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Imperial America

By Justin Raimondo
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“May you live in interesting times” – that old (supposedly Chinese) curse seems to define the world today. “Interesting” is meant in the snarkish sense: it is a euphemism for unpleasant, or even intolerable, although in the present context I think a more appropriate term is *baffling*.

The political elites are baffled by the rise of Donald Trump: how is it that the celebrity equivalent of a circus clown could be number one in the GOP presidential race? Here, after all, is someone who wants to deport upward of some 11 million people – kick down their doors, put them on a train, and send them off to Mexico, in spite of the fact that many of them were born here. Asked by Hugh Hewitt if he’s an authoritarian, Trump didn’t deny it: instead he answered: “Everyone is weak. We need someone strong.”

At the considerable risk of sounding like an old fogy, I must confess to waking up some mornings and thinking: Where in the hell *am* I? No, it’s not the onrush of senility, although that day may not be far: it’s the indisputable reality that things that wouldn’t have been tolerated or even taken seriously, as little as fifteen or twenty years ago are now utterly commonplace, and even the norm. Trump is only a symptom of the normalization of the bizarre, and, for lack of a better word, the *debased*.

I was struck, the other day, by this piece in *The National Interest*, which discusses the odd changes we have experienced in terms of the foreign policy discourse. Too often, Richard Burt

and Dmitri Simes complain, the debate takes the form of a battle of the bumperstickers: what we see are competing slogans rather than rival policies being bruited about. Or, as they put it:

“[T]he debate over international affairs is now badly debased, particularly in Congress. The media, meanwhile, lacks the interest and the expertise (particularly in the digital space) to present vital issues to the American people. At the same time, despite a number of national-security setbacks – including in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya – voters appear ready to delegate authority to political elites with few questions or constraints, perhaps because ordinary Americans see no direct negative impacts on their daily lives.”

A disengaged citizenry, a political class imbued with hubris and the spirit of Caesarism: where have we seen this before? It is late imperial Rome, perhaps at the height of its power – or, perhaps, at the moment before its long descent. There is indeed a certain Romanesque quality to the triumphalist tone of the foreign policy discourse in this country, as Burt and Simes go on to relate:

“With victory in the Cold War and absent a rival superpower to limit and shape U.S. choices, America’s new foreign-policy establishment has adopted a simplistic, moralistic and triumphalist mindset: foreign policy by bumper sticker. This mindset abandons traditional foreign-policy analysis, which emphasizes establishing a hierarchy of priorities, making difficult decisions over tradeoffs and considering the unintended consequences of US actions. It also ignores the fact that America’s political system has consistently failed to sustain costly international interventions when vital national interests are not at stake. Prominent voices dismiss those raising such concerns as cynical realists, isolationists or, more recently, unpatriotic Putin apologists. Many tacitly accept this form of intimidation by interventionists who substitute chest-thumping for coherent and serious, historically grounded arguments.”

What Burt and Simes are really complaining about is the fact that America has made the transition from republic to empire. An empire, particularly one such as the United States, doesn’t need – or *thinks* it doesn’t need – to establish priorities because, after all, we’re all-powerful, aren’t we? Traditional foreign policy analysis – who the heck needs it? As some anonymous White House aide told Ron Suskind back in 2004:

“The aide said that guys like me were ‘in what we call the reality-based community,’ which he defined as people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.’ ... ‘That’s not the way the world really works anymore,’ he continued. ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.’”

In the age of the Caesars the function of reporters, analysts, and commentators is akin to that of ancient scribes: their job is not to note the facts and discern the truth but to reflect the self-created “reality” of the political class, and particularly its Great Leaders. Their job, in short, is to shout “Hail Caesar!” and record his (or her) great achievements for posterity.

“We’re an empire now” ... well, yes. That old scold Garet Garrett, a former *New York Times* editor turned prophet, warned us at the dawn of the cold war of what was not only coming but was already a reality in 1952:

“We have crossed the boundary that lies between Republic and Empire. If you ask when, the answer is that you cannot make a single stroke between day and night: the precise moment does not matter. There was no painted sign to say: ‘You are now entering Imperium.’ Yet it was a very old road and the voice of history was saying: ‘Whether you know it or not, the act of crossing may be irreversible.’ And now, not far ahead, is a sign that reads: ‘No U-turns.’”

No, there are no painted signs, but there are indications, portents, auguries of our fate: Trump, the cartoon Caesar, may be one of them. The Iraq war, and the ceaseless conflicts that followed in its wake, are less subtle symptoms of the imperial disease, the decadence that eats away at the heart of all republics similarly afflicted with the virus of imperialism. And the symptoms are not limited to the foreign policy and political realms, as the conservative theorist Claes Ryn has pointed out: there are cultural and psychological traits that infiltrate and eventually overthrow the old “republican virtues” of self-restraint, modesty, and civic duty. In our own case, these have been replaced, much to Ryn’s disgust, by recklessness and narcissism, and in this piece he relates his personal experience with the phenomenon.

Ryn describes lunchtime at a McDonald’s in “one of the most affluent and pretentious suburbs in America just outside of Washington, D.C.” It is, in short, the territory of America’s ruling elite, and the behavior of the children is described by Ryn with damning precision: they scream if they don’t get their French fries fast enough, they make noise as if the decibel level measures the degree of their enjoyment, and of course the parents are oblivious to how all this impacts on everyone else in the room. The children are merely reflections of their egotistical parents: in short, both children and parents are spoiled brats. Ryn goes on to write:

“Yes, this picture has everything to do with US foreign policy. This is the emerging American ruling class, which is made up increasingly of persons used to having the world cater to them. If others challenge their will, they throw a temper tantrum. Call this the imperialistic personality – if ‘spoilt brat’ sounds too crude.”

An arrogant, ingrown patrician class, increasingly out of touch, and contemptuous of those who live in “flyover country,” is, in turn, matched in its debasement by America’s plebeians.

Here we see the “trickle-down” theory of cultural decadence demonstrated in the rise of a new form of journalism: news reporting as a function of what Jacob Heilbrunn calls the “entertainment-industrial complex.” Citing an essay by Sam Tannehaus in *The American Prospect*, Heilbrunn avers that it’s the media and not Trump who are responsible for The Donald’s rise on account of “the temptation to turn every event into a mini-drama.” He notes Tannehaus’s point that this is “deeply injurious” to the journalistic profession which has even infiltrated the newsroom over at the *New York Times*, that temple of journalistic punctiliousness – but is this really something new?

Didn't the "reporting" of Judith Miller turn the run up to the Iraq war into a "mini-drama" – a story of brave "dissidents" like Ahmed Chalabi & Co. uncovering the alleged deception of the bloody tyrant Saddam Hussein? Going farther back in history, what about the Hearst papers reporting the sinking of the *Maine* as an act of Spanish treachery? And then there were those Belgian babies supposedly speared on German bayonets whose grisly and entirely fictitious fate inspired us to enter the Great War – a lie that was limned by the Great Lantos Hoax which provoked the first Gulf War. Is it really something novel that journalism is no longer about the truth but rather about selling a "narrative"?

Yes, American journalism in the age of empire has become a form of entertainment. In chronicling the decline of the Roman republic, the writer Juvenal disdained the abdication of civic duty by citizens who were content to suffer demagogues so long as they were the source of plentiful "bread and circuses." The latter surely fits Heilbrunn's description of the "entertainment-industrial complex."

Disengaged yet disgruntled, kept down and yet increasingly uppity, average Americans are both apathetic and angry when it comes to politics. They are ready for someone who simultaneously entertains and entrances them with the prospect of an American Caesar. As that grumpy old republican (small-"r") George Will puts it:

"Some supporters simply find Trump entertainingly naughty. Others, however, have remarkable cognitive dissonance. They properly execrate Obama's executive highhandedness that expresses progressivism's traditional disdain for the separation of powers that often makes government action difficult. But these same Trumpkins simultaneously despise GOP congressional leaders because they do not somehow jettison the separation of powers and work conservatism's unimpeded will from Capitol Hill.

"For conservatives, this is the dispiriting irony: The administrative state's intrusiveness ... may benefit the principal architect of this state, the Democratic Party. This is because the other party's talented critics of the administrative state are being drowned out by Trump's recent discovery that Americans understandably disgusted by government can be beguiled by a summons to Caesarism."

It is truly ironic that today's "conservative" Trump supporters long for a Caesar to undo the effects of ... Caesarism, i.e. Big Government. And yet there is more irony to be had in the rise of *Trumpismo*, which first caught the nation's attention on account of the immigration issue.

Every empire has open borders: it cannot be otherwise. Just as we claim the "right" to invade the world, so the world claims the corollary right to invade us. Where else will those Vietnamese allies who fled our defeat find sanctuary? What of the Iraqis made homeless by our wars of "liberation"?

Half a century after Sen. Ted Kennedy's immigration "reform" changed the demographics of this country forever – legislation that caused barely a ripple at the time – the Trumpkins have decided to make a last stand of it. Indeed, one can locate the date when the issue was decided much

farther back – all the way back to the war with Mexico that handed us Texas and the rest of the American Southwest, including California.

Trump wants to send the Mexicans back in railroad cars and buses – but *they were here first*, and no mere wall will keep them out. We conquered them and they are ours. We're a global empire – so why are we surprised to wake up one day to find the peoples of the world teeming in our streets?

Once we succumbed to the temptation of empire, all else followed: the altered demographics, the bread and the circuses, the demagogues and the Caesars. Garrett, the prophet of our doom, gave us plenty of warning: he told us there are “no U-turns” – and perhaps he was right. However, that's one prophecy that has yet to be proved true.