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Welcome to the Post-American World

by Tom Engelhardt
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Let me try to get this straight: from the moment the Soviet Union imploded in 1991 until recently just about every politician and mainstream pundit in America assured us that we were the planet's indispensable nation, the only truly exceptional one on this small orb of ours.

We were the sole superpower, Earth's hyperpower, its designated global sheriff, the architect of our planetary future. After five centuries of great power rivalries, in the wake of a two-superpower world that, amid the threat of nuclear annihilation, seemed to last forever and a day (even if it didn't quite make it 50 years), the United States was the ultimate survivor, the victor of victors, the last of the last. It stood triumphantly at the end of history. In a lottery that had lasted since Europe's wooden ships first broke out of a periphery of Eurasia and began to colonize much of the planet, the United States was the chosen one, the country that would leave every imperial world-maker from the Romans to the British in its shadow.

Who could doubt that this was now our world in a coming American century beyond compare? And then, of course, came the attacks of 9/11. A mere \$400,000 and 19 suicidal hijackers (mostly Saudis) armed with box cutters and organized from Afghanistan, a country plunged into an Islamic version of the Middle Ages, had challenged the greatest power of all time. In the process, they would bring down iconic structures in what would soon be known to Americans as "the homeland," while killing almost 3,000 innocent civilians, acts so shocking that they really did change the world.

Yet even then, a fervor for world-organizing triumphalism only took firmer hold in Washington. The top officials of President George W. Bush's administration almost instantly saw the 9/11 attacks as their very own "Pearl Harbor," the twenty-first-century equivalent of the moment that

had launched the U.S. on the path to post-World War II superpowerdom. As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld instantly told his aides in the rubble of the Pentagon, “Go massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not.” And indeed they would do just that, seizing the moment with alacrity and promptly launching the “Global War on Terror” – aka, among the cognoscenti, World War IV (the third, in their minds, having been the Cold War).

No simple “police action” against the modest al-Qaeda organization and Osama bin Laden would do (and those who suggested something so pathetically humble were to be laughed out of the room). At that moment, their newly launched “war” was to be aimed at no less than 60 countries. The world was to be swept clean of “terror” and the tool for doing so and for imposing Washington’s version of a world order on much of the planet would be the U.S. military, a force like none ever seen before. It was, President Bush would claim, “the greatest force for human liberation the world has ever known.” It was, as both he and Barack Obama affirmed, as became gospel on both sides of the aisle in Washington (until Donald Trump arrived in the presidential race of 2016), “the finest fighting force” in history. It was so unquestionably powerful that no enemy could conceivably stand in its path. It would “liberate” not just Afghanistan, but Iraq, a country in the Middle Eastern oil heartlands that had nothing to do with either al-Qaeda or Islamic terror but had a ruler despised in Washington.

And that, mind you, would only be the beginning. Syria and Iran would undoubtedly follow and soon enough the Greater Middle East would be brought under the aegis of a Pax Americana. Meanwhile, globally, no country or even bloc of countries would be capable of rising to challenge the United States into the imaginable future. As Bush put it in a speech at West Point in 2002, “America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge, thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace.” In that year, the U.S. National Security Strategy similarly called for the country to “build and maintain” its military power “beyond challenge.”

What a soaring dream it all was! In response to the destruction of part of the Pentagon and those towers in New York City, a small group of top officials in Washington, long waiting for just such an opportunity, were determined to impose their version of order and democracy, military-first, on significant parts of the planet and no one would be capable of resisting. Not for long anyway.

Almost 16 years later, you know how that dream of domination turned out, but to Washington’s power players at the time it all seemed so obvious. Except for a few retrograde Muslim rebels, it was clearly no one else’s planet but ours to organize as we wished. The Soviet Union was already an instant historical memory, its empire scattered to the winds, and Russia itself largely immiserated. The Chinese had a capitalist economy of no small means (even if run by a Communist Party), but as a military force, as a great power, they were anything but impressive. And if you looked at the rest of the world, there were no other potential great powers, no less superpowers, on any imaginable horizon.

Given the history of the Global War on Terror and of the stunning inability of the U.S. military to impose Washington’s will, no less its planetary dreams, on more or less anyone, it took an awful long time for such thinking to begin to die. And before it did, the political class, in a fervor of defensive exaggeration, began insisting in a mantra-like way on the “indispensability” and “exceptionality” of... well, us. It was as if the sense of decline most Americans had started feeling in their bones wasn’t happening. Of course, the constant invocation of the country’s singular specialness should itself have signaled just how wrong things were, because when

you're truly indispensable and exceptional you don't need to repeatedly say so (or even say it at all).

It took a reality TV star with a curious comb-over who had run a set of casinos into the ground to pick up a Reagan-era slogan, "Make America Great Again," and bodysurf it into the White House. He did so in part on the widespread sense in the American heartland that, a quarter-century after the Soviet Union imploded, the U.S. was indeed in decline, even heading for the exit at a creep, not a gallop. The "again" in that slogan was the telltale signal that the billionaire "businessman" (and classic American huckster) had an intuitive handle on an American world of failed war-making and raging inequality about which both his Republican opposition and his Democratic opponent in election 2016, all still priming the pump of indispensability and exceptionality, seemed clueless.

Who? Us?

Now, here we are on the planet the U.S. was to dominate and run for an eternity with an embattled president surrounded by generals whose skills were honed in America's losing wars of the twenty-first century. If you want a personal gauge of American decline, consider this: barely half a year into office, Donald J. Trump is already threatening to launch a nuclear war and exploring whether he has the power not just to pardon aides, friends, and family, but himself in case of future convictions. With the previous decade and a half in mind, here's a question for you: Pardon me, but even if he pardons himself, who's going to pardon the rest of us?

I mean, am I wrong, or aren't we living in the mess of a world the sole superpower had a major hand in creating and was, once upon a not-so-distant time, all too eager to take credit for? So I find it strange that no one who matters here seems to feel the slightest responsibility for the planet's dismal state. All the politicians, power players, and pundits in Washington who wouldn't have hesitated to take complete credit, had the U.S. achieved anything like its fantasy of a Pax Americana world, couldn't be quicker these days to place the blame for what's actually happened elsewhere.

You know the tale. When it comes to the world's ills, it's Vlad, the Ukrainian Impaler, or Vlad, the Hacker, who's spoiled so much. Among other things, he had, we're told, the temerity to mess with the sacrosanct electoral system of the most democratic country on the planet, a place so pure that its denizens had never heard of such a shocking act – except, of course, for the scores of times Washington did exactly that to other countries. (Who in the U.S. these days even remembers "the first 9/11"?) The Russian president now gets much of the blame in Washington for the sorry mess of our world, from Eastern Europe and the unsettled NATO alliance to Syria. As for where the rest of the blame lands: it's the Chinese, of course, who've had the nerve to flex their potential great-power muscles by bulking up their military, building fake "islands" in the South China Sea, and claiming parts of that body of water as their own, while not pressuring the North Koreans harder to stand down. It's the Iranians who somehow are responsible for much of the mess in the Middle East, along with various jihadi successors and spin-offs from the original al-Qaeda. They take the rest of the blame for the world of chaos that continues to spread across the Greater Middle East, parts of Africa, and now the Philippines (not to mention the refugees fleeing embattled and desperate lands who are, we are regularly assured, threatening the continental U.S. with disastrous harm).

I don't mean to say that such a crew (refugees excepted) shouldn't bear some of the blame for our disintegrating world, but just remind me: Wasn't the Islamic State born in an American military prison in Iraq? Weren't the Iranian theocrats, those Great-Satan haters, born in the grim crucible of the Shah's rule (and that of his brutal secret police) after the CIA helped hatch a coup

that overthrew the elected prime minister of that country in 1953? Didn't Washington ignore promises made to former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and others and do its damndest to move NATO's line of control into parts of the former Soviet empire and associated satellite states?

Didn't the Bush administration lump North Korea with Iraq, a nation it was eager to invade, and Iran, another it planned to take down sooner or later, in the infamous "axis of evil," even though the North Koreans had nothing to do with either of those countries? In the most public manner possible, in a State of the Union address to the nation, the American president linked all three of those countries to terrorism and evil in what was unmistakably a "regime change" package. (If you were eager to convince the North Korean leadership that possessing a nuclear arsenal was the only way to go, that certainly was a good start.) In the process, didn't George W. Bush and his officials functionally shred the Clinton-negotiated agreement by which the North Koreans had indeed frozen their nuclear program, in part by listing that country in its 2002 Nuclear Posture Review "as one of the states that might become the target of a preventive strike"?

And that's just to begin to explore what it meant to be in the world of the sole superpower from 2001 to 2017. Remind me, for example, which country only recently announced its withdrawal from the Paris climate accord, the crucial global architecture for protecting the planetary environment, and so humanity's future, from a grim kind of dismemberment?

Who's Going to Sanction Us?

So here's my next question: If you're parceling out blame on this planet of ours, why just dump it on the evil doers? What about us? What about the sole superpower, its changing leadership, and the finest fighting force in the history of the universe? Don't we have any responsibility for the situation we now face globally, from North Korea to the Greater Middle East, Ukraine to Venezuela? Didn't the actions of America's leaders and its national security state have anything to do with the world that called forth the Trumpian wave, which could now swamp so many ships of state? Maybe President Trump can indeed pardon himself (an issue being debated at the moment by constitutional scholars), but who pardoned everyone else who lent a hand, large or small, to the creation of what increasingly looks like a failed world?

Are there no high crimes and misdemeanors for which we Americans are responsible on a planet of the otherwise guilty?

Here's one thing I think about sometimes on bleak nights. I'm sure you remember the way the Bush administration used fraudulent claims about weapons of mass destruction, or WMDs, as an excuse to launch an invasion of Saddam Hussein's Iraq and occupy his country. In fact, there was indeed a weapon of mass destruction in Iraq and no one needed to search for it. I'm talking about the U.S. military.

It was also a weapon of destructive creation. It cracked Iraq open, set Shia and Sunni at each others' throats, loosed a grim process of religious "cleansing" there and across the region, and so provided fertile ground for the worst of the worst. Its "successful" invasion was the crucial factor in preparing the way for the birth of al-Qaeda in Iraq and then of the Islamic State in a country where no such organizations had previously existed.

In truth, in every land across the Greater Middle East and Africa where that military has gotten involved in hostilities, from Libya to Iraq, Yemen to Afghanistan, it has left in its wake shaken or failed states, untold numbers of desperate refugees, and spreading terror movements. It has been a major player in a decade and a half of disaster that has helped destabilize significant parts of the planet. And yet when it comes to apportioning blame, the main people tarred with the

disaster that's been the war on terror are those who have been made into refugees in its wake, those who, we are told, would be a mortal danger to us, were we to welcome them here.

And while we're at it, it might be worth mentioning one other weapon of mass destruction in our world: the rise to glory of the 1% and the widening inequality chasm that's accompanied their successes. From Ronald Reagan's presidency on, a series of administrations, Republican and Democratic, have presided over a country and a world growing ever more disastrously unequal, as the rich make staggering gains in income and wealth while the poor and working classes labor ever harder for, relatively speaking, ever less. Consider that but another story of devastation on what reputedly was once an American planet.

In such a global context, our Congress has been eager indeed to sanction the Russians, the Iranians, and the North Koreans for their roles in spreading misery, but who's going to sanction us? Honestly, don't you wonder how we got off the hook so easily for the world we swore that we alone would create? Isn't the U.S. responsible for anything? Doesn't anyone even remember? We now have a president with the strangest demeanor imaginable, a narcissistic bully spouting a kind of rhetoric that eerily echoes the bellicose threats of North Korea. However, like the spreading terror movements and failed states of the Greater Middle East, he should be seen as a spawn of the actions, programs, and dreams of the sole superpower in its self-proclaimed glory and of its plans for a military-enforced global Pax Americana. By the time he's done, President Trump may be responsible for high crimes, including nuclear ones, of a sort that even impeachment wouldn't cover and who, these days, could ever miss his demeanor?

Blame the evil doers for the devastation visiting this planet? Sure thing. But us? Not for a second.

And while you're at it, welcome to the post-American world.