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Power, Profit and Prestige: A History of American Imperial Expansion (Pluto Press, 2010)

LSE Ideas

By Philip S Golub

On 5th October 2010, Philip S Golub spoke at IDEAS to launch his new book, 'Power, Profit and Prestige: A History of American Expansionism'. Here he sets out the core rationale behind his argument for the emergence of an 'imperial cosmology' among American leaders.

In the 1990s, after decades of hand wringing over American “decline”, influential parts of the US power elite began dreaming of a new “American Century” and an expanded “American peace”. This was a broad ideational trend, encompassing nationalist and internationalist segments of the foreign policy and security establishment who, notwithstanding varying prescriptions regarding world order, interpreted the end of the Cold War as an historic opportunity to reassert and expand US power and authority. By the end of the decade the main strands of elite opinion, casually comparing the US to Rome at its height, were celebrating the US’ “unparalleled ascendancy around the globe... unrivalled by even the greatest empires of the past” (Henry Kissinger).

Imperial imaginings were particularly pronounced in the national security complex and the neo-conservative right, which harboured extravagant visions of “global empire” and lasting strategic monopoly. At the turn of the century, imperial outlooks pervaded a new administration that sought, in Condoleezza Rice’s words, to “capitalize on [the opportunities offered] by the shifting of the tectonic plates in international politics” and establish a new world order under exclusive US authority. Striving for unbounded autonomy, the Bush administration launched a methodical assault on the UN system, abandoned international law, and initiated a new phase of military mobilization and imperial expansion in Central Asia and the Gulf. The unintended but predictable result of this effort to curb pluralism was a severe erosion of US political legitimacy and an accentuation of the systemic movement towards polycentrism that it was intended to inhibit.

Power, Profit and Prestige aims to make sense of this turbulent phase of world politics and assess its consequences by situating contemporary change in historic and comparative perspective. Rejecting lazy explanations that dismiss US monopoly-seeking behaviour as an aberration or a “mistake”, and contesting structural realist assumptions that it was simply induced by the power maximising mechanics of international anarchy, the book argues in favour of a historical sociological approach that studies state formation and collective identity construction in the *longue durée*.

Excavating an imperial past that never passed, it weaves together the material and ideational dimensions of the long US expansionary experience and shows how the post-Cold War imperial urge, the conditions of possibility of which were created by the new power asymmetry, can be traced back to a *causa remota*: a pervasive culture of expansion and force, rooted in deep currents of late-modern transatlantic imperial history. The book thus highlights the remarkable kinship between the worldviews of late nineteenth century expansionists and those of their successors who presided over the post-1945 American *Pax*. It argues that this continuity reflects an underlying *imperial cosmology*, which US elites shared with their European counterparts, that emerged in the late modern period about the ordering of the world, cultural hierarchy, and the destiny of the West to be at the centre and the apex.

Like late nineteenth century expansionists who imagined American world-empire as destiny, since the 1940s US leaders have conceived of *Pax Americana* as the natural and necessary outcome of a historical process of imperial selection and succession. Notwithstanding changing international and domestic circumstances, foundational assumptions regarding the US’ world historical role and international hierarchy have varied only slightly from one period and one administration to another. With very few exceptions, leaders have perceived the US as the necessary centre of the cosmos, with other nations and societies in orbit around it.

New leaders, however liberal and democratic in outlook are constrained by the US’ logic of world power and its structures of reproduction. Even if he so wished, Barack Obama cannot erase the past or simply decide to liquidate the imperial system that

he has inherited and will briefly preside over. Like many of his predecessors, he is caught in the same bind as reformist British Liberal and Labour leaders in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries who found, once in power, in Elisabeth Monroe's words, that "a worldwide empire...cannot change direction overnight". Looking to the future, *Power, Profit and Prestige* argues that the US will nonetheless have to come to terms with the fact that globalisation has shifted the world's tectonic plates in unforeseen ways and that the western era of dominance is now slowly coming to an end.

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