic distribution is no longer sufficient to ameliorate the class, racial and regional conflicts that are never far from the surface in US American life. So they are growing, and could well break up the nation.

A fourth limiting crisis has appeared more recently, though it was known by the 1960s. In long-term consequences it dwarfs all the rest.

It is climate disruption, caused by failure to limit fossil fuel pollution,

creating its own limits in terms of increasingly costly droughts, wildfires and storms. As noted above, fossil fuels have been a foundation of the U.S. empire. They made possible monumental economic expansion, particularly since the take-off of mass consumer society in the 1950s. They are the source of massive profits for the most historically powerful corporations, and the fuel of the military machine. The power to cut off oil flows implicit in U.S. military presence is a hammer on nations such as China. Is it any wonder that the U.S. has been the center of resistance to the fossil fuel replacement that climate stabilization demands? That is as true of the contradictions of a Biden who speaks of an existential crisis while approving expanded fossil fuel production as it is of the outright climate denial of a Trump.

CAN WE CHANGE?

These limits on expansion and empire will cause increasing conflicts and crises, internally and internationally, unless we move to different pathways that democratize and distribute economic and political power. **A system based on endless expansion must give way to one that creates solutions based on cooperation.** The changes involve what seems most difficult for U.S. politics and culture, acknowledging limits. One can question whether empire and expansionism are so deep in the national DNA that the needed changes are possible short of massive collapse. The best we can do is acknowledge the uncertainties and explore the possibilities.

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