

Cohen, E. A. (2004) 'History and the Hyperpower', *Foreign Affairs* July/August 2004, (p.5–6, 9–10)

The logic of the Cold War was one of ideological struggle and bipolar contest. The logic of contemporary international politics is that of predominance and its discontents. The first lesson of imperial history is that the absence of rivals does not diminish the challenges for statesmen.

... One overwhelming problem results from the sheer scope of imperial politics. In virtually any government, a handful of people make the critical decisions on foreign and security policy. The larger the empire, the less likely that this small group will know what it must about the nature and extent of imperial problems.

... The imperial power faces another fundamental disadvantage in its contests with smaller states or political movements: its leaders cannot focus in the way their opponents can. Smaller actors who recognize this can manipulate an imperial center's politics. Both the Indian National Congress and the Irish Republic Army contained astute students of British politics who know how to wrestle with a metropolitan government that only intermittently concentrated its attention on the problems of India or Ireland. The stumbles and follies of U.S. foreign policy result in part from a similar problem: its demands simply exceed the capacity of the handful of men and women who manage them.

... The universal enmity that hegemonic power breeds presents another, and perhaps graver, challenge to imperial statesmen. Empires have no peers and precious few friends. Indeed, to the imperial mind, 'friendship' means a relationship in which clients render services and patrons provide protection. The result, as Great Britain found out at least twice during its heyday (first during the American Revolution ... then in the Boer War ...), is diplomatic isolation. An empire's opponent always looks like an underdog, the imperial power always the bully. The victories of insurgents become inspiring tales of audacity and sacrifice, the triumphs of legions the inevitable consequences of superior technology, training and numbers. The empire's claims to act for the good of the international system will always be dismissed (often rightly) as the mere exercise of self-interest.

... The inevitability of anti-imperial sentiment may help explain the tide of anti-Americanism that has swept much of the world since September 11, 2001. Some of that antipathy surely emerged in reaction to the personality of an assertive U.S. president whose manner and core beliefs aggravate the elites of Europe and the Middle East. Some surely results from understandable apprehension about U.S. courses of action, in the Middle East especially. But some also stems from the swirl of hostility to the colossus, to all it embodies, and, indeed, to the very fact of its existence. The consequences of that hostility may be managed and mitigated in the years ahead, but some level of antipathy will remain, perhaps grow, and conceivably become dangerous. To be an empire, or something like an empire, is to be envied, resented, suspects, mistrusted, and, often enough, hated.

The United States today also has less choice about its role in world affairs than its worried leaders and their critics, or its anxious friends and numerous enemies, think. The logic of empire is a logic of extension, and the strategic conundrum of empire is that of over commitment and overstretch. Despite the wishes of French and Chinese politicians, no countervailing state or federation will restore a balance-of-power system akin to that of Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at least not in the near future. Despite the wishes of idealists, no international institution has proven capable of effective action in the absence of the power generated and exercised by states. And a third possibility – anarchy unleashed after a disgusted United States recalls its legions in a spurt of democratic disgust at and indifference to the rest of the planet – is too horrifying to contemplate. The real alternatives, then, are U.S. hegemony exercised prudently or foolishly, consistently or fecklessly, safely or dangerously – and for this, U.S. leaders must look back to school themselves in the wisdom that will make such statesmanship possible.