The inherent irony in empire talk is comical. Every empire prides itself on being different from all others, on being exceptional. Yet, if every empire relies on the same general justifications, then how can any be different? Indeed, all empires—and the “talk” around them—share crucial commonalities. Such is the case with the United States, despite all its claims otherwise. The Steel passage highlights the epitome of United States empire talk, with claims of accidental empire, global dominance, and benevolent “empty-building.” Americans do not like to think that they might have come to possess an empire, live under an empire, or exercise empire. While frank “empire talk” has been taboo for much of recent American history, it does not change the reality of American imperialism. United States empire talk, even if its true subject is not expressly admitted, features similarities to generic attitudes about all empires: ubiquitous delusional claims describing the stages of birth, growth, and global power.

The birth of empire is important to the route it takes on its global conquest; it provides justification and explanation for the behavior of the government and its people. America has always faced dilemmas about the nature of its origins. Much of this crisis in thought comes from the secession of the colonies from an empire, and the influence of British thought and culture on subsequent American expansion. The Steel passage opens with an instant claim of distinction between American and British empire; “If the British empire, as Macauley once said, was acquired in a fit of absent-mindedness, the American empire came into being by accident” (1). The American Revolution has always been considered just that: revolutionary. While scholars debate whether it was actually radical or conservative and if it was a true change in American

---

1 Maier, p. 24.
2 Lecture notes, February 2, 2015.
politics and culture\textsuperscript{3}, the popular American belief is that revolution dramatically altered the course of the country’s political practices. Indeed, it became an immediate priority for Americans to establish their own sense of origin, and in doing so shed the remnants of British influence; this required forming an alternative to the lineage of British culture and the lineage of Native American land\textsuperscript{4}. Instead, America took on influences from Roman culture, apparent through the praise of columned houses and democratic republicanism\textsuperscript{5}. Enlightenment values coursed through early American political developments, as Jefferson declared a new “Empire of Liberty.”\textsuperscript{5} Empires pride themselves on their differences from those that have come before, often through proposals of unique origins and values. The adherence to these values would soon be tested, as with any empire, as the United States entered its phase of growth and expansion.

Based on the rhetoric from Steel, it seems as if American empire was natural and inevitable, arising from “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” (9-10). It was this attitude of altruism that was used to justify relentless expansion of United States land holdings. Americans marketed the capture of Native American lands not as conquest but as a “civilizing mission”, just like the other 19th century European empires\textsuperscript{6}. Steel asserts “the belief that it was America’s role to make the world a happier, more orderly place, one more nearly reflecting our own image,” (10-11) an argument that was present even in the earliest days of the country; Henry Knox expressed his goal to “[impart] our knowledge of cultivation and the arts to the aboriginals of the country” while introducing them to the principles

\textsuperscript{3} Lecture notes, February 2, 2015.
\textsuperscript{4} Lecture notes, February 2, 2015.
\textsuperscript{5} Burbank and Cooper, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{6} Maier, p. 28.
of United States culture. Expansion into the frontier was more than just a consequence of supposed good intentions; it was engrained into the American psyche. The imperial patterns were rooted in British influence: directly through the early frustration with British limitations on westward expansion past the Appalachians, and ideologically because of the long-standing British tradition of colonization. The intersection of empires provokes imitation. Ethnic displacement has been a common characteristic of empire, from the Ottomans to Nazi Germany. America used it as a means to project power through economic means (support of middle-class settlers), military means (decimation of Native populations through “incidents”), cultural means (broad attempts to “civilize”), and legal means (deceiving treaties such as family allotment in which Native Americans unknowingly signed away nearly all of their land holdings). Rooted in ideologically enhanced origins, the methods and motivation for expansion in the United States are consistent with the generic understanding of empire.

The moral justification for territorial expansion of empire develops into a predictable sense of exceptionalism that coincides with global influence. Steel makes the popular view of America and its international dominance quite clear; “We are the strongest and most politically active nation in the world. Our impact reaches everywhere and affects everything it touches” (5). The global dominance may be exaggerated; empires tend to celebrate their exceptionalism and exaggerate their influence. Some of American empire’s greatest supporters—Niall Ferguson, for example—blatantly ignore crucial facts about the rest of the world; consider his failure to acknowledge the Muslim world’s contribution to the Scientific Revolution or the Qing Dynasty’s

---

7 Lecture notes, February 2, 2015.
8 Lecture notes, February 2, 2015.
9 Burbank and Cooper, p. 15.
10 Maier, p. 28.
11 Maier, p. 29.
12 Lecture notes, February 2, 2015.
awesome power and civilization in China$^{13}$. A core sign of empire cockiness is the tendency to spread itself thinly over vast territories that it cannot hope to maintain—a primary concern of post-Revolutionary America$^{14}$. Nonetheless, just like great empires before it—Rome as the classic example, Britain as an example through its failure to effectively govern its colonies—the United States succumbed to the temptation to exert global influence. Its extreme confidence that it “possess[ed] the mightiest military force in history” and “an economy productive beyond any man had ever known” (12-13) was a primary factor in its recent failures in far-flung wars around the world. In its encounters with these foreign entities—from the Philippines to Vietnam to Afghanistan—a common practice of disregarding inhabited land, competing sovereignties, and fluid settlements followed the tradition of the British before it$^{15}$. The illusion that the United States was “the protector of weak and dependent nations released from the bondage of colonialism” (12) led to a string of global struggles, but Americans can take solace in the fact that many other empires have suffered from the same inflated sense of exceptionalism.

Since the time of Steel’s declaration of American empire in all its glory, empire talk has become more widely acceptable$^{16}$. Perhaps the creeping sense that America’s greatest days are past instigates reflection on times of more sheer dominance. It also allows for increasing awareness about the true nature of American empire, and how it is more similar to other empires than the most proud Americans might hope. Steel’s passage reflects the consistency between the empire talk of the United States and that of other empires through varying stages of empire: birth, growth, and global power. All empires eventually fall; it is foolish to believe that the

$^{13}$ Mishra.
$^{14}$ Lecture notes, February 2, 2015.
$^{15}$ Lecture notes, February 2, 2015.
$^{16}$ Maier, p. 24.
United States is an exception. It stands to reason that perhaps the sun has set on the days when America was “an empire on which the sun truly never sets” (3).