

An Analysis of the Unique Characteristics of the American Empire through the Lens of the Anglo-Saxon Imperial Continuity Myth

Christopher Hulshof

Department of History
University of Wisconsin-Madison
455 N. Park Street
Madison, WI 53705
United States

Abstract

Since the so-called passing of the imperial baton across the Atlantic during World War II, many historians have propagated a myth of Anglo-Saxon imperial continuity which claims that the American empire is merely a reiteration or mirror of the British empire which came before it. While the similarities between the Anglo-Saxon empires are manifold, and often glaringly obvious, this myth fails to account for the unique attributes of the American empire which set it apart from its imperial predecessors; massive and continuous international distribution of economic aid, a central focus on prodigious clandestine capabilities in the application of hegemony, and an American exceptionalist ideology of imperial deniability.

Keywords: British Empire, U.S. Empire, Anglo-Saxon, Twentieth Century, Comparative History

Introduction

The myth of Anglo-Saxon imperial continuity, the idea that the British system merely transferred across the Atlantic with a pass of the imperial baton, is often promoted by historians of empire. The myth, however, fails to adequately recognize the unique characteristics of U.S. imperialism. A comparative analysis of the diplomatic strategy, military and intelligence apparatuses, soft power exertion, and economic dominance of the two Anglo-Saxon empires highlights numerous similarities at the root of “passing of the torch” narratives while simultaneously highlighting the formation of a unique American imperium. These unique characteristics include the massive and continuous international distribution of economic aid, a central focus on prodigious clandestine capabilities in the application of hegemony, and the American exceptionalist ideology of imperial deniability. The culmination of these wholly unique attributes of the U.S. empire offers sufficient differentiation from America’s imperial predecessors to rebuke the myth of Anglo-Saxon Imperial continuity.

Prior to embarking on a comparison of two empires, it serves to first establish that the two states being compared are indeed empires. Britain can easily be labeled an empire given that its society had become fully imperialized in values, culture, and social hierarchy by the 20th century, not only self-identifying as an empire, but embracing the role (Darwin, 2009). The United States is historically a more difficult case as the nation was created from seceding from an empire, resulting in Americans tending to “not like to think that they might themselves have come to possess an empire, live under an empire, or exercise empire.” Charles Maier has pointed out that for U.S. historians, “empire has displaced civil society as the fashionable political concept for the new decade” (Maier, 2006). Yet, there remains a contingent of contemporary historians such as Jeremi Suri who, like much of the American populace, remains wedded to American exceptionalist ideology (McCoy, Scarano, & Johnson, 2009). They cling to the notion that the U.S. is a hegemonic power, yet somehow not “a real empire” (Suri, 2009). The debate on the definition of what constitutes an empire, and whether the U.S. fits such a definition, is beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes, we accept the more popular, and realistic, conclusion that both nations possessed empires at some point during the past two centuries.

For most historians of empire, the United States has seemingly inherited the British empire with each of its attributes, almost as if it was passed down through genetics or natural procession. “Might not the United States equally well be Britain’s successor as an Anglophone empire?” Niall Ferguson has asked. Answering that question, Ferguson concludes that the U.S. empire “increasingly resembles, as rebellious sons grow to resemble the fathers [the British empire] they once despised” (Ferguson, 2004). James Kurth claims that “they [the U.S.] are the true heirs to the legendary civil official [...] of the British Empire” (Kurth, 2002). Dane Kennedy conclusion that “The United States’ immediate predecessor was the British Empire,” draws more than temporal lines (Kennedy, 2007). For John Darwin, the cataclysm of the 1940s highlighted more than an Atlantic alliance, but “a declining imperial state [...] and its obvious successor” (Darwin, 2008).

Even the few historians with the clarity to recognize unique characteristics of America imperium return to connecting the two empires when analyzing imperial attributes. America's "later global hegemony," according to Alfred W. McCoy, "seemed similar to great Britain's informal imperial controls" (McCoy, 2017).

Examples of such historical linkages are manifold, and not without good reason. An examination of the core attributes of each empire certainly showcases a number of similarities. Commonalities have always existed between each proceeding empire in the procession of global imperium – empires are not, after all, formed in a vacuum. However, the same examination of the core attributes of the two Anglo-Saxon empires also serves to highlight fundamental differences in and unique attributes of American imperium which differentiate it from empires of the past, including the British.

Characteristics of the British Empire

The most tangible aspect of imperial domination is brute military power. The linchpin of Britain's military was supremacy of the open seas. The father of geopolitics, Sir Halford Mackinder, articulated this centrality. "The unity of the ocean is the simple physical face underlying the dominant value of sea-power in the modern globe-wide world" (Mackinder, 1902). Both domestic and imperial security through geopolitical control of the seas was of central importance in the 18th century as numerous wars raged between France and Britain (Hyam, 2010). By 1815, Britain's global position through their navy was "almost prodigally favorable in geopolitical terms: conferring free movement in almost any direction [...] the territories that the British acquired were not of great value and had small or poor populations. But their geostrategic meaning was huge" (Darwin, 2009). By the mid-19th century, a clear geopolitical strategy of controlling the globe's major shipping lanes had emerged, which was preserved and even strengthened during the heightened period of imperial competition during the century. "At the 'high politics' level of imperial decision making, strategic and geopolitical calculations were dominant" (Hyam, 2010).

By 1900, Britain exerted power by surrounding the Eurasian landmass with 300 capital ships and 30 fortified naval bases stretching from the North Atlantic at Scapa Flow, through the Mediterranean at Gibraltar, Malta, and the Suez Canal, through the Indian Ocean at Bombay, in the straits at Singapore, and into the Sea of China at Hong Kong (McCoy, 2017). "We are like an octopus with gigantic feelers stretching out over the habitable world," claimed Lord George Hamilton in 1899, "constantly interrupting and preventing foreign nations from doing that which we in the past have done ourselves" (Darwin, 2009).

The British Empire was able to maintain dominance of the seas through ever increasing naval expenditures and technological innovations (Parsons, 1999). Between 1885 and 1890 the Royal Navy kept six first-class battleships stationed in the Mediterranean, increasing to ten in the 1890s and 14 by 1902, making a fleet of over 40 ships in the Mediterranean alone. During the late 19th century, the Royal Navy's budget increased from £10.6 million in 1882 to £24 million in 1899 and then increased an additional 50 percent between 1899 and 1905 (Darwin, 2009). Rising naval budgets would continue into the 20th century with the unveiling of the 20,000-ton HMS Dreadnought in 1906 costing a massive £1.8 million, a price per vessel of over 10% of the entire naval budget just 25 years earlier (McCoy, 2017).

The result of such massive naval expenditures and a decade of global geopolitical positioning was clear; "It was not simply that the British were the one global power: no coalition against them had any chance of cohering." Britain had not only become the preeminent global super power by the end of the 19th century, but had reached a degree of supremacy that no feasible combination of powers could prevent the Empire from exerting economic, political, and cultural influence throughout the globe. Britain's army increased from 109,000 men in 1829 to 325,000 men in the closing years of the century; however, up to 140,000 of these troops were Indian soldiers and another 60,000 to 70,000 British soldiers were stationed in India at any one time (Darwin, 2009). Just one-third of the Royal Army was distributed around the remainder of Britain's vast global empire encompassing 13 million square miles; approximately 23 percent of the world's land surface and 20 to 25 percent of the world's population (Ferguson, 2004).

The Empire's intelligence services supplemented the small landed presence to a large extent, becoming in the 19th century what historian Calder Walton has dubbed an "Empire of Information" (Walton, 2013). British intelligence may be best known through 20th century spy fiction such as James Bond and popular histories of the 12,000 agents at Bletchley Park decoding Nazi communications during the Second World War, but British Intelligence agencies played an important role as early as the 16th century, providing crucial intel on the Spanish armada for Queen Elizabeth I. "Intelligence gathering – often said to be the second oldest profession – is as old as governments themselves" (Walton, 2013).

British intelligence was predominately conducted on an ad hoc basis through various government branches in the metropole and colonies until 1887, when the Directorate of Military Intelligence was created out of the War Office's Topographical and Statistical Department which had previously been responsible for gathering

information for colonial censuses and mapmaking. In 1909, insecurities highlighted by the lack of information heading into the Boer War was used as justification for the establishment of a permanent peacetime Secret Service Bureau (Walton, 2013). The domestic branch of this bureau would be renamed during World War I to the well-known MI5 and the Foreign Service branch renamed MI6, which later became the Secret Intelligence Service.

As the 20th century progressed, and Britain's military supremacy began to slip away, the empire came to rely more and more on its intelligence apparatus. As popular spy novelist John Le Carre put it, "In times of travail, Britain's tendency was to rely more, not less, on spies. Her entire empire's history urged her to do so. The thinner her trade routes, the more elaborate her clandestine efforts to protect them. The more feeble her colonial grip, the more desperate her subversion of those who sought to loosen it" (Le Carre, 1977). In just the four years between 1914 and 1918, MI5 grew from a small office of a handful of agents to 844 employees, increasing their 17,500 total card registries to over 250,000 cards and 27,000 personnel files. The Censor Office grew from one to 2,000 employees. By 1945, MI5 had created registries for people and organizations across the globe, including one in every 200 British citizens (Walton, 2013).

Scant academic attention has been given to Britain's intelligence apparatus in comparison to other aspects of the imperial system. This may be due to the vast majority of intelligence records not being declassified until 2012. After all, it is difficult to obtain records for institutions which the government does not officially recognize as existing. MI5 did not receive statutory basis until 1989, while the Secret Intelligence Service did not receive the same until 1994 (Walton, 2013). While very little information on post-1960 British intelligence has been declassified, historians have been able to extract from available archives enough information to indicate the continued centrality of its role.

Supporting the Crown's military and covert apparatus was a large cohort of highly trained, multilingual diplomats stationed across the globe working to advance British priorities through carefully crafted diplomatic agreements, treaties, and force multiplying alliances. Strategic insecurities of the small island nation's expansive reach across the entirety of the globe placed a huge premium on diplomatic finesse, particularly after the 1830's when Britain began to actively engage other European nations in pursuit of a constant balance of power, as opposed to passive spectatorship of continental European affairs; a strategy which became a consistent central focus in Britain's diplomacy. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, British diplomats moved beyond bilateral negotiations to establish multilateral agreements, coordinating between multiple states in triangular, and even "octagonal" diplomacy (Darwin, 2009).

Beyond European power politics, British diplomats worked to maintain access to states not under imperial dominion. Through careful negotiations of treaties, Britain was able to maintain an advantageous position in places which they could not, whether for political or military reasons, directly establish control. For example, diplomat John Crawford wrote to the Governor of the Straits Settlements in 1827, regarding Siam, that "our only national object of policy hereafter in relation to the Siamese should be [...] to derive our connexion with them every attainable degree of commercial advantage, by practicing in our intercourse with them the utmost forbearance, temper, and moderation both in language and action, by striving to cultivate a friendly understanding with the Court [...] and above all, by faithfully and scrupulously observing the conditions of the treaty which fixes our future relations" (Tarling, 1999).

As indicated in Crawford's statements, British diplomats were not in the business of promoting international peace or anything resembling the modern conception of benevolent negotiations. For the British diplomatic core, negotiations, like the rest of the imperial project, were a zero-sum game. Diplomat Harold Nicolson put it quite succinctly, "Fundamental to such a conception of diplomacy is the belief that the purpose of negotiation is victory, and that the denial of complete victory means defeat. [...] The strategy of negotiation thus becomes an endeavor to outflank your opponents, to occupy strategical positions which are at once consolidated before any further advance is made." Neville Chamberlain echoed the sentiment nearly a century later, showcasing continuity in British diplomatic policy. "The only sound line of British policy is the path of British interests. The road is too dark for any altruism or digression; it is our own security which must remain the sole consideration" (Rathbun, 2014).

British diplomacy, standing behind the muzzles of British gun boats, worked to establish economic hegemony by convincing Afro-Asian regimes to abolish commercial monopolies, withdraw tariffs, liberalize fiscal and legal institutions, and enter the sphere of influence of the indirect "Imperialism of Free Trade" (Robinson, 1976). The diplomatic balancing act between keeping open markets for British trade and not acquiring the burdens of direct colonial acquisition was the centerpiece of 19th century British diplomacy. "The British sought a less than independent state rather than absorption of territory into the empire: only when they failed did they resort to partition and incorporation." The diplomacy of indirect rule allowed Britain to maintain a global empire without the crippling costs and drain of manpower that direct control would entail. The importance of subordinating local elites crucial for the maintenance of empire.

As historian Ronald Robinson put it, despite massive advantages in firepower, British imperium came to an end “when colonial rulers had run out of indigenous collaborators” (Tarling, 1999).

As the 19th century progressed, maintaining its “Imperialism of Free Trade” was of critical importance to the British Empire. Global markets were crucial to absorbing the ever-rising production of manufactured goods streaming out of Britain’s industrial centers. Without these markets, Britain’s economy would come to a halt. According to Lord Palmerston in 1839, “The great object of the Government in every quarter of the world was to extend the commerce of the country” (Darwin, 2009).

British imperium was extraordinarily successful in this regard. British exports rose from £38 million in 1830 to £60 million in 1845 to £122 million by 1857. During the same period, tonnage of shipping moving through British ports quadrupled. The ratio of Britain’s exports to GDP hit 14.6% in 1856, 18.3% in 1873, and 25% by 1913. The profits from export enterprise created a surplus of disposable capital for the upper echelon of British society, who began to invest in overseas enterprises (Maier, 2006). British overseas investments would increase from £1 billion in 1870 to £2 billion by 1900 and £4 billion on the eve of World War I, amounting to 44% of the world’s total foreign investment (Darwin, 2009). To put it in perspective, this was 1.7 times Britain’s 1913 GDP of £2.4 billion and three times higher than America’s foreign investment to GDP ratio at the turn of the twentieth century (Maier, 2006).

A vast system of commerce, credit, and stock exchange emerged out of London which became, as H.G. Wells put it, “a vast inexplicable being, a vortex of gigantic forces,” an epicenter of international commerce (Wells, 2018). With over 40% of the world’s telegraph cables in British hands, over 325,000 miles worth by 1922, a global nervous system of financial information centered in London. The world’s commerce flowed through London – both physical product and the accompanying financial operations; brokering, insurance, grading, sales, banking, and investment. Backed by the gold standard, the pound sterling was the international currency of choice with 60% of bills on London exchanged between foreign entities in 1913 (Darwin, 2009). International banking institutions across the globe began to use Britain’s currency, establishing the pound sterling as the international reserve currency and Britain as economic hegemon (Maier, 2006).

According to historian Josep Fradera, “British superiority would be based on two parallel processes: the expansion of the space it directly controlled and the affirmation of its commercial and diplomatic superiority over formerly independent world areas” (Fradera, 2009). However, Fradera overlooked a key component of British imperium; soft power (Nye, 1990). This oft intangible mechanism played a pivotal role in spreading Anglo-Saxon liberal capitalist ideology and making British dominance more palatable to those under its influence. In 1937, British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden commented, “It is perfectly true, of course, that good cultural propaganda cannot remedy the damage done by a bad foreign policy, but it is no exaggeration to say that even the best diplomatic policies may fail if it neglects the task of interpretation and persuasion which modern conditions impose” (Nye, 2008).

Liberal British ideology spread across the globe in the 19th century through the mass appeal of literature, sports (cricket, rugby, soccer, and tennis), Anglican religion, mass media (BBC Radio, Reuters wire, and newspapers such as the Times) and the international spread of English through the physical presence of traders, soldiers, missionaries, and settlers (McCoy, 2017). According to historian Dane Kennedy, “The liberal ideology with its promise of progress gave the British imperial project hegemonic strength that it would never have achieved had it relied on brute force” (Kennedy, 2007). The 19th century witnessed a diaspora of British citizens, taking British ideology with them, at unprecedented levels. By the mid-1870s, over eight million emigrants had migrated from the British Isles to permanent new homes outside of Europe (Darwin, 2009).

A massive wave of missionaries determined to evangelize non-Christians accompanied British merchants, settlers, and military expeditions throughout the 19th century, resulting in a further penetration of British ideology and the English language. “Our missionaries [...] are, by the most unexceptionable means, extending British interests, British influence and the British Empire,” according to missionary John Philipps. “Every genuine convert among them made to the Christian religion becomes the ally and friend of the colonial government” (Porter 2005). These missionaries attracted potential converts by offering health care services and Western education, which led to more lucrative employment, resulting in a constant barrage of English and Western ideology on colonial subjects (Parsons, 1999).

Evangelical societies drew upon an enormous base of support from the metropole citizenry, a “private army of millions [...] ready to take the field at a moment’s notice,” enabling the massive non-governmental expansion of British soft power (Darwin, 2009). By 1899, Protestant churches were spending £2 million per year in support of over 50,000 missionaries operating across the globe, a sum which matched the whole of British spending on the salaries of metropolitan civil servant (Parsons, 1999).

Characteristics of the American Empire

According to historian Thomas McCormick, 1945 marked when the “hegemonic America now possessed the power ‘to begin the world again’ and bring into being a new wave of globalization to replace the British-led one that had died at the turn of the century”(McCormick, 2009). However, the process of American soft power overtaking Britain’s on a global scale began much earlier than the mid-20th century. Shortly after the turn of the 20th century, American Secretary of State Elihu Root embarked on a campaign to create a “global leadership” persona, focusing on the use of social sciences to formulate specific strategies “aimed, above all, at normalizing American imperialism” and to “rebrand the American imperial project under cooperative lines.” According to historian Courtney Johnson, “a patient and persistent campaign was undertaken by key members of the national power elite to make American hegemony agreeable to the domestic populace, acceptable to the other imperial powers, and palatable to the regions subject to American intervention and control” (Johnson, 2009).

America’s application of soft power, along with its various other forms of power, reached an unprecedented peak following World War II. The shared Anglo-Saxon “Atlantic Culture” gave way to the ascendancy of “Americanization” which “encompassed such elements as mass consumption and the advent of television, the diffusion of American films, [and] advertising”(Maier, 2009). Washington directly supplemented these sources of soft power through the creation of international broadcast radio with Voice of America in 1942 and Radio Free Europe in 1949 (McCoy, 2017). New York became the center of news media, American basketball and baseball spread globally, and Hollywood films and music reached new peaks of international consumption. For historian Emily Rosenberg, the most deeply penetrating of these elements of American post-war soft power was mass consumption, which quietly spread unabated and without scrutiny. “Mass consumerism, by the closing decades of the twentieth century, had both adapted to and transcended national differentiations,” according to Rosenberg. “People throughout the world had come to embrace mass consumption as the look of the future, even as locally specific debates about the impact of consumerism and of ‘Americanization’ continued” (Rosenberg, 2010).

Well before the spread of consumerism came the spread of evangelicalism, as an outpour of evangelizing missionaries began crossing the Pacific in the 1890s (Oliphant, 1938). The movement gained such momentum that Vanderbilt University professor Oscar E. Brown claimed in 1914 that there were six global powers. “The British Empire, the Russian Empire, the Japanese Empire, the Chinese Republic, The American Republic, and the Young Men’s Christian Association” (Rosenberg, 1982). By 1891, less than ten years after its conception, the YMCA’s volunteer movement funded over six thousand foreign missionaries on their goal to “evangelize the world in one generation.” American English language schools established by missionaries became incredibly popular in places such as Japan and China, resulting in the spread of American culture. “It is Western education that the Chinese are clamoring for and will have,” head of YMCA John R. Mott claimed. “If the Church can give it to them, plus Christianity, they will take it” (Rosenberg, 1982).

“But no empire subsists on soft power alone. ‘Authority forgets a dying king,’ Tennyson’s Arthur recognized. Soft power evaporates if there is no hard power in reserve,” and the American empire was far from being a soft power without hard backing (Maier, 2006). In the second half of the 20th century, America attained a military dominance which no other empire in the history of mankind has come close to achieving. By the end of the 19th century, the American military accounted for 40 percent of the world’s total military expenditures sustaining a system of 725 overseas bases, 1,763 jet fighters, a navy of 600 ships, an armada of over 1,000 ballistic missiles, and 15 nuclear carrier battle groups all connected by the world’s first global system of satellite communications (Johnson, 2004; McCoy, 2017).

Halford Mackinder’s geopolitical theory claims that “Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island: Who rules the World-Island commands the World”(Mackinder, 1919). According to historian John Darwin, no empire had ever fulfilled the requirements of Mackinder’s theory like America after 1945. “This colossal imperium was on an unprecedented scale. No previous world power had entrenched itself at both ends of Eurasia or had the power to do so”(Darwin, 2008). From entrenched pivots in Japan and Western Europe, America surrounded the Eurasian landmass with a string of hundreds of bases. By 2011, 60 drone bases were added to this encirclement, allowing the American military to strike nearly anywhere in Africa and Asia with unmanned aircraft (McCoy, 2017). Operating in at least 133 out of the 189 nations recognized by the State Department in 2002, “our militarized empire is a physical reality”(Johnson, 2004). As Niall Ferguson puts it, “If military power is the sine qua non of empire, then it is hard to imagine how anyone could deny the imperial character of the United States today” (Ferguson, 2004).

Behind the megalithic overt power of the American military lies a covert apparatus which has become a central tier in the exertion of American power. Under the National Security Act of 1947, the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) were established. During Dwight Eisenhower’s eight years as President, the CIA conducted 170 major covert operations in 48 sovereign nations. By the end of the century, the CIA interfered in 82 democratic national elections and helped install sympathetic authoritarian regimes such as those of Suharto in Indonesia, Joseph Mobutu in Congo, and Augusto Pinochet in Chile.

From 1958 to 1975 alone, 36 democratic nations would fall victim to military coups, much due to the backing of CIA covert intelligence sharing, arms and propaganda funding, and military training (McCoy, 2017). Sharing Britain's strategy of prioritizing indirect rule, the CIA cultivated a cadre of collaborative elites and subordinate indigenous armies which allowed America to dominate the policies of sovereign nations without formal, direct control of their governing bodies.

In the 21st century, America's intelligence agencies expanded this covert mechanism to become what historian Alfred McCoy has labeled "a veritable fourth branch of the federal government." In 2013, National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden leaked documents outlining a clandestine apparatus the size of which the world had never seen. According to the documents, America's 16 intelligence agencies employed 107,035 employees and received a black budget of \$52.6 billion, 10% of the entire U.S. defense budget (McCoy, 2017). The lack of accountability provided by this massive black budget allowed a certain level of plausible deniability for politicians. As Henry Kissinger put it, "Congress had an opportunity to acquiesce in what it would not endorse" (Maier, 2006). Over 100 years prior to Snowden's leaks regarding the massive black budgets of America's intelligence apparatus, Rudyard Kipling penned "One advantage of the secret service is that it has no worrying audit. The service is ludicrously starved, of course, but the funds are administered by a few men who do not call for vouchers or present itemized accounts" (Kipling, 1924). The difference a century later is, of course, that the service is ludicrously fed.

America's inflated intelligence budget enabled its agencies to tap into the electronic communications of hundreds of millions of people, if not more, both domestic and abroad, including 117,675 "active surveillance targets" within America, a figure which is "a reasonable approximation of almost every politically active leader in America" (McCoy, 2017). In 2009, America's massive surveillance apparatus turned a corner with the establishment of Cyber Command (CYBERCOM) and the Pentagon announcement two years later that cyberspace was a fourth operational domain involving both defensive and offensive operations. Such offensive capabilities were put on display in 2006-2010 as America successfully destroyed 20% of Iran's nuclear centrifuges using viral cyberstrikes and in 2014's digital sabotage of North Korea's missile launch tests.

In addition to cyberspace, America is now pushing to concretely establish a fifth military operational domain in outer space. The New York Times reported in May 2005 that the U.S. Air Force was seeking to garner a national security directive from President George W. Bush to begin establishing military capabilities in space. "We haven't reached the point of strafing or bombing from space," said the acting secretary of the Air Force in 2004, "nonetheless, we are thinking about those possibilities" (Weiner, 2005). The Defense Department successfully launched X-37B in 2012, an unmanned space shuttle capable of continuously maintaining an altitude of 250 miles above the Earth's surface for a period of 15 months (McCoy, 2017). On June 18th, 2018 President Donald Trump announced that he had directed the Pentagon to establish a sixth branch of the armed forces to oversee military operations in space (Rogers, 2018). The U.S. President used Twitter to elegantly seek public support for the initiative, declaring "Space Force all the way!" (Trump, 2018).

Much like the British empire, deft American diplomacy worked in the background as both soft and hard power spread across the globe. "Multilateralism was to be the order of the day backed by American military might, if need be, to enforce the rules of the game" (McCormick, 2009). In the aftermath of World War II, American power was bolstered by a series of encircling alliances. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was established in 1949, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization in 1954, and the Middle East Treaty Organization in 1955. When multilateralism failed, such as SEATO's collapse at the end of the Second Indochina War, America fell back on bilateral military alliances such as the ANZUS Treaty with Australia and New Zealand, Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, US-Japan Security Treaty, and the Korea Mutual Defense Treaty. These treaties were part of the diplomatic maneuvering which allowed America's encirclement of the Eurasian landmass by building hundreds of military bases in sovereign nations without the use of brute unilateral force, including giant installations such as Ramstein Air Base in Germany and Subic Bay Naval Station in the Philippines.

Within just a few short years after the end of World War II, U.S. diplomats formed "nothing less than a new world order through international institutions." (McCoy, 2017). The Establishment of the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (the predecessor to the World Trade Organization), and the International Court of Justice at the Hague provided America with an international body of consensus through which to exert hegemonic control. Through the 44-nation agreement at the Bretton Woods Conference of 1944, American diplomats established formal controls to dominate the global economy through the IMF and World Bank.

During the process, and for 70 years since, America practiced a policy of international aid distribution that lands somewhere between the realms of diplomacy and economics. As Charles Maier put it, "if there is to be a 'hegemon' who relies on more than force alone, the nation playing the role must be perceived as providing a public good" (Maier, 2006). Economic aid distribution acted as the "public good" provided by American hegemony after 1945.

However, American aid distribution revolved around self-interest. Post-war aid distribution of 1-2 percent of U.S. GDP was multi-casual, allowing America to keep the international market attached to the new dollar standard. Establishing a European consumerism through Marshall Plan aid firmly inserted the continent into a U.S. export economy. This system led to the opening of the European Common Market in 1957, which provided the opportunity for “fast-footed American corporations [...] far more than before the war, of leaving their mark on entire sectors of economic activity, including those that had once seemed especially resistant to American corporate inroads, like food and retailing” (de Garzia, 2005). Economic aid and military presence became intertwined in post-war Europe, resulting in national acceptance of continued policy intervention by America (Maier, 2006).

However, the “public good” provided by America’s economic aid distribution should not be completely overshadowed by underlying realpolitik motivations. A true sense of altruism also existed in many U.S. policymakers, as well as in the American public. At the same time, the widespread acceptance of American presence in the political and economic policies of other sovereign nations did not result in a blindness to the strong-armed tactics often employed by Americans, a fact which William Appleman Williams was able to recognize as early as 1959. “America’s humanitarian urge to assist other peoples is undercut – even subverted – by the way it goes about helping them. Other societies come to feel that American policy causes them to lose their economic, political, and even psychological independence” (Williams, 1959).

Regardless of possible negative repercussions, American postwar policy was successfully able to establish an international economic system favorable to America’s export economy. The growth of manufactured goods in America increased by 500 percent between 1895 and the end of the First World War, resulting in exports increasing by nearly 240 percent (Rosenberg, 1982). Some of America’s largest export markets, such as auto mobiles, had reached upwards of 15 percent of total sales in foreign markets during the 1920s (Williams, 1959). However, the protectionist policies of the Great Depression had catastrophic consequences to these industries. By establishing firm control of an open international market by the 1950s, America successfully moved towards prevention of ills which had plagued its economy in the past. Furthermore, the establishment of the dollar as the international reserve currency had much longer beneficial effects as “the United States gradually made the transition from serving as an industrial exporter controlling technological advantages, to financier providing international capital” (Maier, 2006).

When America abandoned the Bretton Woods system and the gold standard in 1971, an agreement was made with Saudi Arabia to ensure oil trade would be denominated in dollars. This resulted in oil importing countries accumulating dollars as a means of protection from oil shock while under-developed nations continued to hoard dollars to protect their fragile economies from collapse. At a time of increasing import-export deficits, America could print fiat dollars and other countries would accept them for their exports. The flow of dollars back into America were invested in treasury bonds to offset the outflow. Through this system, the dollar’s role as the world’s reserve currency has acted, essentially, as a subsidy allowing America to maintain fiscal and trade deficits which would most likely cripple any other nation. “Dollar hegemony is what concealed the costs of Empire, which were effectively being paid for by the rest of the world, from US citizens. Other countries were compelled to accept fiat dollars because they had no choice. It was the world’s only reserve currency”(Hensman&Correggia, 2005). In other words, the establishment of the dollar as the international reserve currency after World War II has acted as the glue which holds the empire together.

A Comparative Analysis of the Anglo-Saxon Empires

Such a broad overview of the core characteristics of the two Anglo-Saxon empires – diplomatic strategy, military and intelligence apparatuses, soft power exertion, and economic dominance – shows a plethora of similarities which can help explain the perception of continuity. The cultural bond between the two nations is that of a familial relationship, each with their own quirks but ultimately embodying a parallel underlying character (Darwin, 2009). A commonality of linguistic, religious, intellectual, and political histories created a shared Atlantic culture which can be seen in the soft power mechanisms of both empires. Particularly given America’s colonial past under the British Crown, many of these mechanisms can be seen as directly handed down. The shift from British to American dominance in mass media, literature, and sports over the course of the 20th century certainly aligns with the theory of congruent imperial power shifting across the Atlantic.

Similarly, one can draw lines of connectivity between the military strategies of both empires. Halford Mackinder’s geopolitical theory of world island encirclement has obviously been followed by both the British and Americans at the peak of their powers. While some historians, such as Arnold Toynbee, have proclaimed the unprecedented level of encirclement of the Eurasian landmass by American bases to be wholly unique, this is not the case (McCoy, 2017). It is true that America’s physical presence far exceeds that of the British, as does the capability of the U.S. navy to forcefully safeguard that presence. However, sheer numbers and improved technologies do not differentiate geopolitical strategy in any meaningful way. America’s superiority in maintenance of Mackinder’s theory does not result in a unique characteristic when compared to the British.

Similarly, despite America conducting its post-WWII diplomatic maneuvering on a larger scale than the British ever had, the diplomatic strategies of the Anglo-Saxon empires have much in common. Both nations sent bilingual specialists to all corners of the globe to facilitate force multiplying multi-lateral treaties, alliances, and trade agreements to help maintain global hegemony. Neither nation shied away from bilateral agreements when it suited their needs, and both turned to the international forum when deemed more fruitful, whether that came through international conferences of world powers, as often the case with Britain, or formal international institutions under American guidance. Both empires also heavily relied on collaborating elites to help maintain a system of indirect hegemony over formally sovereign states. These empires were predominately led by pragmatic expansionists who used such diplomatic maneuvering to “abide by the old British dictum: Informal empire where possible, (more) formal empire where necessary,” to create a “subtle, indirect regime of international hegemony” as opposed to the unilateral use of brute force alone (McCormick, 2009; Johnson, 2009).

Economically, both nations began their imperial adventures as industrialized states with an export economy, focused on instituting open door policies “conceived and designed to win the victories without the wars” and keep international markets open to their products (Williams, 1959). As the Anglo-Saxon empires consolidated power across the globe, their gold backed currencies, first the pound sterling and then the dollar, became international reserve currencies. The financial entrepôts of London and New York emerged as centers of world finance with Britain and America both transitioning from exporters to financiers to rentiers from their position as economic hegemon. The similarities between the two liberal capitalist economies are numerous and easily compared.

Despite the similarities supporting the theory of continuity between the Anglo-Saxon empires, there are three characteristics which illustrate the unique development of American empire which cannot be, at least wholly, traced back to its British counterpart. These characteristics include the massive and continuous international distribution of economic aid, a central focus on prodigious clandestine capabilities in the application of hegemony, and an American exceptionalist ideology of imperial deniability. The procession of global empires over the past 600 years, from the Portuguese and the Spanish to the Dutch and the English, have all witnessed the transmission of numerous characteristics from predecessor empires. Yet, each global empire remains a unique entity wholly separate from those which came before it (McCoy, in press). The state of alliance between the two nations as the seat of power transferred across the Atlantic makes it very attractive to pretend that the imperial passing of the baton resulted in mirroring Anglo-Saxon empire. However, the unique characteristics of the American empire separate it from each of its predecessors, including the British empire.

When Arnold Toynbee incorrectly declared America’s global system of military bases to be the defining factor of the American empire’s unique character, he also proclaimed that America possessed a character “unprecedented in the history of empires” by making “her imperial position felt by giving economic aid to the people under her ascendancy, instead of [...] exploiting them economically” (McCoy, 2017). In this observation, Toynbee was at least partially correct. The first unique characteristic of American empire is its system of international aid distribution. However, Toynbee missed the mark when he claimed that economic aid was in lieu of economically exploitation. To the contrary, aid distribution has been used by America to strategically insert itself into the economies and policy making of other sovereign nations. In a sense, such strategic exertion of influence over other state’s affairs is not at all unique. Subtle application of power through economic means, in and of itself, is a characteristic shared by other empires. However, America’s use of economic aid distribution as a conduit through which to exert such power on a global scale is unprecedented. No other empire in human history has distributed economic aid as widely or in such massive amounts as America.

America’s reliance on its clandestine apparatus does not inherently seem unique. Intelligence gathering, surveillance, and covert operations certainly are not in and of themselves a unique part of American imperialism. Both the U.S. and British possessed intelligence agencies which have participated in espionage and covert penetration of other state bureaucracies, and both have spied on their own citizens under the guise of national security. “In the UK,” historian Peter Gill has pointed out, “the term national security has often been utilized by governments to justify going beyond normally permissible limits in the investigation of citizens’ activities. [...] National security is what Her Majesty’s government says it is.” Similar sentiments have echoed through America’s government. As John Dean, counsel to President Richard Nixon, put it in 1973, “National security is like executive privilege. It’s vague and you can use it for anything” (Gill, 1994). Both empire’s systems of structural autonomy in intelligence agencies has resulted in historical checks upon their activities being predominately self-imposed, leading to what many would consider abuse of power in surveillance of their own citizens.

However, the centrality of America’s clandestine apparatus in maintaining global hegemony lends a unique characteristic to the U.S. empire. American foreign policy has continuously relied on covert operations to spread hegemonic control over nations which traditional military and economic manipulation failed. Whereas British spies worked in the shadows to support diplomats and armies, the CIA has used coups and election manipulation to unilaterally topple unfriendly governments on a scale which no modern military has come close to matching. The U.S. clandestine apparatus is not merely a tool of information gathering and espionage, but a unique nexus of

covert warfare the likes of which the world has never seen. Far more than any other attribute, it is this clandestine apparatus which distinguishes U.S. empire from its predecessors.

A final, easily overlooked characteristic of the U.S. empire is a unique American exceptionalist ideology which can be best defined as imperial deniability. As Niall Ferguson put it, “The kingdom of England was proclaimed an empire – by Henry VIII – before it became one. The United States by contrast has long been an empire, but eschews the appellation” (Ferguson, 2004). Whereas citizens of other empires have glorified imperial achievements, Americans have remained wedded to a sense of exceptionalism which defined U.S. hegemony as benevolent, democratic, and immune to the realpolitik practiced by empires of the past. America has “no territorial ambitions,” claimed President George W. Bush in June of 2002. “We don’t seek an empire. Our nation is committed to freedom for ourselves and for others” (Ferguson, 2004). While American imperium crumbles in the 21st century, Americans outside of academia, and many within, remain tied to the grand illusion of their country’s perceived benevolent, anti-imperialist hegemony while current U.S. President Donald Trump, seemingly oblivious to the nature of the empire, disavows every founding feature of American power aside from military expenditures. It is a truly unique characteristic of the American empire which the British model did not, in any remote sense, share.

Denials of America’s empire only serve to separate it from its predecessors – as does the U.S. use of economic aid as a conduit for the exertion of economic and political power, and the centrality of America’s clandestine apparatus in shaping the governments of sovereign nations across the globe. The myth of Anglo-Saxon imperial continuity, the idea that the British system merely transferred across the Atlantic by imperial baton passing, simply falls apart with closer analysis. The American empire, like all global hegemonies which came before it, has adopted a number of attributes from its predecessors. However, it remains a system unique in and of itself, the likes of which the world has never seen prior to its emergence.

References

- Darwin, J. (2008). *After Tamerlane: The rise and fall of global empires, 1400-2000*. New York: Bloomsbury Press.
- Darwin, J. (2009). *The empire project: The rise and fall of the British world-system, 1830-1970*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- de Garzia, V. (2005). *Irresistible empire: America’s advance through twentieth-century Europe*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Ferguson, N. (2004). *Colossus: The price of America’s empire*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Fradera, J. (2009). Reading imperial transitions: Spanish contraction, British expansion, and American irruption.” In A. W. McCoy and F. A. Scarano (eds.), *Colonial crucibles: Empire in the making of the modern American state* (pp. 34-62). Madison: The University of Madison Press.
- Gill, P. (1994). *Policing politics: Security intelligence and the liberal democratic state*. London: Frank Cass.
- Hyam, R. (2010). *Understanding the British Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hensman, R. & Correggia, M. (2005). US dollar hegemony: The soft underbelly of empire. *Economic and Political Weekly Vol. 40, No. 12, Money, Banking and Finance*, 1091-1095.
- Ignatieff, M. (2003, January 5). The American empire; the burden. *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/05/magazine/the-american-empire-the-burden.html>.
- Johnson, C. (2004). *The sorrow of empire: Militarism, secrecy, and the end of the republic*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Johnson, C. (2009) Understanding the American empire: Colonialism, Latin Americanism, and professional social science, 1898-1920. In A. W. McCoy and F. A. Scarano (eds.), *Colonial crucibles: Empire in the making of the modern American state* (pp. 175-192). Madison: The University of Madison Press.
- Kennedy, D. (2007, March). Essay and reflection: On American empire from a British imperial perspective. *The International History Review, Vol. 29, No. 1*, 83-108.
- Kipling, R. (1924). *Kim*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Kurth, J. (2002, Spring). Migration and the dynamics of empire. *The National Interest No. 71*, 5-16.
- Le Carre, J. (1977). *The honourableschoolboy*. New York: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Mackinder, H. J. (1902). *Britain and the British seas*. New York: Appleton and Co.
- Mackinder, H. J. (1919). *Democratic ideals and reality: A study in the politics of reconstruction*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Maier, C. S. (2006). *Among empires: American ascendancy and its predecessors*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- McCormick, T. (2009). From old empire to new: The changing dynamics and tactics of American empire. In A. W. McCoy and F. A. Scarano (eds.), *Colonial crucibles: Empire in the making of the modern American state* (pp. 63-82). Madison: The University of Madison Press.

- McCoy, A. W., Scarano, F. A., & Johnson, C. (2009). On the tropic of cancer: Transitions and transformations in the U.S. imperial state. In A. W. McCoy and F. A. Scarano (eds.), *Colonial crucibles: Empire in the making of the modern American state* (pp. 3-33). Madison: The University of Madison Press.
- McCoy, A. W. (2017). *In the shadows of the American century*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- McCoy, A. W. (in press). *To govern the globe: World orders and catastrophic change*. Chicago: Haymarket Book.
- Nye Jr., J. S. (1990, Autumn). Soft Power. *Foreign Policy No. 80 Twentieth Anniversary*, 153-171.
- Nye Jr., J. S. (2008, March). Public diplomacy and soft power. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 616, Public Diplomacy in a Changing World*, 94-109.
- Oliphant, J. O. (1938, June). The American missionary spirit, 1828-1835. *Church History Vol. 7 No. 2*, 125-137.
- Porter, A. (2005). An overview, 1700-1914. In N. Etherington (ed.), *Missions and empire* (pp. 40-63). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rathbun, B. C. (2014). *Diplomacy's value: Creating security in 1920s Europe and the contemporary Middle East*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Robinson, R. (1976). Non-European foundations of European imperialism: Sketch for a theory of collaboration." In Wm. R. Lewis (ed.), *The Robinson and Gallagher controversy* (pp. 128-148). New York: New Viewpoints.
- Rogers, K. (2018, June 18). Trump orders establishment of space force as sixth military branch. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/18/us/politics/trump-space-force-sixth-military-branch.html>.
- Rosenberg, E. S. (1982). *Spreading the American dream: American economic and cultural expansion, 1890-1945*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Rosenberg, E. S. (2010). Consumer capitalism and the end of the Cold War. In M. P. Leffler & O. A. Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge history of the Cold War* (pp 489-512). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Suri, J. (2009). The limits of American empire: Democracy and militarism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In A. W. McCoy and F. A. Scarano (eds.), *Colonial crucibles: Empire in the making of the modern American state* (pp. 523-531). Madison: The University of Madison Press.
- Tarling, N. (1999) The establishment of the colonial regimes. In N. Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge history of Southeast Asia: Volume two, part one, from 1800 to the 1930s* (pp. 3-72). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Trump, D. (2018, August 9). Space Force all the way! *Twitter*, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1027586174448218113>.
- Walton, C. (2013). *Empire of secrets: British intelligence, the Cold War, and the twilight of empire*. New York: The Overlook Press.
- Weiner, T. (2005, May 18). Air force seeks Bush's approval for space arms. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/18/business/air-force-seeks-bushs-approval-for-space-weapons-programs.html>.
- Wells, H. G. (2018). *The New Machiavelli*. Champaign: Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1047/1047-h/1047-h.htm>.
- Williams, W. A. (1959). *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc.