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A Republic or an Empire

by Jacob G. Hornberger

The “Week in Review” section of the March 31 issue of the New York Times published an article containing a startling observation—that “today, America is no mere superpower or hegemon but a full-blown empire in the Roman and British sense.” The article, “All Roads Lead to D.C.,” by Emily Eakin, which included a picture of ancient Rome from a scene in the movie *Gladiator*, pointed out that many Americans, most notably conservatives, are now openly stating that the achievement of empire status is not something that Americans should bemoan but rather something we should be celebrating.

But is it?

First consider how differently our American ancestors viewed the concept of liberty and the legitimate functions of government. In 1890, for example, there was little or no income tax, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, public schooling, welfare, economic regulations, gun control, or immigration controls. People were free to enter into mutually beneficial transactions with people all over the world, accumulate unlimited amounts of wealth, and decide what to do with it. That’s what it once meant to be an American. That’s what it once meant to be free.

Not anymore. Today, Americans define freedom by the power of government to take care of them with the taxes imposed on them. That’s why there are today thousands of government departments and agencies whose mission is to provide care and sustenance to the citizenry. It’s also why Washington, D.C., with all its magnificent buildings, reminds some people of Imperial Rome.

It might surprise you to know that the Roman Empire had a paternalistic welfare state too. To keep the people content and distracted in the midst of ever-increasing taxes and faraway wars, empire officials provided the citizenry with what became known as “bread and circuses.”

With respect to foreign affairs, for more than a century after the nation’s founding Americans followed the counsel of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson: Stay out of entangling alliances and foreign wars.

Today, the situation is exactly the opposite, which is what the New York Times article points out. America has become a vast empire whose control and domination is far more extensive than any other empire in history.

How does the empire maintain its control and domination thousands of miles away from its center in Washington? By permitting foreign rulers to stay in power in their respective countries, but only so long as they remain subservient to the empire. That subservience is maintained through the payment of large sums of money (foreign aid), threats of ouster (coups), or, in extreme cases of resistance, invasion or bombing by empire forces.

Just as with the Roman Empire, there is always some crisis somewhere, which inevitably is used as the excuse for raising taxes and reducing liberties. And then there's always someone somewhere who is resisting the empire. Consider, for example, Saddam Hussein, the recalcitrant ruler of Iraq. He's actually an empire's greatest asset because he can be so easily employed to raise the citizenry to crisis mode and fever pitch whenever necessary. Yet how many Americans know that Saddam Hussein used to be an ally of the empire when it was helping him wage war against Iran?

Consider also the recent coup attempt in Venezuela against its democratically elected president, Fernando Chavez. Ever since his election, Chavez has been a mortal enemy of the empire, but not because he's a socialist or an authoritarian, as empire officials suggest. After all, the empire befriends many socialist and authoritarian rulers, most recently the president of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, an army general who took control of that nation in a coup and who, with the implicit support of empire officials, refuses to call for democratic elections.

The real reason that U.S. officials don't like Chavez and why they implicitly endorsed (and possibly supported) the military coup against him is that Chavez has refused to serve and obey the empire, even going so far as to befriend such mortal enemies of the empire as Fidel Castro and Saddam Hussein.

Conservatives like to point out how the United States defeated the Soviet Empire by making it tax and spend so heavily that the entire system ultimately collapsed from within on the impoverished and dispirited Soviet people. That's also why the Roman Empire ultimately fell to the barbarian invaders. But that can't happen to the American Empire. Right?

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This article was published in May of 2002.