



The Fast Fall of the U.S. Empire

By Gore Vidal

The U.S. empire died on September 16, 1985, when the Commerce Department announced that the United States had become a debtor nation. The empire was 71 years old and had been in ill health since 1968. Like most modern empires, it rested not so much on military prowess as on economic primacy.

After the French Revolution, the world money power shifted from Paris to London. For three generations, the British maintained an old-fashioned colonial empire, as well as a modern empire based on London's primacy in the money markets.

Then, in 1914, New York replaced London as the world's financial capital. Before 1914, the United States had been a developing country, dependent on outside investment. But with the shift of the money power from Old World to New World, what had been a debtor nation because a creditor nation and central motor to all the world's economy.

All that, the British were well pleased to have the Americans take their place. The British were too few in number for so big a task. As early as the turn of the century, the British were eager for the Americans not only to help them out financially but to continue the high destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race: to bear with courage the white man's burden, as Rudyard Kipling nor so tactfully put it.

Were not British and Americans all Anglo-Saxons, united by common blood, laws, and languages? Well, no, they were not. But their differences were not so apparent then. In any case, the Americans took on the job. They would supervise and civilize the lesser breeds. They would make money.

By the end of the Second World War, the United States was the most powerful and least damaged of the great nations. It also had most of the money. U.S. hegemony lasted five years. Then the cold and hot wars began. U.S. masters would have Americans believe that all their problems are the fault of the Evil Empire of the East, with its Satanic and atheistic religion, ever ready to destroy this one night.

This nonsense began when the United States had atomic weapons and the Soviets did not. The Soviets had lost 20 million of their people in the war, and eight million of them before the war, thanks to their political system. Most important, there was never any chance, then or now, of the money power (all that matters) shifting from New York to Moscow.

What was — and is — the reason for the big scare? Well, the Second World War made prosperous the United States, which had been undergoing a depression for a dozen years; and made very rich those magnates who govern the republic, with many a wink, in the people's name.

To maintain a general prosperity (and enormous wealth for the few) they decided the Americans would become the world's policemen, pinnacled shield against the Mongol hordes. Americans shall win because the Soviets will go broke first. Americans were then put on a permanent wartime economy, which is why a third or so of the Government's revenue is constantly being siphoned off to pay for what is euphemistically called defense.

As early as 1950, Albert Einstein understood the nature of the ripoff. He said: "The men who possess real power in this country have no intention of ending the cold war." Thirty-five years later, they are still at it, making money while the nation itself declines to 11th place in the world per capita income, and so on, until last summer (not suddenly, I fear) Americans found themselves close to \$2-trillion in debt.

Then, in the autumn, the money power shifted from New York to Tokyo, and that was the end of the U.S. empire. Now the long-feared Asiatic colossus takes its turn as world leader, and the white race has become the yellow man's burden. Let us hope that he will treat us more kindly than we treated him.

In any case, if the foreseeable future is not nuclear, it will be Asiatic some combination of Japan's advanced technology with China's resourceful land mass. Europe and the United States will

then be simple irrelevant to the world that matters, and as we come fall circle. Europe began as the reatively empty, uncivilized Wild West of Asia; then the Western Hemisphere became the Wild West of Europe. Now the sun has set on the West and risen once more in the East.

During the first decade of our disagreeable century, the great world fact was the internal collapse of China. Who could pick up the pieces? Britain grabbed Kowloon; Russia was busy in the north; the Kaiser's fleet prowled the China coast; Japan was modernizing itself, and biding its time.

We are now at the end of the twentieth century. Britain, France and Germany have all disappeared from the imperial stage. China is now reassembling itself, and Confucius, greatest of the political thinkers, is again at the center of the Middle Kingdom. Japan has the world money power and wants a land mass; China now seems ready to go into business with its ancient enemy. Wars are, if no longer possible, no longer practical. Today's conquests are shifts of currency by computer, and the manufacture of those things that people everywhere are willing to buy.

When Confucius was asked what would be the first thing he would do if he were to lead the state — his never-to-be-fulfilled dream — he said he would rectify the language. This is wise. This is subtle. As societies grow more decadent, the language grows more decadent too. Words are used to disguise, not to illuminate action; you liberate a city by destroying it. Words are used to confuse, so that at election time people will solemnly vote against their own interests. Finally, words must be so twisted as to justify an empire that has now ceased to exist, much less make sense. To maintain a 35-year arms race, it is necessary to have a fearsome enemy. Not since the invention of the Wizard of Oz have U.S. publicists created anything quite so demotivated as the idea that the Soviet Union is a monolithic, omnipotent empire with tentacles everywhere on earth, intent on our destruction, which will surely take place unless we constantly imitate

it with our war machine and its secret services.

In fact, the Soviet Union is a second-world country with a first-world military capacity. Frighten the Soviets sufficiently and they might blow us up. By the same token, as the United States now begin to crack under the vast expense of maintaining a mindless imperial force, Americans might try to blow the Soviets up — particularly if the United States had a president who really was a twice-born Christian and believed the good folks would all go to heaven (where they were headed anyway) and the bad folks would all go where they belong. Fortunately, to date, we have had only hypocrites in the White House. But you never can tell.

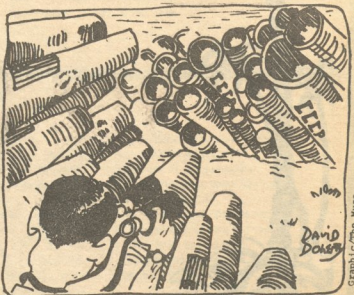
Even worse that the not very likely possibility of a nuclear war — deliberate or by accident — is the economic collapse of the U.S. society because too many of its resources have been wasted on the military. The Pentagon is like a black hole; what goes in is forever lost and no new wealth is created. Hence, U.S. cities, whose centers, are unlivable; the U.S. crime rate, the highest in the Western world; a public education system that has

given up ... you know the lily.

There is now only one way out. The time has come for the United States to make common cause with the Soviet Union. The bringing together of the Soviet land mass (with all its natural resources) and the U.S. empire (with all its technological resources) would be a great benefit to each society, not to mention the world. Also, the Soviet Union and the U.S. section of North America combined would be a match, industrially and technologically, for the Sino-Japanese axis that will dominate the future just as Japan dominates world trade today.

But where war was thought of as the supreme solvent, we now know that war is worse than useless. Therefore the alliance of the two great powers of the Northern hemisphere will give both the strength of each and double, working together, an opportunity to survive, economically, in a highly centralized Asiatic world.

(This article is extracted from a speech Mr. Vidal made at The Observer Book Banquet in London. Mr. Vidal is a U.S. novelist, essayist, and screenwriter.)



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