

# Donald Trump's presidency may lead to a reassessment of the "American Empire"

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*Donald Trump's inauguration has sparked a reassessment of America's role in the world through the president's statements about its interaction with international institutions, its willingness to intervene in foreign conflicts, and exercise forms of 'soft power'. Debates about the nature of American power, and whether it constitutes a modern 'empire', have been on-going for decades.*

**Andrew Mumford** reframes the debate by identifying four schools of thought that have emerged: the Advocates, the Cautious Optimists, the Critics, and the Deniers. He assesses where the debate stands at the start of a new presidency.



In what was seen as one of the starkest [inaugural addresses](#) ever delivered by a new president, Donald Trump's focus was predominantly a domestic one, promising to end what he labelled the 'American carnage' of job losses, welfare dependency, and gang violence. Yet there were a few intimations as to how he intended to conduct America's foreign policy for the duration of his four year term. He stated that: 'We do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather to let it shine as an example for everyone to follow.' This implied a distinct turn in American engagement with the world, hinting at a retreat from the interventionist stance of administrations for the past few decades. The wider question that Trump's foreign policy platform creates is what this does to depictions of American power at home and abroad.

Expansionism across the frontier in pursuit of a 'manifest destiny' has been a marked feature of the American Republic since independence in the late eighteenth century. As the nation grew from its original thirteen colonies, in the nineteenth century the push westward triggered wars with native Indians, Spaniards and Mexicans as Thomas Jefferson's self-proclaimed '[empire of liberty](#)' annexed land to fulfil a nascent set of ideological, economic and strategic national interests. Yet the territorial expansion of the nation halted with the connection of two oceans. The United States dominated the continent as the nation consolidated its expanse. Through participation in two world wars and the creation of a dominant economy via a huge workforce and mass resources, American isolationism in world affairs gradually eroded. The bigger question, though, remains whether this made America an empire in some form, and whether the exercise of its power abroad constitute acts of American imperialism.

## Labelling American Power

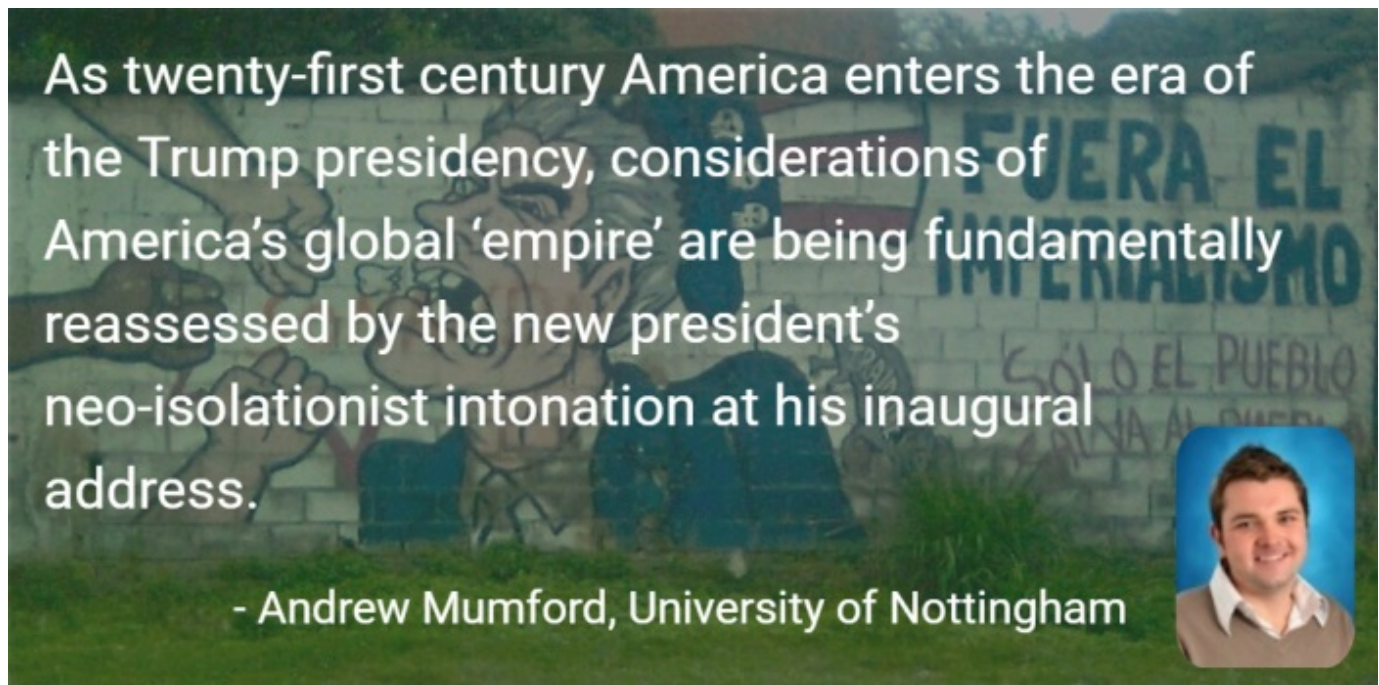
How best to label the role and character of American power in the world? Raymond Aron was in no doubt that America constituted an '[Imperial Republic](#)' in its actions during the early Cold War because of the way he perceived the US expanded the concept of containment to become an imperially-imposed doctrine for a new international order. Numerous sobriquets have been used by other scholars, each of which, [Michael Cox](#) has argued, seems inadequate: 'superpower' is a little blatant; 'hegemon' too vague; 'unipolar' too restrictive. 'Empire', however, is a tag imbued with both ideological and military functions that allows for the normative character and the resource capabilities of the country to be taken into consideration.

Michael Doyle's seminal [definition of empire](#) constructs it as 'a system of interaction between two political entities, one of which, the dominant metropole, exerts political control over the internal and external policy – the effective sovereignty – of the other, the subordinate periphery.' Notions of America as an 'empire' have more often than not been used alongside some adjective to characterise a particular aspect of American power projection. We therefore have America as an 'Incoherent Empire' (Michael Mann), as an 'Empire in Denial' (Andrew Bachevich) and as 'Empire Lite' (Michael Ignatieff). The decades' long debate about the existence of an American Empire has broadly

created four schools of thought that I label the Advocates (those who embrace the label and benefits of modern imperialism); the Cautious Optimists (those who believe that if used properly modern American imperialism can be a liberal force for good); the Critics (those who decry American imperial pretension); and the Deniers (those who argue that no such thing as an American Empire exists).

## The Advocates

Leading the Advocates school of thought are modern neo-conservatives like [Niall Ferguson](#) and [Max Boot](#). Their forceful advocacy of a pro-imperial interpretation of modern American history leads Advocates to not see empire as a dirty word. Ferguson has gone as far as to claim that Americans should shrug off any timidity around using the label 'empire' to describe their country's global influence because American power projection is not only expansionist and self-righteous, it is an unquestionable force for good. Like the self-styled liberal empire built by Britain in the nineteenth century the rhetoric and actions that have come to define the modern American imperium has led to a perceptible historical irony whereby, as Ferguson has mischievously put it, the anti-colonial foundations of the United States are so compromised by similarities to its British imperial predecessor that the rebellious child has now grown up to resemble the once despised parent. One of the main catalysts to such a transformation has arguably been America's engagement in a series of counter-insurgency wars to fend off sub-state threats to gradual expansionism of the frontier in North America and abroad as a 'sphere of influence' spread. Max Boot made this connection when writing a history of American 'small wars' in the early twentieth century, observing that he was simultaneously 'chronicling the political course of American empire.' American success in counter-insurgency wars before the Second World War benignly created, to Boot's mind at least, a 'family of democratic capitalist nations that eagerly seek shelter under Uncle Sam's umbrella'. The American Empire, for the Advocates, is benevolent and held together consensually.



## The Cautious Optimists

This assumption is challenged to some extent by the Cautious Optimists, like [Michael Ignatieff](#). This position shifts the basic ideological interpretation of American Empire from a neo-conservative one to a liberal one. From such a standpoint Ignatieff has argued that although not seeking to build an empire in a traditional sense the United States has built a version of 'empire lite' whose touchstones are the advocacy of human rights, the spreading of democracy, and free markets – all of which is aggressively protected by unrivalled military prowess. Liberal notions of American

Empire being used as a force for good in international politics by occasionally using force to uphold fundamental rights informs Geir Lundestad's description of America establishing an ['empire by invitation'](#) in the early Cold War. This was a consensual process where the US supported allies in rebuilding their economies after the Second World War and provided a military bulwark against Soviet encroachment. Invitations from European nations to provide economic, political and military assistance, Lundestad argues, were extended by other countries on other continents in the subsequent decades. These governments saw American protection as an important mechanism to uphold democratic rights that would have been curtailed by communist rivals. For the Cautious Optimists, this makes the foundation of the American Empire one of accident not design in reluctant fulfilment of its own liberal, perhaps utopian, world view.

## The Critics

But the use of the very word 'empire' really only received a positive tone in recent decades. Its origins in the American debate was as a label of denigration used by the third identifiable school of thought, the Critics, in regard to American foreign policy actions in the Cold War. Critics perceive American foreign policy since 1945 as being so imbued with perceptions of benevolence and righteousness (something the Cautious Optimists applaud) that William Appleman Williams coined the phrase ['the imperialism of idealism'](#) to describe the ideological zeal that accompanied American expansionism and interventions abroad. More contemporary Critics, like Chalmers Johnson perceive that the nature of American imperialism lies in its mass network of foreign military bases in countries all over the world. This provides the US, Johnson argues, with the capacity to ['garrison the globe'](#) via the permanent deployment of over half a million service personnel to over 700 military bases on every continent bar Antarctica. In short, America's empire is militaristic and predicated upon the sheer physical presence of its armed forces. This is a theme recurrent in Michael Mann's characterisation of America as an ['incoherent empire'](#) that practices what he critically labels 'new imperialism' – a blend of coercive and occupationist tendencies with more informal modes of hegemonic influence in political and economic realms. The Critics coalesce on the left of the political spectrum and decry the course and conduct of American foreign relations most audibly when against the backdrop of controversial wars, such as in Vietnam and Iraq.

## The Deniers

The final discernible set of scholars to have staked a claim in the American Empire debate are the Deniers. They argue, as [Desmond King and David Lake](#) have done, that although the US may act in an imperial fashion this is not the same as being an empire. The Deniers counter the notion that American actions even fit within the rubric of a debate about imperialism. [Benjamin Barber](#) has argued that far from being an interventionist or expansionist imperial power, the majority of American foreign policy actions abroad have been undertaken to ensure future reductions in expeditionary warfare. As such, any *Pax Americana* is based 'not to secure the world for US purposes, but only to secure the USA from the world.' The implications of the post-9/11 'security dilemma' largely nullified such a distinction as America's search for absolute security at home necessitated controlling the internal and external policies of other states, through both hard and soft power mechanisms.

## America's imperial problem

Although not an empire builder in the traditional sense in which nearly every vestige of the occupied territory is controlled by the metropole, America has got itself, in Andrew Bacevich's words, ['an imperial problem'](#) which successive presidents have refused to acknowledge. This has been a particularly acute issue during American military operations when forcible regime change has been followed by extensive occupations involving punitive measures against elements of the population. Whether American leaders decide to use the label 'empire' or not is largely irrelevant; if world opinion decides that it looks, sounds and acts like an empire, the label will stick. America's decision after 1945 to rigorously defend and help expand the boundaries of global democracy left it in a self-created position of being the guardian of a global liberal order. As Britain demonstrated in the nineteenth

century, some nations go in search of an empire. What America has shown in the twentieth century is that some nations have empires thrust upon them. As twenty-first century America enters the era of the Trump presidency, considerations of America's global 'empire' are being fundamentally reassessed by the new president's neo-isolationist intonation at his inaugural address. Whether by accident or design, all empires eventually shrink.

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