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Hail Bush: A new Roman empire

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They came, they saw, they conquered. Now the United States dominates the world. With the rise of the New Age Roman empire, Jonathan Freedland asks how long before the fall?

The word of the hour is empire. As the United States marches to war, no other label quite seems to capture the scope of American power or the scale of its ambition. "Sole superpower" is accurate enough, but seems oddly modest. "Hyperpower" might appeal to the French; "hegemon" is favoured by academics. But empire is the big one, the gorilla of geopolitical designations - and suddenly the US is bearing its name.



Of course, enemies of the US have shaken their fist at its "imperialism" for decades: they are doing it again now, as Washington wages a global "war against terror" and braces itself for a campaign aimed at "regime change" in a foreign, sovereign state. What is more surprising, and much newer, is that the notion of a US empire has suddenly become a live debate inside the US. And not just among Europhile liberals either, but across the range - from left to right.

Today a liberal dissenter such as Gore Vidal, who called his most recent collection of essays on the US *The Last Empire*, finds an ally in the likes of conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer, who earlier this year told *The New York Times*, "People are coming out of the closet on the word 'empire'." He argued that Americans should admit the truth and face up to their responsibilities as the undisputed masters of the world. And it wasn't any old empire he had in mind. "The fact is, no country has been as dominant culturally, economically, technologically and militarily in the history of the world since the Roman empire."

But is the comparison apt? Are the Americans the new Romans?

The most obvious similarity is overwhelming military strength. Rome was the superpower of its day, boasting an army with the best training, biggest budgets and finest equipment the world had seen. No-one else came close. The US is just as dominant - its defence budget will soon be bigger than the military spending of the next nine countries combined, allowing it to deploy forces almost anywhere on the planet at lightning speed. Throw in its technological lead, and the US emerges as a power without rival.

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There is a big difference, of course. Apart from the odd Puerto Rico or Guam, the US does not have formal colonies, the way the Romans did. There are no American consuls or viceroys directly ruling faraway lands.

But that difference between ancient Rome and modern Washington may be less significant than it looks. After all, America has done plenty of conquering and colonising. For some historians, the founding of America and its 19th-century push westward were no less an exercise in empire building than Rome's drive to take charge of the Mediterranean. While Julius Caesar took on the Gauls - bragging that he had slaughtered a million of them - American pioneers battled the Cherokee, the Iroquois and the Sioux.

"From the time the first settlers arrived in Virginia from England and started moving westward, this was an imperial nation, a conquering nation," says Paul Kennedy, author of *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.

More to the point, the US has military bases, or base rights, in some 40 countries - giving it the same global muscle it would enjoy if it ruled those countries directly. According to Chalmers Johnson, author of *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, these US military bases are today's version of the imperial colonies of old. Washington may refer to them as "forward deployment", says Johnson, but colonies are what they are. On this definition, there is almost no place outside America's reach.

So the US may be more Roman than we realise, with garrisons in every corner of the globe. But there the similarities only begin. For the US approach to empire looks quintessentially Roman. It's as if the Romans bequeathed a blueprint for how imperial business should be done - and today's Americans follow it religiously.

Lesson one in the Roman handbook for imperial success would be a realisation that it is not enough to have great military strength: the rest of the world must know that strength - and fear it. The Romans used the propaganda technique of their time - gladiatorial games in the Colosseum - to show the world how hard they were. Today 24-hour news coverage of US military operations, including video footage of smart bombs scoring direct hits, or Hollywood shoot-'em-ups at the multiplex serve the same function. Both tell the world: this empire is too tough to beat.

The US has learned a second lesson from Rome, realising the centrality of technology. For the Romans, it was those famously straight roads, enabling the empire to move troops or supplies at awesome speeds - rates that would not be surpassed for well over a thousand years. It was a perfect example of how one imperial strength tends to feed another: an innovation in engineering, originally designed for military use, went on to boost Rome commercially.

Today those highways find their counterpart in the information superhighway: the Internet also began as a military tool, devised by the US Defence Department, and now stands at the heart of American commerce. In the process, it is making English the Latin of its day - a language spoken across the globe. The US is proving what the Romans already knew: that once an empire is a world leader in one sphere, it soon dominates in every other.

But it is not just specific tips that the US seems to have picked up from its ancient forebears. Rather, it is the fundamental approach to empire that echoes so loudly. Rome understood that, if it was to last, a world power needed to practise both hard imperialism, the business of winning wars and invading lands, and soft imperialism, the cultural and political tricks that worked not to win power but to keep it.

So Rome's greatest conquests came not at the end of a spear, but through

its power to seduce conquered peoples. As Tacitus observed in Britain, the natives seemed to like togas, baths and central heating - never realising that these were the symbols of their "enslavement".

Today the US offers the people of the world a similarly coherent cultural package, a cluster of goodies that remain reassuringly uniform. It's not togas or gladiatorial games today, but Starbucks, Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Disney, all paid for in the contemporary equivalent of Roman coinage, the global hard currency of the 21st century: the dollar.

When the process works, you don't even have to resort to direct force; it is possible to rule by remote control, using friendly client states. This is a favourite technique for the contemporary US - no need for colonies when you have the Shah in Iran or Pinochet in Chile to do the job for you - but the Romans got there first. They ruled by proxy whenever they could. The English know all about it.

One of the most loyal of client kings, Togidubnus, ruled in the southern England of the first century AD.

Togidubnus did not let his masters down. When Boadicea led her uprising against the Roman occupation in AD60, she made great advances in Colchester, St Albans and London - but not Sussex. Historians now think that was because Togidubnus kept the native Britons under him in line. Just as Hosni Mubarak and Pervez Musharraf have kept the lid on anti-American feeling in Egypt and Pakistan, Togidubnus did the job for Rome nearly two millennia ago.

Not that it always worked. Rebellions against the empire were a permanent fixture, with barbarians constantly pressing at the borders. Some accounts suggest that the rebels were not always fundamentally anti-Roman; they merely wanted to share in the privileges and affluence of Roman life. If that has a familiar ring, consider this: several of the enemies who rose up against Rome are thought to have been men previously nurtured by the empire to serve as pliant allies. Need one mention former US protegee Saddam Hussein or one-time CIA trainee Osama bin Laden?

Rome even had its own 9/11 moment. In the 80s BC, Hellenistic king Mithridates called on his followers to kill all Roman citizens in their midst, naming a specific day for the slaughter.

They heeded the call and killed 80,000 Romans in local communities across Greece. "The Romans were incredibly shocked by this," says the ancient historian Jeremy Paterson, of Newcastle University, England. "It's a little bit like the statements in so many of the American newspapers since September 11: 'Why are we hated so much?'"

Internally, too, today's US would strike many Romans as familiar terrain. America's mythologising of its past - its casting of founding fathers Washington and Jefferson as heroic titans, its folk-tale rendering of the Boston Tea Party and the war of independence - is very Roman.

That empire, too, felt the need to create a mythic past, starred with heroes. For them it was Aeneas and the founding of Rome, but the urge was the same: to show that the great nation was no accident, but the fruit of manifest destiny.

There are some large differences between the two empires, of course - starting with self-image. Romans revelled in their status as masters of the known world, but few Americans would be as ready to brag of their own imperialism. Most would deny it. But that may come down to the US's founding myth. For America was established as a rebellion against empire, in the name of freedom and self-government. Raised to see themselves as a

rebel nation and plucky underdog, they cannot quite accept their current role as master.

One last factor scares Americans from making a parallel between themselves and Rome: that empire declined and fell. The historians say this happens to all empires; they are dynamic entities that follow a common path, from beginning to middle to end.

"What America will need to consider in the next 10 or 15 years," says the Cambridge classicist Christopher Kelly, "is what is the optimum size for a non-territorial empire, how interventionist will it be outside its borders, what degree of control will it wish to exercise, how directly, how much through local elites? These were all questions which pressed upon the Roman empire."

Anti-Americans like to believe that an operation in Iraq might be proof that the US is succumbing to the temptation that ate away at Rome: overstretch. But it's just as possible that the US is merely moving into what was the second phase of Rome's imperial history, when it grew frustrated with indirect rule through allies and decided to do the job itself. Which is it?

Is the US at the end of its imperial journey, or on the brink of its most ambitious voyage? Only the historians of the future can tell us that.

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