Empiric Un-Exceptionalism: The Notion of the Generic Empire

Although the term empire has no universal definition among contemporary scholars, all empires inevitably share certain indistinguishable components. In Steel’s passage describing the American empire during the Cold War era, he alludes to several of these inherent traits that are common to imperial states throughout history. While not all empires must necessarily possess the exact features Steel assigns to the American empire, many of the elements he describes are embodied in the typical notion of an empire. Steel’s passage reflects this generic image of empire because it illustrates two prominent characteristics of an empire: the idea of a benevolent empire serving in the best interest of its foreign subjects and the various repertoires and methods of projecting power utilized by empires in order to obtain their goals.

Throughout Steel’s passage, he makes several references to the benevolence and good will of the American empire towards the rest of the world, consistently reminding the reader of the plethora of benefits and improvements the United States has bestowed upon other countries and their people. He describes the American empire as a “benevolent empire” that permeates, “an affluence that could support whole nations with its waste”. Steel furthers this point by explaining that embedded in our national character and quest for empire is “an instinct to help those less fortunate and permit them to emulate and perhaps one day achieve the

1 Steel passage.
virtues of our own society”, noting that this is not due necessarily to a sense of our own superiority, rather it is “heavily tinged with altruism”. In doing this, Steel is seeking to justify America’s near global authority on the grounds that its foundations and intentions lie in promoting the best interests of those who fall within our imperial reach rather than simply dominating them for our own benefit.

However, this is not a novel concept to empires. Imperial regimes have often strived to justify their control of foreign territories by persuading the subjugated populations that residing within the dominion of their empire actually improves their way of life and leads to modernization and prosperity. The Roman empire homogenized its conquered territories by making them adapt Roman legal codes, political institutions, and culture in an effort to civilize and incorporate them into their superior lifestyle. The British empire severely limited the production of goods and restricted trade relations within its colonies under the guise of “free trade”, claiming that by doing so it was bringing economic growth to these regions that would have otherwise been unobtainable. More recently, the American empire has toppled sovereign governments in the Middle East and replaced them with democracies under the pretense that a democratic government is most conductive to the rule of law and civil liberties of their populations. Claims of a moral high

2 Ibid.
3 Maier, p. 65-66.
4 Burbank and Cooper, p. 12-13.
5 Mishra.
6 Lecture notes, January 26, 2015.
7 Ferguson, “The ‘E’ Word”.
8 Lecture notes, January 26, 2015.
ground regularly underlie imperial aspirations and serve to rationalize the behavior of empires, especially when they impose their own way of life on other cultures.

The second main characteristic generic to empires that Steel mentions is the repertoire that an empire employs to project its power throughout the world. He mentions that the American empire possesses “the mightiest military force in history, an economy productive beyond any man had ever known,” and “technology that is the wonder of the world”, all of which he argues allow it 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.” These various sources of power, Steel insinuates, allow the American empire to exert its influence throughout the world by utilizing a diverse methodology to accomplish a wide array of goals, and by doing this the United States can strategically choose which method is best suited to handle a particular situation.

Previous empires have also resorted to varying tactics to attain their imperial ambitions, and this is achieved by using hard power (military prowess), soft power (economic and cultural influences) or a delicate balance of both to bring about desirable outcomes. The Soviet Union made use of its military might to violently suppress revolutionary demonstration several of its satellite states (Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Afghanistan in throughout the 1980s) in order to maintain dominance over these subjects. Maritime empires, such as the Portuguese and British in Asia, relied more so on exploiting economic mechanisms

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9 Steel passage.
10 Maier, p. 65.
to maintain control over the resources of distant territories, albeit still utilizing their navies to command trade routes and regulate these regions’ commerce and finances.\textsuperscript{11} The United States has been adept at managing both sets of power to meet its ends. For example, utilizing its hard power, though covertly, it overthrew unfriendly regimes in Iran in 1953 and Guatemala in 1954 and replaced them with cooperative governments more favorable towards American interests.\textsuperscript{12}

Additionally, by assisting in the establishment of several multinational organizations in the middle-to-late twentieth century, such as the United Nations, International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, America has made use of its soft power to strengthen its global economic and political influence, rewarding countries who agree with its policies and imposing sanctions on those that oppose them.\textsuperscript{13}

These examples all illustrate the importance of an empire to possess a diverse repertoire for projecting its power on other states and political actors; an empire cannot rely on any one method alone to ensure its interests are carried out.

Although these two characteristics of empire do not encompass all the facets of an empire’s image, they are two of the most prominent and necessary components of a well-functioning empire. The notion of benevolence towards subjugated populations serves as moral justification for the empire’s imperial actions directed at these people and their state’s institutions, and the wide assortment of techniques empires use to execute these imperial actions allow them to address a multitude of issues in the most appropriate manner they see fit. While

\textsuperscript{11} Maier, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{12} Maier, p. 65.
\textsuperscript{13} Lecture Notes, January 26, 2015
Steel posits the exceptionalism of his empire, as many people tend to do of their own, the reality is that empiric states model themselves on their predecessors and contemporaries, and more often than not it is this hubris that ultimately leads to their demise.
Endnotes

Burbank and Cooper

Ferguson, “The ‘E’ Word”

Lecture Notes, January 26, 2015

Maier

Mishra

Steel Passage