Generic Empire Talk

Empires have always claimed to be exceptional—better and nicer than the empires that came before them. This idea is referred to as “imperial exceptionalism,” and it can be found in discussions of empire talk throughout history.¹ In Maier’s “What Is an Empire?,” Burbank and Cooper’s “Imperial Trajectories,” and Mishra’s “Watch This Man,” many themes that are often present in empire talk are discussed, including structures of imperial formation, trajectories of empire, factors of violence, and justifying ideologies. The primary source passage from Steel’s *Pax Americana* uses these themes by portraying the American empire as forming by accident, possessing great strength, being benevolent and altruistic rather than violent, and holding the responsibility of spreading democracy and a better quality of life. While Steel’s passage claims that the American empire is exceptional, his empire talk reflects a generic image of empire with the same themes described by Maier, Burbank and Cooper, and Mishra.

Steel claims that the American empire is exceptional because its imperial formation was accidental and because Americans never wanted an empire, but many empires throughout history have also claimed that they formed by accident, so this point is generic. Steel states that “the American empire came into being by accident…Nobody planned our empire. In fact nobody even wanted it.”² He later asserts again that “our adventure in empire-building began by accident.”³ In these quotations, Steel claims that the accidental and unwanted formation of the American empire makes it exceptional. However, Maier points out that most modern empires have made this argument that they accidentally expanded and became empires.⁴ Granted, Steel

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¹ Lecture notes, January 20, 2016.
² Primary source, 1967.
³ Primary source, 1967.
⁴ Maier, p. 25.
does acknowledge that “the British empire…was acquired in a fit of absent-mindedness,” which
one might interpret to have the same meaning as “by accident.” But he seems to make a
distinction between this “absent-mindedness” and the accidental formation of the American
empire—a distinction that still separates the American empire from previous empires, and
therefore makes it exceptional. But Maier equates the supposed accidental formation of the
American empire to the “absent-mindedness” of the British empire by stating that both
formations were “irrelevant.” He states that both empires engaged in just as much conquest as
the empires before them, despite their accidental or “absent-minded” formations. Because many
other empires have argued that they formed accidentally, Steel’s empire talk is generic, rather
than exceptional.

Steel claims that the American empire is exceptional because its trajectory is stronger
than any other nation or empire, but many empires throughout history have also claimed that
they were the strongest, so this point is generic. He states that America is “the strongest…nation
in the world” and that it has “a technology that is a wonder of the world,” “the mightiest military
force in history,” and “an economy productive beyond any man had ever known.” In these
quotations, Steel argues that the American empire is strong because it has advanced technology,
a powerful military, and a good economy, and that these factors of strength make it exceptional.
But as Burbank and Cooper show, all empires have been strong; they would not have been able
to become empires without having great strength. For example, the Roman empire was so
powerful that it is still regarded as a model of civilized society, and the Roman and Chinese
empires were used as reference points by empires that came after them. In addition, other

5 Primary source, 1967.
6 Maier, p. 25.
7 Primary source, 1967.
empires also had strong military forces. The Ottoman empire ruled for six hundred years; Chinese empires ruled for over two thousand years; the Roman empire ruled for six hundred years; the Byzantine empire ruled for a thousand years; and the Russian empire ruled for a few centuries. These durations indicate that these empires must have had strong militaries, or they would not have been able to rule for so long. Furthermore, the Roman and Chinese empires also had large economies. These empires were all strong, so it is not unique for the American empire to be strong. Because many other empires have argued that they were the strongest, Steel’s empire talk is generic, rather than exceptional.

Steel claims that the American empire is exceptional because it was benevolent and altruistic, rather than violent, but many empires throughout history have also claimed that they were benevolent and altruistic, so this point is generic. Twice in the passage he states that America is “benevolent,” and he claims that America’s attitude is “heavily tinged with altruism.” But many other empires have claimed to be motivated by altruism, so this motivation is not unique to the American empire. For example, Maier points out that the Spanish empire was motivated partly to serve God. In addition, Burbank and Cooper state that Christian and Muslim empires desired to spread their religion. Furthermore, in the 19th century, the British empire claimed to provide its subjects with the gift of civilization, and in the 21st century, China claimed to provide its subjects with the gift of democracy. This rhetoric of benevolence is common among empires, and is not unique to the American empire. Because many other

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8 Burbank and Cooper, p. 2-4.
9 Primary source, 1967.
10 Maier, p. 45.
11 Burbank and Cooper, p. 4.
empires have argued that they were benevolent and altruistic, Steel’s empire talk is generic, rather than exceptional.

Steel justifies the American empire by arguing that it spreads democracy, and he claims that spreading democracy makes the American empire exceptional, but many other empires throughout history have justified themselves by claiming to spread democracy, so this point is generic. To contrast America’s democracy with the less desirable governments of other nations, Steel mentions communism, stating that the American empire contains “virtually all of the European land mass that is not in communist hands,” and colonialism, stating that the American empire protects “nations released from the bondage of colonialism.”¹⁴ By asserting that communism and colonialism are governments that exist elsewhere—not in America—Steel contrasts these forms of government from America’s democracy, which it spreads when it expands. He thinks that spreading democracy makes the American empire exceptional, but other empires have also claimed to spread democracy. For example, Maier points out that the Greek, French, and Russian empires have claimed that their expansion was motivated by the desire to spread democracy.¹⁵ Because many other empires have justified themselves by claiming that they spread democracy, Steel’s empire talk is generic, rather than exceptional.

Steel also justifies the American empire by arguing that it holds the responsibility of helping other nations improve their quality of life, and that this responsibility makes it exceptional, but many other empires throughout history have used this responsibility to justify themselves, so this point is generic. Steel states that “it was America’s role to make the world a happier, more orderly place, one more nearly reflecting our own image” and that Americans have “a deep-rooted instinct in our national character—an instinct to help those less fortunate and

¹⁴ Primary source, 1967.
¹⁵ Maier, p. 34.
permit them to emulate and perhaps one day achieve the virtues of our own society.”

Steel believes that America has a higher quality of life than other countries and that it is responsible for helping other countries become more like it. He states that the American empire was “obligated to help” other countries and that it “saw this as a special responsibility fate had thrust upon” it. This responsibility can be compared to the white man’s burden, the idea that it is white men’s duty to spread democracy and civilization to other parts of the world. Many European empires have also felt burdened by this responsibility, so it is not unique to the American empire. For example, Burbank and Cooper argue that Britain, France, Germany, and other European countries all justified their empires by claiming that they were spreading civilization and economic progress. In addition, Maier argues that empires have always tried to justify themselves by claiming to spread universal values of some sort. Because many other empires have justified themselves by claiming that they help other countries become better, Steel’s empire talk is generic, rather than exceptional.

Throughout Steel’s passage, he uses generic empire talk to describe what he believes makes the American empire exceptional. He claims that the American empire’s accidental formation, strong trajectory, benevolence and altruism, and responsibility to spread democracy and a higher quality of life make it better than the empires that came before it. But since empires throughout history have made these same arguments, Steel’s passage reflects a generic rather than exceptional image of empire.

16 Primary source, 1967.
17 Primary source, 1967.
18 Mishra.
19 Burbank and Cooper, p. 6.
20 Maier, p. 65.