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The US Imperium Comes Out

The United States of Amnesia has occasionally found expression amongst those despairing at the state of historical consciousness in Freedom's Land. Gore Vidal remains something of its high priest, his writings a pertinent scolding about what went wrong in the creation of a New Rome in the Americas. From Pilgrim's Progress to the National Security State, the US became an empire with certain resemblances those of past: territorial acquisitiveness, a code of behaviour to observe and impose, a bore's insistence on its exceptional qualities.

The word "empire" never really caught on, sealed fast from the cognitive capacities of the US academic and policy establishment. The US was meant to be different, and celebrating the Fourth of July was not intended as a boastful affair of chained slaves on parade, rumbling armaments and purpled victory. Besides, any course Washington had to power was, as Geir Lundestad, former director of the Norwegian Nobel Institute, famously observed, invited, not imposed. (Such fine dissembling!)

This point is insisted upon by historians and international theorists alike who avoid the implications of US thuggery and predation: the US merely exerted a sort of hegemony by consensus and encouraged its citizens to spend, spend, spend; it was also, by definition, the only true hegemon (on this, see John Lewis Gaddis) in a world without genuine rivals, which was not the same as calling it imperial. Any urgings that the US empire come out of the closet were met with alarm by such figures as Robert Kagan, who insist that calling it such "would not only be factually wrong but strategically catastrophic." The US enriched rather than pillaged.

For much of the Obama administration, the imperium adopted what might be called a form of cross-dress or at least a form of fancy dress. No one could be under any illusion what the Chicago lawyer was really up to: the lingering power of Empire required a less than subtle reorientation, or pivot, eastwards to stay the rise of Cathay. It also saw an expansion of such interventions by stealth, with a spike in the use of drone warfare.

Then came President Donald J. Trump, who has nursed dreams of tanks rolling and jets roaring during an official celebration since 2017, when he witnessed the spectacular of a Bastille Day parade. If the French President Emmanuel Macron could bask in such ecstatic celebration of civilisation, why not the US? But even the empire has its logistical limits: a ballooning budget to run such a show, for instance and the prospect of damage to roads. (US infrastructure continues to ail.)

Trump's Fourth of July "Salute to America" was a chance to right the ledger. The US Navy's Blue Angels impressed; the crowds took their snaps. The New York Times penned its own observation, and not an approving one at that. "Flanked by Bradley armoured vehicles and M1A2 tanks in front of the statue of Abraham Lincoln, Mr Trump payed homage to the five branches of the military as a chorus sang each service hymn and he cued the arrival of fighter jets, helicopters and other military aircraft as they roared overhead."

Had Trump the militarist come out? Retired Marine Col. David Lapan of the Bipartisan Policy Center caught eye of the tanks but considered them less than impressive "props". Prior to the celebration, the issue of Trump unleashing tanks in display was seen with mixtures of orgiastic delight and an infantile terror.

The American Empire was gasping to come out of the closet, and dressed for the occasion, but Senator Jack Reed, Democrat of Rhode Island, himself a West Point graduate who served in the 82nd Airborne Division, would have none of it. "Tanks aren't props. They are weapons of war."

As with all beacon-on-the-hill messages, Trump spoke of an idea rather than an entity, a heart welled up. "We are one people, chasing one dream, and one magnificent destiny." Then came the dreaming – and so much dreaming it was. "We all share the same heroes, the same home, the same heart, and we are all made by the same Almighty God." The US was a narrative of, and in, progress. "Together, we are part of one of the greatest stories ever told – the story of America."

While such notes have a historical rhyming with the speech fare of other presidents, this one was different in backdrop and occasion. Previous stewards of the imperium have preferred to avoid the abject reality of the US as empire, preferring the quiet retreat, the humble commemoration. Doing so assists amnesia, reassuring the US citizenry that Washington remains against wars of conquest, toppling governments and preserving its power.

On this occasion, there was no return to the home state, no low key gathering. George W. Bush preferred West Virginia for four years running; visible, military filled bluster was put to one side. As Time Magazine noted, the bicentennial parade of 1976 saw hundreds of thousands in attendance, but President Gerald Ford preferred a golfing stint in Bethesda.

While Fox News tends to be an annexe of laboured unreality, its commentators were out to celebrate the admission about US military power, taking issue with the naysayers. Lou Dobbs of the Fox Business Network, in the true sentiment of the imperial sissy, was feeling particularly bullish. “No wonder these Snowflake General haven’t won a war since 1991: Military chiefs concerned about @realDonaldTrump’s July Fourth celebration”. Dobbs’ was on shaky ground in his enthusiastic reliance upon a source: a piece in the UK Daily Mail – hardly a paper of record – noting claims by an “insider” that “members of the military’s top brass have been hesitant about accepting Trump’s invitation to the event at the National Mall on Thursday”.

Admittedly, the military high-ups were in short supply, being on leave, travelling or simply not in attendance. The same could not be said for military families given invitations by Trump to attend the VIP section.

Trump was heartily warmed by the occasion, and duly said so. “A great crowd of tremendous Patriots this evening, all the way back to the Washington Monument!” This came with its usual theatrical alterations – or so it was alleged: no show is quite complete without a cosmetic touch-up to Trump’s images, though the accusers were suggesting a mauling of the original. Allegations of authenticity battled those of the inauthentic, and Trump merely garnered more publicity for the occasion. The one entity, undoctored and decked out in the whole war costume of celebration, finally let out into the open with frank vulgarity, was the US imperium

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