

## The American 'Empire'

Daily events remind us that democracy is fragile. The pandemic has shown that the US is vulnerable to not only a virus, but to disinformation, social division, and violent extremists. When Benjamin Franklin asserted in *Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One* that, “[A] great Empire, like a great Cake, is most easily diminished at the edges”, he was predicting the ultimate fall of the British Empire. While he was decrying the degradation of British influence in the colonies, he described the costs of maintaining imperial control in the post-WWII global environment. The expansion of British colonial interests from the end of the 17th Century created a territory upon which “the sun never set” (North). Their rule in India especially has been noted as, “the most sordid and criminal exploitation of one nation by another in all of recorded history” (Durant). Eventually, the costs outstripped the capacity of a world-class military, particularly against the forces of democratic rebellion on its fringes. These cries for freedom tested the resolve of British citizens when cast with a modern moral imperative. The Indian Independence movement showed British citizens the costs of colonialism. Winston Churchill was reluctant to give up the Indian subcontinent, but eventually even he realized that the Empire’s glory days had passed. Britain could no longer claim moral superiority while suppressing its colonies.

The first test of this post-Enlightenment quest for British self-governance was the American Revolution. While the colonists looked to Britain as a social and moral arbiter, taxation without representation and the limitation of the colonists’ economic freedom incited opposition. Even so, as Franklin and Whatley stated in *Principles of Trade* , "No nation was ever

ruined by trade, even seemingly the most disadvantageous.” As long as the colonies were profitable, the military and moral costs could be withstood. Nevertheless, tight control over the American colonies did not mirror the increasingly democratic Parliament in London and increasing British opposition to slavery added urgency to the colonists’ need for self-governance (Kendi).

After the Revolutionary War, the United States were able to form a new nation on the principles of the American Experiment. The violence of the Revolution was sublimated to the greater ideals of the Founding Fathers. There was real risk on Britain’s departure that the colonies would fall into disarray. But, as stated in the Federalist Papers, the bounds of the Constitution provided structure to what Jefferson lauded in the Declaration of Independence: “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” These principles have allowed for the creation of a powerful nation state which remains the world’s premier democracy post-WWII. Unfortunately, the underpinnings of this grand ideal remained the exploitation of peoples of color, including colonial expansion, slaveholding, and the destruction of indigenous populations.

The US has risen to be the world’s superpower. The American Century has shown how globalism and the rise of technology were the best means of international influence. Now, empires are not defined by physical borders, but by global reach. The Western outlook has shifted from white supremacy to celebrating diversity. These evolving attitudes towards race, gender, sexuality, science, and religion have advanced through modern technology. Social justice has become a mainstream idea rather than a fringe opinion. However, as with past empires, there are holdouts whose more reactive beliefs contrast with the common view. They feel isolated physically and morally from evolving ideas and changing landscapes. Social media provides an avenue for misinformation and radicalization where these individuals can become desensitized to

violence, racism and misogyny (von Behr, 2013). As demonstrated by the attacks on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, conspiracy theories developed on social media can devolve into violence.

Thus, the American ‘Empire’ must worry about being diminished on the fringes. To harken back to the words of the Founding Fathers, George Washington stated in his farewell address, “The unity of government which constitutes you one people is...a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence...[and] of that very liberty which you so highly prize.” In order to maintain that unity of government, we must learn to understand and educate on multiple viewpoints, and bring those on the fringes out of the shadows. While Benjamin Franklin was speaking about the treatment of the Colonies by the British Empire, he knew that peaceful government and the resulting prosperity are based on inclusion. Having all voices heard and appreciated will prevent the fabric of society from fraying and the ‘cake’ of empire from being diminished.

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