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Empire – what Empire?

Graham MacPhee

To understand why Americans believe their nation to be innocent of imperialism we must go back to the Founding Fathers of the Republic, says Graham MacPhee.

Some of the most powerful images to have appeared in the run-up to November's American presidential election have been the video loops of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright – erstwhile pastor to presidential hopeful Senator Barack Obama – played time and time again on US television. In a medley of outtakes from his sermons, Wright is heard to proclaim 'God damn America!', a startling inversion of the Irving Berlin song 'God BlessAmerica' that serves as the unofficial American national anthem. This sound bite, regarded by many Americans as proof of Wright's anti-Americanism, has by association proved hugely damaging to Senator Obama's image as the post-racial, post-ideological unity candidate and heir apparent to John F. Kennedy. But whatever the immediate impact of these images on the outcome of the 2008 presidential election, they reveal much about popular perceptions ofUS history and its implications for the self-understanding of the USA as an international political actor today.

Although public discussion has centered on Wright's alleged anti-Americanism, the closing remarks of the sermon from which the sound bite is taken do not in fact focus primarily on the USA, but engage more broadly with the conflict between conscience and loyalty experienced by citizens of imperial states. Echoing Matthew 22:21 ('Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's'), in which Jesus rejects the subordination of individual conscience to loyalty to the earthly power of Rome, Wright insists that Christian teaching is inimical to the historical project of imperialism, citing as his examples the crimes committed not only by the Roman Empire, but also by the empires of Britain, Russia, Japan, Germany – and the United States. Had he concluded by expressing Christian condemnation of Russian, Japanese, German or indeed British imperialism, his sermon would most likely never have gained national attention. However, while Wright's condemnation of US imperialism has garnered unprecedented media interest, significantly it has not been presented as that: Wright has widely been vilified not for attacking US imperialism, but for attacking the AmericanRepublic, which is overwhelmingly conceived as uniquely innocent of imperialism.

Within the context of the history referenced in his sermon, the furore provoked by Wright's comments may seem surprising. After all, many of the crimes listed by Wright – the genocide and ethnic cleansing of Native Americans, the enslavement of Africans and the subsequent formal and informal systems of segregation, discrimination and marginalization deployed against their descendants, and the internment of American citizens of Japanese descent in the Second World War – are widely recognized in contemporary American public discourse. Equally, since the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, there has been a noticeable upsurge of public discussion about the 'imperial role' the USA may or may not be about to assume, a discussion that involves conservative and right-wing commentators as much as liberals or leftists. However, what distinguishes the public acceptance of America's historical crimes or the punditry about its putative role as a new empire from Wright's comments is that in each case the USA as a political ideal is understood in some fundamental sense not to be the product of imperialism: there may have been slavery and genocide, and it may be that the USA has begun to assume a quasi-imperial role, but such historical quandaries do not imperil the authenticity of the American Republic as the uniquely unadulterated expression of political liberty and democracy in the modern world. In this view, it is the fundamentally free and democratic character of the AmericanRepublic that must be purified of the historical stain of slavery and genocide, or saved from the impending prospect of imperialism to come.

Despite the unprecedented constitutional encroachments of the current administration, the USA continues to enjoy forms of constitutional democracy and legality that might be regarded with envy not only by those living under authoritarian regimes but also by countries such as Britain that lack some of the safeguards for free speech and privacy enshrined in the US Constitution. However, the existence of formal structures of legality and constitutionality – which is what is meant by the ideal of 'the Republic' – does not exclude an imperial provenance; indeed, the existence of republican or democratic forms within the domestic space has historically proved to be an important factor in obscuring the injustices incumbent on the exercise of imperial power beyond it. The *polis* of fifth-century BC Athens, usually taken as the progenitor of modern democracy, converted the Delian League from an alliance of city-states into an empire, while the Roman Republic embarked on a series of expansionist wars that led to the domination of the Italian peninsula, Iberia, Macedonia, Asia Minor, North Africa and Gaul; indeed, even under the Roman *imperium*, Rome continued to describe itself as the *Res Publica* or Republic.

More recently, and much closer in terms of historical parallels, British colonial activity from the late seventeenth century onwards was overseen by a domestic polity that conceived of itself as uniquely democratic. As British historian Bernard Porter observes, for three-quarters of the nineteenth century most Victorians would not have conceived themselves as 'imperialists' at all, but rather saw what we regard as the extension of British rule in terms of the widening of 'free trade', the spread of 'civilization' and the proselytizing of Christianity. On historical evidence, there is no more reason to regard democratic or republican forms of government as inherently incompatible with imperialism than there is to assume that democratic states are less prone to fighting wars than monarchies, tyrannies or authoritarian states.

Across the twentieth century, however, the dominant perception in the USA has been that the fundamentally democratic character of the American Republic exempts it from charges of imperialism. There would certainly seem to be some evidence for America's anti-imperialist credentials in this period, especially during and immediately after the Second World War, when the USA opposed the resumption of French and British colonial authority in the Middle East and South Asia, while supporting the new architecture of international law associated with the United Nations, which seemed to promise a fundamentally different approach to international relations and human rights. At the same time, however, the USA not only funded the violent restoration of French colonial rule in Southeast Asia, a UN-sanctioned war in the Korean peninsula, and the massive extension of its own dominance in the Western hemisphere, Africa and Asia, it also put in place new international structures of global economic hegemony in the form of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and what would later become the World Trade Organization. Arguably, the perception of America's imperial innocence has as much to do with the basic assumption of the incompatibility of imperialism and republican democracy as it has to do with empirical facts on the ground – an assumption that would prove fundamental within the ideological language of the Cold War.

Central to American self-perception in the post-war period is the conviction that the democratic character of the American Republic is inherently incompatible with imperialism. The fulcrum of this assumption rests on the understanding of the break with Britain that founded the United States – in what is referred to in Britain as the American War of Independence (1775–83) but is called in the US the American Revolution or the Revolutionary War, casting it as a 'revolution' along the lines of the nearly contemporaneous revolutions in France and Haiti. Within the narrative of the American Revolution, the conflict marks the moment when the thirteen British colonies in North America not only threw off the yoke of an invidious external despot – George III – and established new forms of popular government, but also the moment when the thirteen colonies reconstituted themselves in a fundamental sense as 'Americans', or owners of the continent by inherent right, rather than as settler colonists. Exactly how revolutionary such a political upheaval was is open to debate, especially for those excluded from the radical extension of the franchise ushered in by the Constitution of 1787 – namely slaves, Native Americans and women – as well as for those whose economic position, despite this extension, continued to place them outside the elite circles of the merchant and planter classes. But without detracting from the real democratic advances made by the US Constitution, it is important not to lose sight of the extraordinary alchemy by which British American settler colonists re-imagined their identity: no longer as colonists on the edge of a continental 'wilderness', but as the owners of the entire North American continent by right of their being *Americans in a newsense*, and not as a matter of fortuitous acquisition or conquest.

Claims to the ownership of the continent 'from sea to sea' had accompanied the earliest English colonial settlement in North America, at Jamestown in Virginia. However, as colonial claims they had always depended on the prerogative of the English, and subsequently the British, monarch and were therefore dependent on an external authority and on the balance of power between competing European powers, namely Britain, France and Spain. These external constraints came into play in the wake of the French and Indian War (1754–63), in which British colonial and regular troops fought the French and their Native American allies for control of eastern Canada and the territory that bordered Pennsylvania,Maryland and Virginia to the west. As part of the peace settlement, the British Crown agreed to bar British American settler colonists from Native American lands west of the Appalachians. None was more aggrieved than Colonel George Washington, a colonial soldier and member of the slave-owning Virginia planter class who laid claim to vast tracts of the 'Ohio Country', the unending expanse of land west of the Blue Ridge Mountains that had nominally always been 'owned' by the Virginia colony but in fact remained Native American territory. Washington, like the archetypal Victorian entrepreneur and imperialist Cecil Rhodes a century later, understood that the untapped resources of the interior held the key to economic power that would circumvent the traditional metropolitan circuits of authority, patronage and political control, and he moved single-mindedly to secure as much territory as possible through his military service and his political contacts within the Virginia planter elite. Despite his earlier enthusiastic service as a colonial soldier, Washington became increasingly alienated from the British Crown because of its resistance to his territorial ambitions, combined with his growing understanding of the benefits of economic nationalism.

In the period before the outbreak of hostilities in 1775, calls for unfettered colonial expansion became increasingly bound up with the claim for colonial self-government, and not only for those, such as Washington, who were actively pursuing expansion. In *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* (1774), Thomas Jefferson bases the colonists' claim for independence on the fact that:

> our ancestors, before their emigration to America, were the free inhabitants of the British dominions in Europe, and possessed a right which nature has given to all men, of departing from the country in which chance … has placed them, of going in quest of new habitations, and of there establishing new societies, under such laws and regulations as to them shall seem most likely to promote public happiness.

Here Jefferson argues not only that democracy and colonial expansion are compatible, but that the former springs from the latter. Such 'democratic colonialism' is not, therefore, incompatible with membership of the British Empire, as long as the empire is understood as a collection of independent and equal polities of 'free men' (i.e. not natives, slaves, or the property-less) sharing the same constitutionally limited monarch. At this stage, Jefferson argues that the problem is not George III, whose powers are restricted by the Glorious Revolution of 1688, but the British Parliament, which refuses to grant parity to the thirteen colonial legislatures. However, when Jefferson shifted his position two years later in *The Declaration of Independence* – from arguing for co-equal membership of the empire to American independence outside of it – he did not renounce the 'natural right' that 'all men' (or at least British descendants) had to colonial expansion. Indeed, now he lists the frustration of this 'right' as one of the grievances justifying 'revolution': for not only had the British Crown 'prevent[ed] the population of these States [by] obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners' and by 'refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither', it had further infringed natural right by raising obstacles to the 'new Appropriations of Lands' by the settler colonists.

With the founding of the American Republic, the thirteen colonies chose to rename themselves 'states', but this did not signal the end of their colonizing activity. Indeed, without the constraints of European *realpolitik* and the limits to westward settlement imposed by the British Crown, the USA soon embarked on a sustained period of territorial expansion, propelled by the War of 1812 (1812–15), the Mexican-American War (1846–48), and a series of bush wars against poorly armed native populations that resembled British and French colonial campaigns in Africa – except that they were far more successful in clearing native populations wholesale. Equally, rapprochement with Britain was confirmed with the Monroe Doctrine (1823), which traded British acceptance of US dominance of the hemisphere for an exemption from the exclusion of European powers from Latin America. The territorial gains associated with the Spanish-American War (1898) – which are often taken as a unique American lapse into European colonial habits – fit into a pattern of expansionist activity that paralleled European colonialism throughout the nineteenth century, except that conquered territory was as a rule incorporated into the Republic through ethnic cleansing and intensive settlement, rather than being held as a series of distinct imperial possessions.

As an idea, the American Republic functioned as a moment of radical rebirth: by re-imagining itself as a self-creating and self-constituting people – as the spontaneous product of a moment of 'revolution' that cut all ties with the past – British Americans no longer saw themselves as settler colonists originally from somewhere else but as the rightful inheritors of a continent that was already theirs by nature, if not in fact. The remarkable power of this self-perception continues to operate today. In the popular understanding of the Revolutionary War, British American settler colonists like Washington and Jefferson are perceived not as the colonizers but as the colonized, a historical reversal that not only erases the fate of Native Americans and African slaves, but renders the expansion of European settler colonies after 1783 both natural and imperially innocent. And it is this conception of the AmericanRepublic as categorically distinct from imperialism that leaves so many Americans baffled by the anger not only of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, but also of the many people around the world who are subject to political, economic or military intervention by the USA.

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