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<http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/04/13/the-end-of-the-american-empire/print/>

The End of the American Empire

By Amb. Chas W. Freeman
April 13, 2016

I'm here to talk about the end of the American empire. But before I do I want to note that one of our most charming characteristics as Americans is our amnesia. I mean, we are so good at forgetting what we've done and where we did it that we can hide our own Easter eggs.

I'm reminded of the geezer—someone about my age—who was sitting in his living room having a drink with his friend while his wife made dinner.

He said to his friend, "you know, we went to a really terrific restaurant last week. You'd like it. Great atmosphere. Delicious food. Wonderful service."

"What's the name of it?" his friend asked.

He scratched his head. "Ah, ah. Ah. What do you call those red flowers you give to women you love?"

His friend hesitated. "A rose?"

"Right. Um, hey, Rose! What was the name of that restaurant we went to last week?"

Americans like to forget we ever had an empire or to claim that, if we did, we never really wanted one. But the momentum of Manifest Destiny made us an imperial power. It carried us

well beyond the shores of the continent we seized from its original aboriginal and Mexican owners. The Monroe Doctrine proclaimed an American sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere. But the American empire was never limited to that sphere.

In 1854, the United States deployed U.S. Marines to China and Japan, where they imposed our first treaty ports. Somewhat like Guantánamo, these were places in foreign countries where our law, not theirs, prevailed, whether they liked it or not. Also in 1854, U.S. gunboats began to sail up and down the Yangtze River (the jugular vein of China), a practice that ended only in 1941, when Japan as well as the Chinese went after us.

In 1893, the United States engineered regime change in Hawaii. In 1898, we annexed the islands outright. In that same year, we helped Cuba win its independence from Spain, while confiscating the Spanish Empire's remaining holdings in Asia and the Americas: Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico. Beginning in 1897, the U.S. Navy contested Samoa with Germany. In 1899, we took Samoa's eastern islands for ourselves, establishing a naval base at Pago Pago.

From 1899 to 1902, Americans killed an estimated 200,000 or more Filipinos who tried to gain independence for their country from ours. In 1903, we forced Cuba to cede a base at Guantánamo to us and detached Panamá from Colombia. In later years, we occupied Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, parts of Mexico, and Haiti.

Blatant American empire-building of this sort ended with World War II, when it was replaced by a duel between us and those in our sphere of influence on one side and the Soviet Union and countries in its sphere on the other. But the antipathies our earlier empire-building created remain potent. They played a significant role in Cuba's decision to seek Soviet protection after its revolution in 1959. They inspired the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua. (Augusto César Sandino, whose name the movement took, was the charismatic leader of the resistance to the 1922 – 1934 U.S. occupation of Nicaragua.) In 1991, as soon as the Cold War ended, the Philippines evicted U.S. bases and forces on its territory.

Spheres of influence are a more subtle form of dominance than empires per se. They subordinate other states to a great power informally, without the necessity of treaties or agreements. In the Cold War, we ruled the roost in a sphere of influence called "the free world"—free only in the sense that it included every country outside the competing Soviet sphere of influence, whether democratic or aligned with the United States or not. With the end of the Cold War, we incorporated most of the former Soviet sphere into our own, pushing our self-proclaimed responsibility to manage everything within it right up to the borders of Russia and China. Russia's unwillingness to accept that everything beyond its territory is ours to regulate is the root cause of the crises in Georgia and Ukraine. China's unwillingness to acquiesce in perpetual U.S. dominance of its near seas is the origin of the current tensions in the South China Sea.

The notion of a sphere of influence that is global except for a few no-go zones in Russia and China is now so deeply ingrained in the American psyche that our politicians think it entirely natural to make a number of far-reaching assertions, like these:

(1) The world is desperate for Americans to lead it by making the rules, regulating global public goods, policing the global commons, and doing in “bad guys” everywhere by whatever means our president considers most expedient.

(2) America is losing influence by not putting more boots on the ground in more places.

(3) The United States is the indispensable arbiter of what the world’s international financial institutions should do and how they should do it.

(4) Even if they change, American values always represent universal norms, from which other cultures deviate at their peril. Thus, profanity, sacrilege, and blasphemy—all of which were not so long ago anathema to Americans—are now basic human rights to be insisted upon internationally. So are indulgence in homosexuality, climate change denial, the sale of GM foodstuffs, and the consumption of alcohol.

And so forth.

These American conceits are, of course, delusional. They are all the more unpersuasive to foreigners because everyone can see that America is now in a schizophrenic muddle—able to open fire at perceived enemies but delusional, distracted, and internally divided to the point of political paralysis. The ongoing “sequester” is a national decision not to make decisions about national priorities or how to pay for them. Congress has walked off the job, leaving decisions about war and peace to the president and turning economic policy over to the Fed, which has now run out of options. Almost half of our senators had time to write to America’s adversaries in Tehran to disavow the authority of the president to represent us internationally as the Constitution and the laws prescribe. But they won’t make time to consider treaties, nominees for public office, or budget proposals. Politicians who long asserted that “Washington is broken” appear to take pride in themselves for finally having broken it. The run-up to the 2016 presidential election is providing ongoing evidence that the United States is currently suffering from the political equivalent of a nervous breakdown.

Congress may be on strike against the rest of the government, but our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines remain hard at work. Since the turn of the century, they have been kept busy fighting a series of ill-conceived wars—all of which they have lost or are losing. The major achievement of multiple interventions in the Muslim world has been to demonstrate that the use of force is not the answer to very many problems but that there are few problems it cannot aggravate. Our repeated inability to win and end our wars has damaged our prestige with our allies and adversaries alike. Still, with the Congress engaged in a walkout from its legislative responsibilities and the public in revolt against the mess in Washington, American global leadership is not much in evidence except on the battlefield, where its results are not impressive.

Diplomacy-free foreign policy blows up enough things to liven up the TV news but it generates terrorist blowback and it’s expensive. There is a direct line of causation between European and American interventions in the Middle East and the bombings in Boston, Paris, and Brussels as well as the flood of refugees now inundating Europe. And so far this century, we’ve racked up

over \$6 trillion in outlays and future financial obligations in wars that fail to achieve much, if anything, other than breeding anti-American terrorists with global reach.

We borrowed the money to conduct these military activities abroad at the expense of investing in our homeland. What we have to show for staggering additions to our national debt is falling living standards for all but the “one percent,” a shrinking middle class, a rising fear of terrorism, rotting infrastructure, unattended forest fires, and eroding civil liberties. Yet, with the notable exception of Bernie Sanders, every major party candidate for president promises not just to continue—but to double down on—the policies that produced this mess.

Small wonder that both U.S. allies and adversaries now consider the United States the most erratic and unpredictable element in the current world disorder. You can’t retain the respect of either citizens or foreigners when you refuse to learn from experience. You can’t lead when no one, including you yourself, knows what you’re up to or why. You won’t have the respect of allies and they won’t follow you if, as in the case of Iraq, you insist that they join you in entering an obvious ambush on the basis of falsified intelligence. You can’t retain the loyalty of protégés and partners when you abandon them when they’re in trouble, as we did with Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak. You can’t continue to control the global monetary system when, as in the case of the IMF and World Bank, you renege on promises to reform and fund them.

And you can’t expect to accomplish much by launching wars and then asking your military commanders to figure out what their objectives should be, and what might constitute sufficient success to make peace. But that’s what we’ve been doing. Our generals and admirals have long been taught that they are to implement, not make policy. But what if the civilian leadership is clueless or deluded? What if there is no feasible policy objective attached to military campaigns?

We went into Afghanistan to take out the perpetrators of 9/11 and punish the Taliban regime that had sheltered them. We did that, but we’re still there. Why? Because we can be? To promote girls’ education? Against Islamic government? To protect the world’s heroin supply? No one can provide a clear answer.

We went into Iraq to ensure that weapons of mass destruction that did not exist did not fall into the hands of terrorists who did not exist until our arrival created them. We’re still there. Why? Is it to ensure the rule of the Sh`ia majority in Iraq? To secure Iraq for Iranian influence? To divide Iraq between Kurds and Sunni and Sh`ia Arabs? To protect China’s access to Iraqi oil? To combat the terrorists our presence creates? Or what? No one can provide a clear answer.

Amidst this inexcusable confusion, our Congress now routinely asks combatant commanders to make policy recommendations independent of those proposed by their civilian commander-in-chief or the secretary of state. Our generals not only provide such advice; they openly advocate actions in places like Ukraine and the South China Sea that undercut White House guidance while appeasing hawkish congressional opinion. We must add the erosion of civilian control of the military to the lengthening list of constitutional crises our imperial adventurism is brewing up. In a land of bewildered civilians, the military offer can-do attitudes and discipline that are comparatively appealing. But American militarism now has a well-attested record of failure to deliver anything but escalating violence and debt.

This brings me to the sources of civilian incompetence. As President Obama recently said, there's a Washington playbook that dictates military action as the first response to international challenges. This is the game we've been playing—and losing—all around the world. The cause of our misadventures is homemade, not foreign. And it is structural, not a consequence of the party in power or who's in the Oval Office. The evolution of the National Security Council Staff helps understand why.

The National Security Council is a cabinet body established in 1947 as the Cold War began to discuss and coordinate policy as directed by the president. It originally had no staff or policy role independent of the cabinet. The modern NSC staff began with President Kennedy. He wanted a few assistants to help him run a hands-on, activist foreign policy. So far, so good. But the staff he created has grown over decades to replace the cabinet as the center of gravity in Washington's decisions on foreign affairs. And, as it has evolved, its main task has become to make sure that foreign relations don't get the president in trouble in Washington.

Kennedy's initial NSC staff numbered six men, some of whom, like McGeorge Bundy and Walt Rostow, achieved infamy as the authors of the Vietnam War. Twenty years later, when Ronald Reagan took office, the NSC staff had grown to around 50. By the time Barack Obama became president in 2009, it numbered about 370, plus another 230 or so people off the books and on temporary duty, for a total of around 600. The bloat has not abated. If anyone knows how many men and women now man the NSC, he or she is not talking. The NSC staff, like the department of defense, has never been audited.

What was once a personal staff for the president has long since become an independent agency whose official and temporary employees duplicate the subject expertise of executive branch departments. This relieves the president of the need to draw on the insights, resources, and checks and balances of the government as a whole, while enabling the centralization of power in the White House. The NSC staff has achieved critical mass. It has become a bureaucracy whose officers look mainly to each other for affirmation, not to the civil, military, foreign, or intelligence services. Their focus is on protecting or enhancing the president's domestic political reputation by trimming foreign policy to the parameters of the Washington bubble. Results abroad are important mainly to the extent they serve this objective.

From the National Security Adviser on down, NSC staff members are not confirmed by the Senate. They are immune from congressional or public oversight on grounds of executive privilege. Recent cabinet secretaries—especially secretaries of defense—have consistently complained that NSC staffers no longer coordinate and monitor policy formulation and implementation but seek to direct policy and to carry out diplomatic and military policy functions on their own. This leaves the cabinet departments to clean up after them as well as cover for them in congressional testimony. Remember Oliver North, the Iran-Contra fiasco, and the key-shaped cake? That episode suggested that the Keystone Cops might have seized control of our foreign policy. That was a glimpse of a future that has now arrived.

Size and numbers matter. Among other things, they foster overspecialization. This creates what the Chinese call the *"jing di zhi wa"* phenomenon—the narrow vision of a frog at the bottom of a well. The frog looks up and sees a tiny circle of light that it imagines is the entire universe

outside its habitat. With so many people now on the NSC staff, there are now a hundred frogs in a hundred wells, each evaluating what is happening in the world by the little bit of reality it perceives. There is no effective process that synergizes a comprehensive appreciation of trends, events, and their causes from these fragmentary views.

This decision-making structure makes strategic reasoning next to impossible. It all but guarantees that the response to any stimulus will be narrowly tactical. It focuses the government on the buzz du jour in Washington, not what is important to the long-term wellbeing of the United States. And it makes its decisions mainly by reference to their impact at home, not abroad. Not incidentally, this system also removes foreign policy from the congressional oversight that the Constitution prescribes. As such, it adds to the rancor in relations between the executive and legislative branches of the federal establishment.

In many ways too, the NSC staff has evolved to resemble the machinery in a planetarium. It turns this way and that and, to those within its ambit, the heavens appear to turn with it. But this is an apparatus that projects illusions. Inside its event horizon, everything is comfortably predictable. Outside—who knows?—there may be a hurricane brewing. This is a system that creates and implements foreign policies suited to Washington narratives but detached from external realities, often to the point of delusion, as America's misadventures in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria illustrate. And the system never admits mistakes. To do so would be a political gaffe, even if it might be a learning experience.

We have come up with a hell of a way to run a government, let alone an informal empire manifested as a sphere of influence. In case you haven't noticed, it isn't effective at either task. At home, the American people feel that they have been reduced to the status of the chorus in a Greek tragedy. They can see the blind self-destructiveness of what the actors on the political stage are doing and can moan out loud about it. But they cannot stop the actors from proceeding toward their (and our) doom.

Abroad, our allies watch and are disheartened by what they see. Our client states and partners are dismayed. Our adversaries are simply dumbfounded. And our influence is ebbing away.

Whatever the cure for our foul mood and foreigners' doubts about us may be, it is not spending more money on our armed forces, piling up more debt with military Keynesianism, or pretending that the world yearns for us to make all its decisions for it or to be its policeman. But that's what almost all our politicians now urge as the cure to our sense that our nation has lost its groove. Doing what they propose will not reduce the threat of foreign attack or restore the domestic tranquility that terrorist blowback has disturbed. It will not rebuild our broken roads, rickety bridges, or underperforming educational system. It will not reindustrialize America or modernize our infrastructure. It will not enable us to cope with the geo-economic challenge of China, to compete effectively with Russian diplomacy, or to halt the metastasis of Islamist fanaticism. And it will not eliminate the losses of international credibility that foolish and poorly executed policies have incubated. The cause of those losses is not any weakness on the part of the U.S. military.

Americans will not regain our national composure and the respect of our allies, friends, and adversaries abroad until we recognize their interests and perspectives as well as our own, stop lecturing them about what they need to do, and concentrate on fixing the shambles we've made here at home. There's a long list of self-destructive behavior to correct and an equally long list of to-dos before us. Americans need both to focus on getting our act together domestically and to rediscover diplomacy as an alternative to the use of force.

Both the president and the Congress now honor the Constitution ever more in the breach. In our system, money talks to such an extent that the Supreme Court has equated it to speech. Our politicians are prepared to prostitute themselves to both domestic and foreign causes for cash.

Policy dialogue has become tendentiously representative of special interests, uncivil, uninformed, and inconclusive. American political campaigns are interminable, uncouth, and full of deliberately deceptive advertising. We are showing the world how great republics and empires die, not how they make sound decisions or defend spheres of influence.

Spheres of influence entail liabilities for those who manage them but not necessarily for the countries they incorporate. Take the Philippines, for example. Secure in the American sphere, it did not bother to acquire a navy or an air force before suddenly—in the mid-1970s—asserting ownership of islands long claimed by China in the nearby South China Sea and seizing and settling them. China has belatedly reacted. The Philippines still has no air and naval power to speak of. Now it wants the United States to return in sufficient force to defend its claims against those of China. Military confrontations are us! So we're dutifully doing so.

It's gratifying to be wanted. Other than that, what's in this for us? A possible American war with China? Even if such a war were wise, who would go to war with China with us on behalf of Filipino claims to worthless sandbars, rocks, and reefs? Surely it would be better to promote a diplomatic resolution of competing claims than to help ramp up a military confrontation.

The conflicts in the South China Sea are first and foremost about the control of territory—sovereignty over islets and rocks that generate rights over adjacent seas and seabeds. Our arguments with China are often described by U.S. officials as about “freedom of navigation.” If by this they mean assuring the unobstructed passage of commercial shipping through the area, the challenge is entirely conjectural. This sort of freedom of navigation has never been threatened or compromised there. It is not irrelevant that its most self-interested champion is China. A plurality of goods in the South China Sea are in transit to and from Chinese ports or transported in Chinese ships.

But what we mean by freedom of navigation is the right of the U.S. Navy to continue unilaterally to police the global commons off Asia, as it has been for seventy years, and the right of our navy to lurk at China's twelve-mile limit while preparing and practicing to cross it in the event of a US-China conflict over Taiwan or some other casus belli. Not surprisingly, the Chinese object to both propositions, as we would if the People's Liberation Army Navy were to attempt to do the same twelve miles off Block Island or a dozen miles from Pearl Harbor, Norfolk, or San Diego.

We persist, not just because China is the current enemy of choice of our military planners and armaments industry, but because we are determined to perpetuate our unilateral dominance of the world's seas. But such dominance does not reflect current power balances, let alone those of the future. Unilateral dominance is a possibility whose time is passing or may already have passed. What is needed now is a turn toward partnership.

This might include trying to build a framework for sharing the burdens of assuring freedom of navigation with China, Japan, the European Union and other major economic powers who fear its disruption. As the world's largest trading nation, about to overtake Greece and Japan as the owner of the world's largest shipping fleet, China has more at stake in the continuation of untrammelled international commerce than any other country. Why not leverage that interest to the advantage of a recrafted world and Asian-Pacific order that protects our interests at lower cost and lessened risk of conflict with a nuclear power?

We might try a little diplomacy elsewhere as well. In practice, we have aided and abetted those who prefer a Syria in endless, agonized turmoil to one allied with Iran. Our policy has consisted of funneling weapons to Syrian and foreign opponents of the Assad government, some of whom rival our worst enemies in their fanaticism and savagery. Five years on, with at least 350,000 dead and over ten million Syrians driven from their homes, the Assad government has not fallen. Perhaps it's time to admit that we didn't just ignore international law but seriously miscalculated political realities in our effort to overthrow the Syrian government.

Russia's deft empowerment of diplomacy through its recent, limited use of force in Syria has now opened an apparent path to peace. Perhaps it's time to set aside Cold War antipathies and explore that path. This appears to be what Secretary of State John Kerry is finally doing with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov. Peace in Syria is the key to putting down Da'esh (the so-called "caliphate" that straddles the vanished border between Syria and Iraq). Only peace can end the refugee flows that are destabilizing Europe as well as the Levant. It is good that we seem at last to be recognizing that bombing and strafing are pointless unless tied to feasible diplomatic objectives.

There is also some reason to hope that we may be moving toward greater realism and a more purposive approach to Ukraine. Ukraine needs political and economic reform more than it needs weapons and military training. Only if Ukraine is at peace with its internal differences can it be secured as a neutral bridge and buffer between Russia and the rest of Europe. Demonizing Mr. Putin will not achieve this. Doing so will require embarking on a search for common ground with Russia.

Unfortunately, as the moronic Islamophobia that has characterized the so-called debates between presidential candidates illustrates, there is at present no comparable trend toward realism in our approach to Muslim terrorism. We need to face up to the fact that U.S. interventions and other coercive measures have killed as many as two million Muslims in recent decades. One does not need an elaborate review of the history of European Christian and Jewish colonialism in the Middle East or American collusion with both to understand the sources of Arab rage or the zeal of some Muslims for revenge. Reciprocating Islamist murderousness with our own is no way to end terrorist violence.

Twenty-two percent of the world's people are Muslim. Allowing bombing campaigns and drone warfare to define our relationship with them is a recipe for endless terrorist backlash against us. In the Middle East, the United States is now locked in a death-filled dance with fanatic enemies, ungrateful client states, alienated allies, and resurgent adversaries. Terrorists are over here because we are over there. We'd be better off standing down from our efforts to sort out the problems of the Islamic world. Muslims are more likely to be able to cure their own ills than we are to do this for them.

The next administration needs to begin with the realization that unilateralism in the defense of a global sphere of influence does not and cannot work. The pursuit of partnership with the world beyond our borders has a much better chance of success. Americans need to bring our ambitions into balance with our interests and the resources we are prepared to devote to them.

We need a peaceful international environment to rebuild our country. To achieve this, we must erase our strategy deficit. To do that, the next administration must fix the broken policymaking apparatus in Washington. It must rediscover the merits of measures short of war, learn how to use military power sparingly to support rather than supplant diplomacy, and cultivate the habit of asking "and then what?" before beginning military campaigns.

When he was asked in 1787 what system he and our other founding fathers had given Americans, Benjamin Franklin famously replied, "a republic, if you can keep it." For two centuries, we kept it. Now, if we cannot repair the incivility, dysfunction, and corruption of our politics, we will lose our republic as well as our imperium. America's problems were made in the USA, by Americans, not by refugees, immigrants, or foreigners. They cry out for Americans to fix them.