

Rome, the United States of America, and the Meaning of Empire

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Abstract

In modern literature and media, authors often draw convenient examples from historical episodes and hold them side by side with current events in an attempt to explain or inspire contemporary phenomena. These comparisons serve many parties and purposes, yet rarely are the serious historian or the quest for historical accuracy part of that agenda. Thus, the practice remains widespread for various reasons, including arrogance, seductiveness, and especially convenience, among others. The Roman Empire of antiquity and the supposed “American Empire” of modernity constitute one such comparison, and a common one at that. This imagined parallel, however, is more inaccurate, misleading, and potentially dangerous than most. In order to address those who would desire to cast the United States as the “New Roman Empire,” this investigation will examine the core tenet of that assertion: the definition of the term “empire” itself. A brief discussion of Roman *imperium* will clearly delineate the basic requirements to be considered an empire. The ensuing attempt to apply these standards to the United States answers the question definitively, and dispels any lingering temptations to describe either a new American Rome, or an American Empire at all. The United States is neither, and claiming such lends neither legitimacy nor clairvoyance to American efforts throughout the globe.



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Likening the United States to Ancient Rome is hardly a novel idea. It has been tried many different ways by many different people, with opinions as various as the agendas they serve. Cullen Murphy, author of *Are We Rome?*, describes the comparison as instinctive: "...it comes to mind unbidden, in the reflexive way that the behavior of chimps reminds you of the behavior of people."¹ What makes contrasting these two states, separated by a vast ocean as well as a sea of time, so intriguing? Undoubtedly, the appeal lies in their corresponding positions as the foremost nations of their day, with unrivaled militaries, economies, and international political influences. Murphy answers his title question from the American perspective with, "To American eyes, Rome is the eagle in the mirror."²

While a number of seemingly valid parallels between these two states can be drawn, others require significantly more determination to support. Interested parties with motives other than astute historical investigation may be tempted to force similarities where none actually exist, misinforming both friend and foe about the United States. These analogies are not only misguided, they are simply irrelevant. Unfortunately, when dealing with the subject matter here considered, the practice is often more than enticing; it is dangerously convenient. Thus, it becomes necessary to examine closely the basic tenets of these analogies.

An exemplary case in point is the fundamental concept of "empire." The casual comparison of the Roman Empire vs. the American Empire represents a frequent occurrence of this brand of expedient, often inaccurate assumption. As a potential springboard of a wider-ranging discussion, terminological clarity here is indispensable to prevent any further exaggeration. American scholar Paul Schroeder emphasizes the importance of correctly grasping this underlying concept when he writes: "A better understanding of empire can point us to historical generalizations we ignore at our peril."³ Thus, in an effort to improve such an important debate on a basic level, this inquiry focuses on the term, its origins, and its definitional transformation over centuries. First the Roman and then the modern understandings of "empire" will be considered in a concerted effort to establish the significance of this often-

¹ Murphy, Cullen, *Are we Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007), 5.

² Murphy, 6.

³ Schroeder, Paul, "Is the U.S. an Empire?" *History News Network* (George Mason University, February 2003), Web. 10 February 2012, 1.

ambiguous concept. With these results, the investigation then asks a simple question: Is the United States of America an empire?

Finally, projection and prediction of the United States' future based on the Roman past, while offering potentially entertaining postulates, actually provides only an added layer of untenable, undesirable intellectual debris. Two notable methodological problems that arise will be briefly mentioned in a modest effort to clarify why many of these convenient analogies simply cannot hold up to competent historical dissection, even if they do provide catchy editorial titles. The Romans can only serve as an example for the United States, not as a guide. Indeed, the United States must consider its options carefully, for unlike the Romans, modern Americans have no *haruspices*, *auspicia* or *augurs*, and no way to divine the will of the gods.

Through the march of centuries, the Latin root of “empire” has evolved to wield a much broader definition than in ancient Rome. J.S. Richardson, former chair of Classics at University of Edinburgh, describes the obfuscation of “empire” in any meaningful Roman context by imperial states that inherited Roman vocabulary (such as Charlemagne’s Holy Roman Empire, Imperial Britain, and Tsarist Russia), as they fail to illustrate the very specific role the word’s Latin root played in Roman political and military culture.⁴ Recognizing the distinction between the modern usage of “empire” and the original *imperium* reveals what it really meant to the ancient Romans, and how it has developed after them.

Noted interdisciplinary Professor Vaclav Smil offers a basic interpretation of *imperium* and asserts, “In its original sense the noun simply described the right to command (*imperare*) in the Roman state.”⁵ Throughout the millennium of western Roman ascent and decline, the word retained this basic aspect: *imperium* gave prominent citizens the authority to lead Roman military forces.⁶ From this authority, it also developed a tangential meaning, one that eventually eclipsed the original. To correctly understand this transformation, a brief glance at the long history of *imperium* becomes necessary.

⁴ Richardson, J.S. “Imperium Romanum: Empire and the Language of Power.” *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 81 (1991), 1.

⁵ Smil, Vaclav, *Why America Is Not a New Rome* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2010), 46.

⁶ Richardson, 2.

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Indeed, *imperium* predates the Romans as part of their cultural inheritance from the Etruscans. As respected classicist Andreas Alföldi maintains, Etruscan *imperium* was, "...the absolute supreme power entrusted to a person if approved by the gods, and governing in steady consultation with the divinity, was inherited by the Republic, as was its symbol, the spear."⁷ His assertion coincides with the account of Eutropius, who described the power of *imperium* as being in use long before the founding of the Republic, associated with the early kings of Rome. He reports, "After him [Tullus Hostilius] Ancus Marcius, grandson of Numa on his daughter's side, received the *imperium*. He waged war against the Latins...(I.5.1-2)," and again, "After him [Tarquinius Priscus] Servius Tullius...received the *imperium*. He also subjugated the Sabines...(I.7.1-2)."⁸ Although the king alone exercised the supreme *imperium*, it then referred only to his right to command military forces.

After the Roman people expelled their monarchs in 509 BCE, the supreme authority of the king and functions of government were divided among several magistracies. In the early Republic, the responsibilities of convening the Latin League, divining the will of the gods through *auspicium* and *augurium*, offering sacrifices to the official deities, and commanding the armed forces fell to the two consuls.⁹ Each consular *imperium* was equal to the other in rank in this new system of accountable, balanced government.¹⁰ Although the exercising of *imperium* was necessarily very restricted, the ruling patricians later extended this authority and the administration of justice in Rome to the office of *praetor* in 367 BCE, after it became obvious that the executive functions of an

⁷ Alföldi, Andreas, *Early Rome and the Latins* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 200.

⁸ Eutropius, *Compendium of Roman History*. Trans., ed. Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold. *Roman Civilization*. Vol. 1: The Republic (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 53-55.

⁹ Alföldi, 120.

¹⁰ Hammond, Mason, *The Augustan Principate in Theory and Practice in the Julio-Claudian Period* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1933), 8.17. Hammond includes many examples of the ranking of *imperia*. Generally, *imperia* of the same rank carry the exact same powers; consular *imperia* outrank praetorial *imperia*, while normal magisterial *imperia* outrank pro-magisterial *imperia*. Special Senatorial grants of *imperium* could further outrank those. See Chapter. 2, "The Development of Extraordinary Commands," 8-18.

expanding Rome could not be managed by the two consuls alone.¹¹ As Roman control continued to expand rapidly in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE, the Senate created several new *praetors*, both as administrators and wielders of *imperium*.¹² When necessary, the Senate might also entrust magisterial offices and *imperia* to pro-magistrates (i.e. a *propraetor* or *proconsul*), who acted with the equal authority of a magistrate chosen by the people.¹³ In the late Republic, these Senatorial appointees often served as governors of provinces.¹⁴ Finally, while possessing considerable power, lesser magistrates of the *cursus honorum* (quaestors and aediles) did not wield full *imperia*. They exercised only a subordinate *potestas*, validating Harvard historian Mason Hammond's reference to an office with *imperium* as the "supreme magistracy."¹⁵

While this supreme magistracy was no longer the sole prerogative of a single person, it initially remained a privilege of the new patrician oligarchs. Alföldi relates, "The qualification of the *equites* as such for the election, their exclusive right to explore the will of heaven by the *auspicia* and to obtain the *imperium*, is simply the usurpation of these royal monopolies by a clique."¹⁶ However, this arrangement discontented the plebian class. In Emperor Justinian's *Digest*, legal scholar Sextus Pomponius, writing during the reign of Hadrian (117-138 CE), describes the plebian struggle for prominence and military glory:

¹¹ Lewis, Naphtali. Introduction, *Roman Civilization, Vol. I: The Republic*. Trans., Ed., Naphalti Lewis and Meyer Reinhold (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 35.

¹² Cary, M., *A History of Rome Down to the Reign of Constantine* (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1957), 340.3.3-4. By the time of Sulla, the number of *praetors* had risen from the original one to eight. Caesar doubled this number to sixteen (Cary, 414.1.26) and the number hovered between eighteen and ten for the rest of the Julio-Claudian period (Hammond, *Augustan Principate*, 136.3.1-2).

¹³ Hammond, *Augustan Principate*, 11.

¹⁴ Cary, 229.

¹⁵ Hammond, *Augustan Principate*, 8.

¹⁶ Alföldi, 81.

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Next, several years having elapsed after the passing of the Twelve Tables, a contest arose between the plebeians and the patricians, the former desiring that the consuls should be chosen out of their own body as well as from the patricians, to which the latter refused to consent... Afterwards, it having been resolved that the consuls might be elected from the plebeians themselves, they began to be appointed from both bodies.¹⁷

The first pleb to hold a consulship was Lucius Sextius in 366 BCE.¹⁸ This concession allowed for the rise of talented commoners to the highest magistracy, most notably the able and ambitious Gaius Marius.¹⁹

Despite Marius' and other late Republican generals' success at the Republican constitution's expense, the Senate attempted to limit both patricians and plebeians from freely using the supreme power by delineating specific boundaries for the *imperium* in both space and time.²⁰ Beyond a magistrate's elected term of service or the borders of his appointed theatre of action, his *imperium* became legally invalid. To prevent conflict between military commands, *imperia* granted for combat outside of Rome (*extra pomerium imperia*) immediately lost all validity once the holder crossed the sacred city-limits (*pomerium*).²¹ A general awarded a triumph constituted the only exception, and even he could only hold the *intra pomerium imperium* for the day of his celebration.²²

¹⁷ I.II.2, 16-28 Quoted in Lewis, 92.

¹⁸ Cary, 113.

¹⁹ Plutarch asserts Marius to have been the son of laborers in the village of Cirrhaeaton (Plut:Mar, III.1). This region received full Roman citizenship in 188 BCE, a mere 30 years before Marius' birth in 157. See Cary, 248; 303.

²⁰ Hammond, *Augustan Principate*, 48.

²¹ Cary describes the *pomeria* as "...spiritual ring-fences..." and a "...ritual furrow round the urban area." 20; 37.

²² Versnel, H.S., *Triumphus: An Inquiry into the Origin, Development and Meaning of the Roman Triumph* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970), 191. Versnel asserts this limitation applies to both regular magistrates and promagistrates.

Indeed, the honor and glory associated with triumph motivated many ambitious Romans to wield this greatest of powers; military distinction was almost critical to advance a political career.²³ During the First Punic War, the Roman Senate found it difficult to suppress the magistrates' yearning for glory, and they themselves began "...yielding to the first stirrings of imperialism, militarism and greed."²⁴ Polybius describes these first stirrings in 262, after the Romans inflicted their first decisive defeat on the Carthaginians at Agrigentum:

*When the news...reached the Roman Senate, in their joy and elation they no longer confined themselves to their original designs...but, hoping that it would be possible to drive the Carthaginians entirely out of the island and that if this were done their own power would be much augmented, they directed their attention to this project...*²⁵

By 171 BCE, the eve of the Third Macedonian War against Perseus, this attitude was well entrenched. Livy relates, "The diviners gave the following report: If any new enterprise should be begun, it should be speeded on; victory, triumph, and enlargement of the realm were forecast" (42.30.8). The *haruspices* proved correct, and during the 2nd century BCE, Romans triumphed for victories from Iberia to Asia.

As an additional honor, triumphant generals received the *cognomen* derived from *imperium*, use of which the Senate also strictly limited. As a symbol of supreme honor and success, Roman legions could proclaim their general "*imperator*" after a great victory in a rite called the *appellatio imperatoria*.²⁶ Ioannes Zonaras relates the procedure following the *appellatio imperatoria*:

*On arriving home he [the victor] would assemble the Senate and ask to have the triumph voted him. And if he obtained a vote from the Senate and from the people, his title of imperator was confirmed.*²⁷

²³ Badian, Ernst, *Roman Imperialism in the Late Republic* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), 13.

²⁴ Harris, William V., *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome 327-70 B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 185.

²⁵ I.20.1-2. Quoted in Lewis.

²⁶ Versnel, 342.

²⁷ Zon., VII.11. Quoted in Lewis, 216.

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The commander attached *imperator* to his name until the day of his celebration, when the honorary title was relinquished along with his *imperium*.²⁸ However, Harvard historian Ernst Badian asserts in retrospect, “The excessive powers enjoyed by the holders of *imperium* were bound to corrupt. What is more, they led to an excess of pride and individualism...”²⁹

Indeed, it was this pride and individualism that transformed the Republican *imperators* into the Emperors of Rome.³⁰ Because of rapid expansion of territory and the relentless rise of the great military commands beginning at the end of the 3rd century BCE, *imperator* slowly changed from an official title born by magistrates and pro-magistrates to being a glorified popular acclamation, conferred by soldiers on the battlefield rather than the citizen-electors of the *comitia curiata*.³¹ This honorary title came to be retained by such towering military leaders as Scipio, Pompey and Caesar, a distinction often commemorated on their coins.³² Gradually, these commanders came to retain the *cognomen*, and even their *imperium*, after their triumphs. Pompey kept his proconsular *imperium* inside of the *pomerium* after a triumph from 57-55 BCE, and evidence suggests that he retained the *cognomen imperator* until his third consulship in 52 BCE, when he served as the sole consul.³³

Even more so than Pompey, Julius Caesar absolutely subscribed to this program of sustaining extralegal authority. Hammond describes Caesar’s ascent to power as, “...so unconstitutional that it does not properly belong in a discussion of the extraordinary commands as bestowed by the Senate and People...”³⁴ Several obvious indicators attest that Caesar truly did have his eyes set on monarchy in early 44 BCE, even more convincingly that his “growing imperiousness of manner.”³⁵ In the words of Seutonius,

²⁸ Cary, 115.

²⁹ Badian, 9.

³⁰ Versnel, 340.

³¹ Versnel, 348.

³² Hammond, *Augustan Principate*, 49.

³³ *Ibid.*, 17; 31; 49.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁵ Cary, 415.

For not only did he accept excessive honours, such as an uninterrupted consulship, the dictatorship for life, and the censorship of public morals, as well as the forename Imperator...but he also allowed honours to be bestowed on him which were too great for mortal man... In fact, there were no honours which he did not receive or confer at pleasure (Seut:Caes, 76.1).

Not only did he assume the *dictator perpetuo*, he replaced his curule *toga praetexta* for the purple robe of Roman kings, and his magisterial seat with a throne.³⁶ Most importantly for this discussion, he also retained his *imperium* both *extra* and *intra pomerium*.³⁷ The right of Caesar to command stretched from the heart of Rome to the edge of the Empire, with authority over the legions to be exercised in perpetuity until he saw fit to relinquish it.³⁸ Indeed, it was Caesar who took the critical steps in establishing the new meaning of *imperator* as overlord, ruler and emperor. Prof. Dr. Henk Versnel of Universiteit Leiden asserts, “Here we see a king, even though he did not bear the title *rex*. The title *imperator* is to take over this function.”³⁹ However, not Caesar but his 18 year-old heir Octavian, the last and most-enduring Republican *imperator*, perpetuated this change that launched Rome on an irreversible course that would come to define modern “empire.”

After Caesar’s brutal and notorious murder, Octavian also retained the title *imperator* as a *cognomen*.⁴⁰ There is some debate as to whether Octavian kept the *cognomen* in the Republican sense as a successful general or as an inheritance from his great-uncle.⁴¹ However, the events of these years and accounts given do not justify Octavian’s assumption of *imperator* in the traditional manner. Rather, fortuitous circumstances and political expediency caused him to adopt the title, while the only way he could do so credibly was hereditarily from his adoptive father. Although Cassius Dio asserts that the army and Senate hailed Octavian as *imperator* after Antony’s defeat in the Battle of Mutina in 43 BCE, Valerius Maximus casts a degree of doubt on Dio’s version of the salutation when he asserts that generals were never hailed as *imperator* for civil conflict (ValMax, II.8.7). In any case, Dio suggests Octavian’s salutation was an afterthought. He states, “Upon the defeat of Antony not only was Hirtius

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Versnel, 397.

³⁸ Cary, 407.

³⁹ Ibid., 397.

⁴⁰ Hammond, *Augustan Principate*, 50.

⁴¹ Ibid., Chapter. V: “The Uses of the Title Imperator.”

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saluted as *imperator* by the soldiers and by the Senate, but likewise Vibius although he had fared badly, and Caesar [Octavian], although he had not even been engaged (XLVI.38.1).⁴² This was Octavian's first battle, in which he played no part except to provide troops and guard the camp during the fighting (Dio, XLVI.37.7). Furthermore, the Senate gave Octavian only the minimum authority to lead an army, granting *imperium* by nomination as *propraetor*, an inferior command to the full consular *imperia* of Hirtius and Vibius Pansa.⁴³ Octavian's only glory was surviving the battle. Thus, in 43 BCE, he could not claim the *cognomen* of an exceptional general in the Republican fashion, nor could he claim it as a commander of superior rank, and would not have retained it under such circumstances.

However, that Octavian strove to identify himself as closely as possible with his adoptive father is indisputable. Shortly after the Ides of March, Octavian officially changed his name to Gaius Julius Caesar. Furthermore, the elder Caesar's veterans formed the core of Octavian's army, lured by money and the "magic of his new name."⁴⁴ Neither do Octavian's other titles suggest any specific aversion to aggrandizing hereditary names. In 27 BCE, his full title read *Imperator Caesar divi filius Augustus*, a title that Sir Ronald Syme describes as, "anomalous and exorbitant in each member."⁴⁵ Referencing himself as the "son of the Deified Julius" by adopting *Divi filius* after the introduction of his great-uncle's state religious cult *Divus Julius* in 42 BCE served Octavian's purpose much the same as *imperator*, linking him ever more in the public imagination to the popular dictator and further strengthening his position as Caesar's heir.⁴⁶ Thus, Octavian kept the *cognomen imperator* as part of his inheritance to identify himself with Julius Caesar, possibly waiting for the Senate to bestow it upon him first to offer a minimum of legitimacy.

⁴² A. Hirtius and C. Vibius Pansa were the two elected consuls of 43 BCE that actually conducted combat operations against Antony at Mutina. Vibius later died of his wounds, and Hirtius fell when raiding Antony's camp after the battle, leaving Octavian sole commander of both consular armies and his own force of Caesar's veterans. Dio, XLVI.38.1, Cary, 428.

⁴³ Cary, 427.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 425.

⁴⁵ Syme, Ronald. *The Augustan Aristocracy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986. 39.

⁴⁶ Cary, 432; 469.

Furthermore, there is disagreement if and when Octavian relinquished the title *imperator*. While Hammond suggests that Octavian relinquished it in 38, Syme states just the opposite, that Octavian took the title in 38.⁴⁷ Considering two events may help clarify. First, 38 marks the year Octavian began his campaign against Sextus Pompeius, the son of Pompey, and was badly beaten not only by enemy forces but also by turbulent seas.⁴⁸ It seems improbable that he would deliberately squander the legacy of his adoptive father and the tenuous credibility gained at the battles Mutina, Philippi and Perusia as he led men into a naval war, especially against the son of Caesar's archrival. Second, Marcus Agrippa, Octavian's friend and most trusted general, declined a triumph that year for a victory against rebels in Gaul.⁴⁹ Dio reports, "Agrippa...did not celebrate the triumph, considering it disgraceful for him to make a display when Caesar had fared so poorly..." (XLVIII.49.4). Then Agrippa declared Octavian supreme *imperator*, establishing the precedent that triumphal honors, including unrestricted use of the *cognomen*, be reserved for the superior authority from which the *imperium* originated. Furthermore, Agrippa thereafter referred to Octavian as *Imp. Caesar* on his coins, preserving the hereditary title even in the unlikely scenario that Octavian had desired to abandon it.⁵⁰ Hence, the heir of Caesar retained this title consistently from 43 BCE onwards, even while choosing to emphasize different titles at this time or that depending on the greatest political expediency.

After the defeat of Antony in 31 BCE, Octavian stood unopposed; the borders of the state and his own poor health became the only real limits to Octavian's power.⁵¹ The supreme *imperium*, outranking all others in the Roman state, once again became the sole prerogative of a single person, to be delegated at his will.⁵² While Octavian assumed various powers as necessary to meet his immediate political goals, as Augustus he would never relinquish his overarching command of Rome's armed forces, just as he never relinquished his military title.⁵³

⁴⁷ Hammond, *Augustan Principate*, 50; Syme, 39.

⁴⁸ Cary, 437-439.

⁴⁹ Hammond, *Augustan Principate*, 50.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 50, 53.

⁵¹ Cary, 446; 447.

⁵² Richardson, 8.

⁵³ Cary, 473-474.

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Gradually, the territory under the *Imperator's* authority became synonymous with his *imperium* itself. Richardson elaborates, "The already existing sense of *imperium*...combined with the concentration of *imperium* in the hands of a single individual, will have made the use of *imperium* to describe the corporate power of the Roman state increasingly natural."⁵⁴ Indeed, it is only a small step to correlate the military power of Augustus and his successors with Roman territory as a unit under singular command.⁵⁵ Richardson maintains that the earlier meaning of *imperium*, the right to command, remained, while a territorial connotation evolved beside it. From the later second century CE, *imperium Romanum* correlated with Roman Empire in the sense that we understand it today.⁵⁶ While the derivative "empire" continued to evolve over the next two thousand years, this territorial transformation cemented into the Roman vernacular by Augustus has remained central throughout the centuries. With a firm grasp of the relationship between Roman *imperium* and the *imperium Romanum*, a brief interpretation of the modern definition of "empire" will reveal just how misguided the initial example—Roman Empire vs. American Empire—really is.

Since the decline of Rome, both direct successors to the Roman Empire and many other states seeking to embody its image of strength and stability have adapted this term, *imperium*, to their own ends. Historians also apply this designation retroactively to states like Carthage, Periclean Athens and Achaemenid Persia. In short, an originally Roman idea now describes authoritarian states throughout time, all over the world, that are vastly different from Rome and each other in fundamental ways. Since the words usage has expanded, so must efforts to define it and apply it today. The Oxford English Dictionary provides a useful, basic definition, describing an empire as, "...Supreme and extensive political dominion; *esp.* that exercised by an emperor, or by a sovereign state over its dependencies."⁵⁷ This stresses both the importance of political dominance and the fact that empires can exist without emperors. Prof. Schroeder expounds by dispensing entirely with the emperor qualification and emphasizing political supremacy:

⁵⁴ Richardson, 7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁷ "Empire." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2012. Web. 15 February 2012.

*...empire means political control exercised by one organized political unit over another unit separate from and alien to it. Many factors enter into empire--economics, technology, ideology, religion, above all military strategy and weaponry--but the essential core is political: the possession of final authority of one entity of the vital political decisions of another.*⁵⁸

Political control: this is the primary criterion for empire. Certainly, other factors in this system serve as a relative gauge to measure conquered territories' incorporation, but the final judgment must rest on the political subordination of separate, formerly sovereign entities. A brief survey of empires from antiquity until today clearly shows the validity of this definition.

Using the indicator of political dominance, Schroeder asserts a very clear distinction between empire and another political relationship, hegemony. Although they are often used synonymously, Schroeder maintains that hegemony and empire are fundamentally different systems, and in the contemporary world order, carry drastically different implications. Prof. Schroeder explains the dissimilarity succinctly with, "A hegemon is first among equals; an imperial power rules over subordinates."⁵⁹ Those accepted leaders that put questions to the greater community and facilitate decision-making are hegemons, while those countries that dictate to the community decisions that have already been made are empires. This distinction is critical for this discussion, and will provide helpful insight.

On the surface, the categorization of the United States as either an imperial ruler or preeminent hegemon may lean to the former. The United States military occupies strategic bases all over the world. The country's economic viability depends on unimpeded access to foreign markets. The recent military escapades in Iraq and Afghanistan offer a strong impression of a great power imposing its will. Indeed, imperialistic moments litter history of the United States. One only need recall the violent seizure of the western states in the Mexican-American War, or the blatant imperialist ambitions of the Spanish-American War. Indeed, when writing of the Mexican-American War, revisionist historian Howard Zinn reports references in American newspapers to both imperialist dreams and comparison to Roman ascension with, "The *Congressional Globe* of February 11, 1847, reported:

⁵⁸ Schroeder, 1.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

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Mr. Giles, of Maryland—I take it for granted, that we shall gain territory, and must gain territory, before we shut the gates of the temple of Janus... We must march from ocean to ocean... We must march from Texas straight to the Pacific ocean, and be bounded only by its roaring wave...⁶⁰

Of the Spanish-American War, Zinn quotes an editorial from the *Washington Post*, published just before the war began:

Ambition, interest, land hunger, pride, the mere joy of fighting, whatever it may be, we are animated by a new sensation. We are face to face with a strange destiny. The taste of Empire is in the mouth of the people even as the taste of blood in the jungle.⁶¹

However, these impulses were merely a precursor to imperial potential in 1945. Since WWII, and especially since the end of the Cold War, the United States has enjoyed an unmatched global position. The post-WWII era is the critical period for judging the United States' imperial status in the new world order, rather than the European-dominated 19th century. When Yale scholar John Lewis Gaddis describes the post-WWII dichotomy of the USA and USSR in his essay, "Two Cold War Empires,"⁶² he also provides several excellent examples of the misapplication of this key term based on the above-mentioned criterion of "empire." While Gaddis does describe the vast differences between these two states, he sacrifices terminological clarity for his dramatic title. First,

"Nor, having constructed their empire, did Americans follow the ancient imperial practice of 'divide and rule.' Rather, they used economic leverage to overcome nationalist tendencies, thereby encouraging the Europeans' emergence as a "third force" whose obedience could not always be assumed."⁶³

⁶⁰ Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003: 155.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁶² Gaddis, John Lewis. "Two Cold War Empires." *Major Problems in American History Since 1945*. Ed. Robert Griffith and Paula Baker. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007. 63-79.

⁶³ Gaddis, 79.

Again, “And surely American and Soviet influence...was at least as ubiquitous as that of any earlier empire the world had ever seen. Ubiquity never ensured unchallenged authority, though...”⁶⁴ Basic flaws plague these assertions; empires are based on unchallenged authority; they are based on obedience; in a word, control. Without these elements, what is an empire? The critical point disqualifying the United States from empire lies in the freedom of other countries to make political decisions for themselves. The United States may try to influence those decisions through financial and military aid, economic sanctions, or even covert operations, but this does not equate to absolute rule on an imperial scale. Although their actions may at times seem overbearing and undiplomatic, they generally work through the established international assemblies (i.e. the United Nations and NATO) to reach decisions of importance, and by no means do they always get their way. This would seem to qualify the United States as a hegemon rather than an imperial power. Self-admittedly and by simple fact, the United States exercises no *imperium* over the rest of the world, and thus the idea of an *imperium Americanum* is as much a propaganda ploy as Augustus’ restoration of the Republic.

Taking for granted perhaps the most basic comparison between the United States of America and the Roman state—that of “empire”—results in an improper understanding of the historical Roman context of *imperium*, and, much more seriously, to misguided public opinions and reactions today. The phases of *imperium*’s evolution have been discussed in the Roman context, as well as the essential core of the word’s meaning, authority to command. In this power relationship, a superior rules directly over subordinates, passes down decisions that have already been made and punishes failure to obey those decisions. When this relationship exists between separate states, it constitutes an empire, of which Rome is the archetypal example. The United States fits this category poorly.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 63-64.

Rome, the United States of America, and the Meaning of Empire

Indeed, such analogies fail to provide any value in assessing the United States' contemporary global position. Murphy describes the unfortunate consequences of such haphazard comparison with, "...in many ways, the history of History is a saga of its misuse."⁶⁵ In his article "Ancient Rome and Modern America Reconsidered," Mason Hammond delineates two common methodological problems that should call these comparisons into question, if they are not simply discounted as irrelevant.⁶⁶ First, drawing on various moments from over a millennium of western Roman history to illuminate a specific moment in the American present cannot be accepted as sound.⁶⁷ Second, any notable similarities are offset by great differences.⁶⁸ Thus, seeking precise comparisons between the sweep of Roman history and the blink of American history, while tempting and entertaining, is also generally indefensible against aggressive historical method. This is not to say that the Romans have no messages to impart; these are rather to be found in the realm of abstraction. Looking back through a sea of time distorts the modern perspective, and comparing successes and failures through this flawed lens degrades history as a discipline. Rome is not a map for the United States. Rather than seek to emulate it, the United States of America need only take inspiration from their illustrious predecessor, as this new power strives to chart a durable course through the 21st century.

⁶⁵ Murphy, 14.

⁶⁶ Hammond, Mason. "Ancient Rome and Modern America Reconsidered." *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Third Series, Vol. 73 (1961), 3-17. Electronic. 22 April 2012.

⁶⁷ Hammond, "Ancient Rome," 6.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

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