The (Un)Exceptionalism of the American Empire

As the taste of empire over the years has gone sour to many, current and future empires now seek ways to continue imperial rule without being branded as malevolent; the rhetorical tactics to achieve this is called “empire talk.” When analyzing the self-descriptions of empires that have risen, buy ultimately failed, declarations of imperial exceptionalism are prominent in every case. These “unique” accounts are exactly what makes all imperial power very similar. Empire talk in the past has included proclamations of an accidental rise in power followed by global dominance with benevolent motivations. Another key aspect to an empire’s self-regard is its strategy to differentiate itself from malevolent empires in the past. When relating old empire talk to the United States’ “new” version, it is important to consider the two imperial qualifications: the historical process by which an empire is formed, and its ongoing structure.¹ In the primary source written during the Cold War era, the writer predictably attributes a portion of the American Empire’s fallacious exceptionalism to its accidental rise in power. Additionally, the writer claims that America’s citizens are uncomfortable with the idea of expansion through conquest and coercion.² This description of the American Empire attempts to avoid negative perception of the nation by using classic rhetoric that claims to be, but is not innovative. America’s empire talk becomes increasingly typical when it deems its imperial procedures to have benign intentions to ensure that every action is morally justified. In the primary source’s portrayal of imperial America, the same claims of exceptionalism are apparent in its formation, rise, and sustention. Indeed, these claims do not differ from the empire talk of past imperial powers.

¹ Maier, p. 25.
² Mishra.
The beginnings of any empire provide a grounds for that nation’s values and rationales for future actions. The first indicator of unoriginal empire talk in this passage comes when the writer claims, “the American Empire came into being by accident and has been maintained from a sense of benevolence. Nobody planned our empire. In fact, nobody even wanted it.” This statement reflects a classic way the American Empire attempted to distinguish itself from others in the past. The writer elicits a sense that the rise of the American Empire wasn’t motivated by power hungry individuals. The rhetoric used is designed to rebut any claim that America’s rise in power resulted from “earth hunger,” as empires have in the past; thus shedding a benevolent light on the formation of America. The “accidental and unwanted” rise of the American Empire attempts to differentiate the US as an original imperial power, but instead plays back into the same similarity that all empires seek differentiation.

The primary source continues to claim exceptional, although generic, aspects of the American Empire. The writer claims that, “we are indeed an imperial power, possessed of an empire on which the sun truly never sets, a benevolent empire that embraces the entire western hemisphere, the world’s two great oceans, and virtually all of the Eurasian land mass that is not in communist hands.” The writer reluctantly admits the imperial power of the US, but quickly jumps to disassociate the US from past empires. He adorns the US with the phrase that was once owned by the British Empire to perhaps highlight its failures, while suggesting the US is entitled to such a phrase. Additionally, the writer uses rhetoric infused with favoritism and positive connotations to suggest that America’s imperial power is backed by benevolent intentions. This

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3 Primary Source, 1967.
4 Maier, p. 25.
5 Lecture Notes, January 20, 2016.
6 Primary Source, 1967.
7 Lecture notes, January 25, 2016.
is nothing new among empire talk, as justifications in previous empires have claimed the same benign and altruistic motivations.\textsuperscript{8}

As the passage continues to claim the exceptionalism of the American Empire, its military and global political influence are exaggerated. It is explained that the US is, “the strongest and most politically active nation in the world. Our impact reaches everywhere and affects everything it touches. We have the means to destroy whole societies and rebuild them, to topple governments and create others, to impede social change or to stimulate it, to protect our friends and devastate those who oppose us.”\textsuperscript{9} This excerpt highlights America’s belief in its ability to control global affairs; simply put, no empire has ever claimed anything less than its own ability to dominate on a global scale. Aside from the classic overstatement regarding America’s power, this statement fails to recognize any other world power. This mirrors the view of the British Empire, which consequently led to the weakening of Britain’s grasp of its foreign possessions.\textsuperscript{10} This ignorance of existing foreign anti-imperialism is not only dangerous to sustaining the American Empire, it also appropriates America’s empire talk into the generic persona of failed empires in the past.

Those who promote the American Empire reference its intention to operate benevolently in the best interests of its subjects. The writer of this source unsurprisingly argues that the American Empire, “could not have occurred at all had it not appealed to a deep-rooted instinct in our national character -- an instinct to help those less fortunate and permit them to emulate and perhaps one day achieve the virtues of our own society. There was nothing arrogant in this

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\textsuperscript{8} Maier, p. 45. \\
\textsuperscript{9} Primary Source, 1967. \\
\textsuperscript{10} Mishra.
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attitude; indeed, it was heavily tinged with altruism.” The American Empire sought to justify its extreme expansion with claims of humanitarian motives; these assertions were essential to America’s misleading “differentiation” of itself when compared to other malevolent empires. In the times of African colonization, this same strategy was prevalent as Britain, France, Germany, and other European countries were concerned with their ability to disguise conquest as “morally defensible.” The assertion that imperial and expansionist behavior is justified by an ingrained American appreciation of charity merely attempts to make the concept of empire easier to swallow; the palatability of an empire is vital to its sustentation in a time when small nations feel as if they need to seek alliance with one power or another. Once again, as imperial powers in the past have used the same tactics of disguise, this claim falls far short of the sought after exceptionalism the US claims to represent.

At the conclusion of this primary source, the writer continues to justify America’s imperial tactics that highlight moral responsibility with benign intentions. He states, “we saw this as a special responsibility fate had thrust upon us…we naturally became persuaded of the universal validity of our institutions, and of our obligation to help those threatened by disorder, aggression, and poverty.” The rhetoric used here suggests that the US has no choice in whether or not to expand its influence. When analyzing America’s mediations in Vietnam and Afghanistan, the justification for the deadly trials resides in the US’s alleged responsibility to “civilize” these nations. This typical approach resulted in horrific amounts of death, revealing the arguably failed responsibility of charity to be identical to previous malevolent empires’ justifications of conquest. To relate, it is widely agreed upon that the past “free trade”

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11 Primary Source, 1967.
12 Burbank and Cooper, p. 6.
14 Primary Source, 1967.
15 Maier, p. 28.
imperatives imposed by the British Empire on China and India have had a devastating effect.\textsuperscript{16} Similarly then, the British empire claimed benevolent motives in their imperial tactics. Does the US truly believe it has a “special responsibility” to be the bringer of civilization to those without it, or is this source’s claim merely a classic example of empire talk disguising conquest as benevolent charity? The latter is clear.

To conclude, the primary source fails to differentiate the qualities of the American Empire to those in the past. Compelling similarities between the empire talk of fallen empires and America are apparent in the telling of America’s accidental rise to power and the moral justifications provided for its tenacious display expansionism.\textsuperscript{17} The claim to be an altruistic and benign entity while “civilizing” inhabited territories through conquest is not only oxymoronic, it is dated. America’s self-adornment as having the “mightiest military force in history, an economy productive beyond any man had ever known, and a standard of living the envy of the world,” is a typical description utilized by virtually every empire in the past.\textsuperscript{18} The American Empire, whether alive or fallen, has never been exceptional; the world’s latest empire has simply attempted to disguise its imperial qualities in a recycled shroud of rhetoric claiming humble beginnings, never-before-seen military and economic influence, and benevolent motives behind its expansionist conquest.

\textsuperscript{16} Mishra.
\textsuperscript{17} Lecture Notes, January 25, 2016.
\textsuperscript{18} Primary Source, 1967.