
The Whore of Babylon and the Specter of Universal Monarchy: Protestant Roots of American Foreign Policy

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A Nation Adrift

For more than three decades now, the most powerful nation on earth has lacked a truly national foreign policy. Our national security and diplomatic elites, to be sure, have maintained an impressive consensus of America as benevolent hegemon, global policeman of democratic ideals, but have been routinely vilified by a distrustful public. Although the national mood has veered from optimistic idealism in the 1990s, to vengeful self-assertion in the 2000s, to disillusioned disengagement in the 2010s, none of these mood swings has succeeded in crystallizing a shared vision of America's role in world affairs. Every assertion of power has evoked shame and self-doubt, every withdrawal from power a guilty sense of abdicated responsibility.

From one standpoint, the causes are not far to seek. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the "evil empire," America lost the common enemy that could unite both pro-democracy liberals and national-interest conservatives. No more could we see ourselves—however disingenuously at times—as the scrappy underdog fighting for freedom in a world teetering on the brink of tyranny; freedom was here now, and

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it was our job to keep it. Peacekeeping in a world of elusive threats and petty dictators is an unglamorous task, and most Americans could not help feeling a bit sheepish about the sheer preponderance of our power. Rather than stirring patriotic pride in America's dazzling military supremacy, Desert Storm in 1991 proved a hollow victory, almost as if our gnawing national conscience were muttering to us, "pick on someone your own size." Surely such self-doubt is a common enough malady for hegemony; what nation would not prefer to be an underdog rather than an overlord?

Actually, very few. America's underdog mentality, our desperate need to see ourselves not as empire but as anti-empire, is a striking anomaly in world-historical terms. To be sure, many powerful empires have preferred to sell conflicts to their citizens as necessary defensive actions, rather than naked plays for power. But most have also basked in the glory of hegemony, aspiring to positions of supremacy over all their rivals, and embracing myths of a divine mission to rule the known world. America, to be sure, has hardly been immune to a providentialist vision of being God's gift to the world. But throughout our history, our leading statesmen have seen this mission in fundamentally anti-imperial terms. John Quincy Adams famously declared in 1821 that America "goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own."¹ A quarter century later, Albert Gallatin admonished his countrymen, "Your mission was to be a model for all other governments and for all other less-favored nations, to adhere to the most elevated principles of political morality, to apply all your faculties to the gradual improvement of your own institutions and social state, and by your example to exert a moral influence most beneficial to mankind at large."²

Even the brief imperial moment of 1898-1902, which saw the American flag planted in Cuba and on the far side of the Pacific, almost immediately provoked a backlash of revulsion at such self-aggrandizement. McKinley and Roosevelt justified their assertive policies to the American people as merely an attempt to beat back and hold back the imperial pretensions of Europe, and equip the liberated peoples for self-government

¹ John Quincy Adams, *An Address Delivered . . . on the Occasion of Reading the Declaration of Independence* (Washington, DC, 1821), 29; quoted in David C. Hendrickson, *Union, Nation, or Empire: The American Debate over International Relations, 1789-1941* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 82.

² Henry Adams, *The Life of Albert Gallatin* (Philadelphia, 1880), 676, quoted in Hendrickson, *Union, Nation or Empire*, 184.

as quickly as possible. When America was forced to go abroad in search of monsters to destroy in 1917 and again in 1941, she did so with the greatest reluctance, as the anti-imperial nation forced to cut autocratic empires down to size and proclaim liberty to the captives. The descent of the Iron Curtain following World War II enabled us to continue playing this familiar role, albeit with vastly increased powers, until near the end of the twentieth century.

From 1789 to 1989, the consensus of American foreign policy was clear: if we were to be an empire, it would only be as an “empire of liberty,” in Jefferson’s terms, countering the Old World power politics by constructing, modeling, and promoting around the globe a federation of self-determining peoples. Such a term was consciously ironic, for it was a truism to Jefferson and his Protestant contemporaries that *empires* tend to be hostile to liberty. Americans agreed that no one can long rule over an extended territory, composed of different peoples and cultures, except by force and autocracy, stripping citizens of their political and civil liberties. This, the English-speaking peoples had insisted, was the basic lesson of the Protestant Reformation and the centuries-long struggle against “popery.” America, then, could only fulfill her Protestant mission on behalf of liberty so long as this remained an essentially negative mission, the task of ensuring that no unchallenged global superpower could impose its will upon the world. Once America suddenly found herself thrust into the role of universal empire, her calling to spread liberty throughout the world suddenly felt like an intolerable contradiction.

This identity crisis was not unprecedented, however. Americans had been through it once before, in 1763. America inherited her anti-imperialist self-conception, consciously and explicitly, from her mother country, Britain, who failed to keep faith with her Protestant vocation and yielded to the glittering temptations of universal monarchy. Only if we understand the longer story of America’s self-conception as the anti-imperial guardian of liberty, and the deeply Protestant roots of this ideology, can we understand why America no longer comprehends her place in the world, and learn how to restore her to global leadership in the face of the newest threat to the global balance of power.

Reformation England: the Original Empire of Liberty

In the famous preamble to the 1533 Act in Restraint of Appeals, Thomas Cromwell declared, on behalf of his royal master Henry VIII, that “by divers sundry old authentic histories and chronicles it is mani-

festly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an empire.”³ As in Jefferson’s phrase “empire of liberty,” there was a self-conscious irony here. What, after all, could it mean to speak of “*an* empire”—with the indefinite article? Everyone in Europe knew, after all, that there was but one empire, but one *dominus totius mundi*, “lord of all the world,” and that was Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor.⁴

We may chuckle at the incongruous title now, recalling Voltaire’s quip, but we must realize just how great a hold the mythos of Rome still had on the imagination of Europe, eleven centuries on. In their own day, the Roman emperors had imagined themselves to be the lords of the earth—much of it *de facto*, the rest of it *de jure*—tasked by the gods with enforcing peace and order among all peoples. When Constantine bowed the knee to Jesus as King of Kings, the universal vocation of Rome was merged with the universal mission of the Christian church—though not without tensions. In the waning days of the old empire, Pope Gelasius I summarized the new understanding: “Two powers there are by whom this world is governed.” Although frequently quoted as an affirmation of “spiritual” and “temporal authority” in the abstract, Gelasius’s formula quickly took on a more precise meaning: there were two specific powers—the bishop of Rome and the emperor of Rome—each tasked with the governance of the whole world. Although for many centuries that followed, it was hard to say where the legitimate emperor of Rome was to be found, or how to square his paltry powers with his exalted official claims, by 1519, the gap between rhetoric and reality had at last closed, as Charles V, King of Spain and Naples, Duke of Burgundy, and Lord of the Indies took the imperial crown.

For centuries, Gelasius’s neat formula had glossed over violent disagreements over just how pope and emperor were to divide the labor of world-rule between them, with the former sometimes wielding the lion’s share of real authority in Europe. Charles, however, loyal son of the church though he may have been, lost little time in asserting his preeminence, sacking Rome in 1527 after a dispute with the pope. When, two years later, Henry VIII sought an annulment of his marriage to Charles’s aunt Catherine of Aragon in order to secure his dynastic succession,

³ *Act in Restraint of Appeals* (1533), in J.R. Tanner, *Tudor Constitutional Documents, AD 1485-1603: With An Historical Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), 41.

⁴ I am indebted here to Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain, and France, c. 1500–c. 1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), chs. 1-2; for Charles V’s claims to universal monarchy, see Geoffrey Parker, *Emperor: A New Life of Charles V* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 106, 490-91, 514-15.

Charles leaned hard on the pope to refuse. Henry, tired of feeling like a vassal, decided to declare independence, asserting the autonomy and full sovereignty of his island kingdom.⁵

Initially, there was little enough of liberty and even less of Protestantism in Henry's little empire. It stood for national freedom against the pope's claim to legislate and dispense at pleasure for other Christian peoples, but civil and religious liberties were few and far between in Henrician England, and Luther's declaration of "the freedom of a Christian" was on the banned book list. However, within a few short decades, a series of events combined to forge within the English imagination a fierce commitment to Protestantism and liberty, and a hostility to "popery," empire, and despotism.

After Henry's death in 1547, his trusted servant Thomas Cranmer forcefully steered the boy-king, Edward VI, in the direction of thoroughgoing Protestant reform. Before he could complete this bold project, however, Edward died, leaving the throne to his devoutly Catholic sister, Mary. Rather than patiently weaning her subjects off of the new religion and leaving their national pride intact, Mary lost no time in placing England under the authority of the pope, marrying Philip of Spain, son and heir-apparent to Emperor Charles V, and burning hundreds of her Protestant subjects alive to purge the realm of its heresy. Henceforth, a set of hateful associations was branded onto the English psyche: popery, foreign domination, Spanish empire, and tyranny over conscience. When Mary in turn died in 1558, the religious carousel spun back toward Protestantism with the accession of her sister Elizabeth, who established the Reformed faith but eschewed direct religious persecution, famously forbearing to "make windows into men's souls." A little over a decade later, Pope Pius V rashly excommunicated Elizabeth, called on her subjects to overthrow her, and invited foreign Catholic powers such as Spain to invade England if necessary and restore it to obedience to the pope. All he succeeded in doing was grafting anti-popery more firmly onto the stalk of the growing English nationalism. In 1573, the French Catholic King Charles IX oversaw the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre, in which perhaps 20,000 Protestants were slaughtered throughout France, and thousands more fled to England for refuge—offering further confirma-

⁵ For a fuller discussion of this under-noted dimension of the English Reformation and its contemporary political resonances, see my essay, "The English Reformation: England's First Brexit," *The American Conservative* (January 15, 2020): <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-english-reformation-englands-first-brexite/> (accessed February 20, 2023).

tion of the association between popery and tyranny. When in 1588 the mighty Spanish Armada descended on England to try and make good the threat in Pius V's excommunication, Elizabeth powerfully rallied the national and religious feelings of her people in one of history's great David vs. Goliath showdowns.

By the start of the seventeenth century, then, a clear sense of English national vocation had taken hold: they were a small but independent people, making no claims to wide dominions but with a powerful navy that could hold their own on the seven seas; they took pride in their representative Parliament, their chartered liberties, and their rights of conscience; they were Protestant, not papist, and would succor, as opportunity allowed, their embattled Protestant brethren on the Continent. Against them was ranged a coordinated, global threat: an arbitrary, tyrannical pope who lorded over kings and consciences; absolutist Catholic rulers who trampled underfoot chartered liberties and representative assemblies; and a powerful Spanish monarchy that claimed to have inherited global hegemony from the Roman Empire and the pope's explicit authorization, and that backed up such claims with mounds of New World gold. England's settlements in Virginia were conceived as part of her Protestant, anti-imperial mission: to puncture Spain's inflated claims to lordship of the world and roll back her tide of Catholic missionary work. William Symonds, preaching to the Virginia Company in 1609, foresaw success as long as "such as doe manage the expedition, are carefull to carry thither no Traitors, nor papists that depend on the Great Whore."⁶

While England's self-image was unduly flattering, to be sure, their fear of popery was hardly paranoia, as recent events had shown. Indeed, there was a powerful political logic to their theory of religion, empire, and liberty. Even today, liberty is seen largely in terms of self-rule, and tyranny in terms of unaccountability. These concerns framed the early modern debate as well. By the sheer geographical breadth of its claims, the Papacy stunted the liberty of the various realms of Christendom to direct each its own national life; by the spiritual depth of his claims, the pope claimed lordship even over the inner sanctum of conscience, allowing no space whatsoever in which the individual could stand alone before his Maker. By his claims to supremacy over all other church au-

⁶ William Symonds, "The Epistle Dedicatorie," in *Virginia: A Sermon Preached at White-Chapel* (London, 1609), A3v, 19, 43-46, quoted in Cynthia J. Van Zandt, "The Gunpowder Plot and the Establishment of Virginia," in Evan Haefeli, ed., *Against Popery: Britain, Empire, and Anti-Catholicism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 60.

thorities, laws, and councils, the pope was the most absolute of rulers, unaccountable to any human authority. Protestants thus protested both the universal scope and despotic form of the Roman church. Moreover, they became increasingly convinced that as Rome had hardened its claims, it had drawn temporal rulers into the same mold. Foremost among these, of course, was the Hapsburg Spanish Monarchy, to which, as heir of the Roman and Holy Roman Empires, the pope had granted almost the same universality that he himself claimed. Spain became increasingly despotic and inquisitorial in these decades, and Catholic France was not far behind. Everywhere, English Protestants discerned the same logic: Catholic powers greedily sought to rule over other peoples, body and soul, governing autocratically, without accountability, and without regard for their subjects' liberties.

The seventeenth century offered little evidence to challenge this narrative. While Spain and her Hapsburg cousins in Austria declined in power, they showed little inclination to moderate their claims, liberalize their government, or stop persecuting their subjects. Meanwhile, France was fast on its way to inheriting Spain's mantle. The Stuart monarchs in England, aping French ways and marrying French princesses, sought increasingly to rule without Parliament and finally, under James II, without Protestantism. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 was prompted not merely by James's growing threat to English constitutional liberties but by what looked like a mortal threat to Protestantism and national independence in Europe. Louis XIV, the "Most Christian King" of France, saw himself as a new Charlemagne, tasked with restoring the purity of the Roman Catholic faith and the glory of the old Roman Empire throughout Europe. French domination was evidenced in the rise of the French language as the *lingua franca* of Europe, as one French writer celebrated:

It is, Monseigneur, with this beautiful & glorious language that Louis the Great gives laws not only to his own empire but also to Europe entire—so that other sovereigns appear to think it glorious & a matter for serious application to learn French solely in order better to understand the wishes of a prince whom they all recognize as their sovereign judge . . . the French language has already established something like a universal monarchy not only over all the other languages but also over all the nations, where it has gone as if to mark out the places where our sovereigns shall one day make themselves heard and obeyed.⁷

⁷ Quoted in Paul Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty: War, Religion, Commerce, Climate, Terrain, Technology, Uneasiness of Mind, the Spirit of Political Vigilance, and the Foundations of the Modern Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 8.

By the early 1680s, Louis had undisputed military hegemony on the Continent, and when in 1685, he revoked the Edict of Nantes and began exterminating French Protestantism, the English became eager to join a pan-Protestant league led by William, Prince of Orange—and ultimately, invited him to take their throne.

Rule, Britannia! The Eighteenth-Century Ideology of the British Anti-Empire

The crowning of William and Mary in 1689 committed England firmly to the doctrines of the balanced constitution at home and the balance of power abroad, doctrines which served as the two pillars of British pride and policy for the next seventy-five years. By the former, the rights of Crown and Parliament were delicately equipoised and the rights of ordinary Englishmen protected by the English Bill of Rights and an increasingly independent judiciary. Liberty was guaranteed, and popery excluded. By the latter, England was committed to a broad European alliance of mostly Protestant states committed to resisting French domination and maintaining a relative equilibrium on the Continent.

This goal seemed to have been briefly achieved by the end of the War of the League of Augsburg in 1697, but no sooner had balance been restored than the specter of “universal monarchy” raised its head again when Charles II of Spain died childless in November 1700 and named Louis XIV’s grandson Philip as his heir. The prospective union of the French and Spanish Empires under Bourbon control threatened the greatest imbalance of power in Europe (and the world) since the Fall of Rome, provoking the War of the Spanish Succession. Only the Duke of Marlborough’s legendary march to the Danube and stunning victory at the Battle of Blenheim in 1704 averted this threat; after ten more years of war, absolutist Catholic France had been humbled, the balance of power restored, and free Protestant Britain was the wonder of Europe.

This shocking reversal of French fortunes prompted a generation of soul-searching among its literati, increasingly disenchanted with the extravagance of the Sun-King’s seven-decade reign and inclined to look to victorious England for cultural and political inspiration. Foremost among this rising generation of *philosophes* was Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, whose *Spirit of Laws* was to establish him as the foremost political philosopher of the century. Before publishing this *magnum opus*, however, Montesquieu had penned three shorter classics, each in their own way puncturing the mythos of Catholic empire and championing the ascendant ideology of Protestant England. Although a

lifelong Catholic, Montesquieu had married a hated Protestant Huguenot, and spent much of his career battling the censors of the Sorbonne for his flirtations with heresy. In his first work, *The Persian Letters* (1721), Montesquieu savagely lampooned both the Bourbon monarchy and the Catholic Church through the extended metaphor of a Persian harem, with sycophantic courtiers and celibate priests pictured as impotent but sadistic eunuchs under an absolute master, who fancies himself enlightened while exercising a despotic dominion over the bodies of his subjects. Montesquieu followed this bestseller with a work that proved too controversial to publish, his *Reflections on Universal Monarchy*, which Paul Rahe has called “an angry diatribe against Louis XIV and everything for which the Sun King of France had once stood.”⁸ Rather than launching a frontal attack, Montesquieu then decided to tackle the same subject obliquely in his *Considerations on the Romans* (1734), in which he sought to show how the Roman republic had lost its early freedom and virtue when, in its thirst for expansion, it became too large to govern by republican means and had to resort to despotism. This was a subversive narrative in early modern Europe, where for nearly ten centuries a succession of rulers had sought to model themselves on Roman emperors and promised to their subjects an imperial peace to match the *pax Romana*.

If Rome was a warning to be heeded rather than an example to be followed, Montesquieu’s final work would point a better way forward by praising the remarkable constitution of the modern-day Carthage, the commercial rather than military power that was Great Britain.⁹ In the *Spirit of Laws* (1748), Montesquieu developed a highly influential argument that linked the size of dominions with the form of government: republics can govern small territories united by shared communitarian ideals, while large empires must resort to despotism to impose order on peoples who lack shared customs and a shared vision of the common good. Between these two forms lies at least the possibility of a moderate government that can preserve freedom within a society that is large, so long as it is not *too* large. Britain, “where the republic hides under the form of monarchy,”¹⁰ offered the best model, in Montesquieu’s view,

⁸ Rahe, *Montesquieu*, 26.

⁹ Rahe notes how the comparison to Carthage and Rome was commonplace among French writers of the eighteenth century, many of whom expected France to ultimately triumph over her commercial neighbor just as Rome had. Montesquieu, however, realized that this time, the tables were likely to be turned (*Montesquieu*, 58).

¹⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, translated edited by Anne Cohler, Basia Miller, and Harold Stone, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought* (Cambridge:

with its delicately balanced powers of King, Lords, and Commons, and was to be commended for fighting to preserve on the Continent other medium-sized monarchies against the threat of hegemonic empire.

In this praise, Montesquieu was joined by another great Continental political theorist, Emer de Vattel, whose *The Law of Nations* (1757) was to become the virtual Bible of international lawyers and diplomats for the next sixty years and a favorite text of the American Founders. As a Swiss Protestant in the service of the King of Prussia, Vattel had less difficulty than Montesquieu in enthusiastically sharing the Protestant political vision of the English. He railed in one of the longest chapters of the work against “the enormous powers of the popes” which “directly militates against the independence of nations and the sovereignty of princes.”¹¹ One of the foremost theorists of nationalism, Vattel captured the essential spirit of Henry VIII’s *Act in Restraint of Appeals* when he wrote in this section, “A nation ought not to suffer foreigners to dictate laws to her, to interfere in her concerns, or deprive her of her natural advantages.”¹² If this were true with reference to a spiritual despot like the Catholic Church, how much more so with reference to a temporal despot who aspired to universal empire? Accordingly, in his influential defense of the right of pre-emptive war, he specifically discusses the War of the Spanish Succession, observing,

to have tamely suffered the union of the monarchy of Spain with that of France, would, according to all the rules of human foresight, have been nothing less than delivering up all Europe to servitude, or at least reducing it to the most critical and precarious situation . . . In the preceding supposition, who could have advised the powers of Europe to suffer such a formidable accession to the power of Louis the Fourteenth? Too certain of the use he would have made of it, they have joined in opposing it: and in this their safety warranted them.¹³

In other words, although ordinarily wars must be fought only in self-defense, it may be just to take action pre-emptively against any nation that has manifested a clear design to establish unshakeable hegemony over its neighbors. To prevent such hegemony, Vattel extols the policy of “the equilibrium of power; by which is understood such a disposition of things, as that no one potentate be able absolutely to predominate, and

Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1.5.19 (p. 70).

¹¹ Emer de Vattel, *The Law of Nations*, edited by Bela Kapossy and Richard Whatmore, Natural Law and Enlightenment Classics (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2008), 172.

¹² Vattel, *Law of Nations*, 173.

¹³ Vattel, *Law of Nations*, 493-94.

prescribe laws to the others.”¹⁴ The essential force in this equilibrium, Vattel observed, was England, “whose opulence and formidable fleets have a powerful influence, without alarming any state on the score of its liberty, because that nation seems cured of the rage of conquest—England, I say, has the glory of holding the political balance.”¹⁵

During this Hanoverian heyday of English ascendancy, Englishmen themselves basked in the glory that foreign admirers accorded them, identifying a close connection between their Protestantism, their liberty at home, and their influence for liberty abroad. This last, many deemed, was secured by their unique role as a great sea power, rather than a territorial empire. Instead of being compelled to rule despotically over the bodies and souls of countless subject peoples, as Spain and France had aspired to do in their vast land empires, Britain could rule the waves of the world, securing prosperity through free commerce with all. This self-understanding was powerfully summarized in James Thomson’s famous anthem “Rule, Britannia!” of 1740:

The nations, not so blest as thee
Must, in their turns, to tyrants fall;
While thou shalt flourish great and free,
The deat and envy of them all.
"Rule, Britannia! rule the waves:
Britons never will be slaves."

As David Armitage summarizes in *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, “The conception that emerged in the 1730s defined Britain and the British Empire . . . as Protestant, commercial, maritime and free.”¹⁶ This conception, however, was to be sorely tested in the wake of the Seven Years’ War. In this great global conflict against the combined powers of Catholic France, Austria, and Spain, the climax of two centuries of Protestant England’s struggle against popish “universal empire,” Britain emerged, somewhat to its own surprise, as the new global hegemon, endowed now not merely with naval supremacy but, significantly, with a vast territorial empire as well.

¹⁴ Vattel, *Law of Nations*, 496.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 497.

¹⁶ David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8. For a clear contemporary statement of Britain’s foreign policy in this period, albeit with some salutary cautions, see David Hume’s essay, “Of the Balance of Power,” in Eugene F. Miller, ed., *Hume: Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, revised edition (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1994), 332-41.

***“A Systematic Project of Absolute Power”: The Colonial Revolt
against Universal Monarchy***

Nowhere was this victory for British arms and ideals more triumphantly celebrated than in her North American colonies. For the colonists, the religious dimensions of this war had loomed large from the outset. During the seventeenth century, New Englanders had lost little time in transferring their chief hostility from the popish despotism of Spain to the much nearer and more threatening popish despotism of New France. The link between popery and tyranny in their minds was cemented, as for their fellow Englishmen in the mother-country, by the trauma of Catholic James II’s reign, during which he had abolished representative government in Massachusetts and sought to bring his colonial subjects to heel under autocratic royal governors. The colonists subsequently participated enthusiastically in the long series of wars against the French, which Puritan New Englanders in particular had little difficulty in viewing through the apocalyptic lens of Christ vs. Antichrist. On the outbreak of the Seven Years’ (French and Indian) War, ministers throughout the colonies reminded their flocks of the cruelty and tyranny of the Roman Catholic religion, and stirred soldiers up to fight with fears that they would meet the same fate as the French Huguenots if they failed in their struggle. Rev. Samuel Davies of Virginia had declared the war “the commencement of this grand decisive conflict between the Lamb and the beast.”¹⁷

Little wonder then that the colonists so exulted in the vindication of the Lamb by British arms. Upon the announcement of the Peace of Paris in 1763, Rev. Samuel Cooper of the prestigious Brattle Street Church in Boston enthused from the pulpit,

What Enlargement of the British Empire do we now behold! What a security to these Colonies! What Room to expand themselves: what a Fund of Wealth and Commerce to the Mother Kingdom! . . . How remarkably has divine Providence appeared in our Favor; what great Things has God done for us! Even Canada, in all its Extent, is but a small Part of that Territory that is now added to our Sovereign’s Dominions upon this Continent!¹⁸

His fellow Bostonian James Otis wrote the next year, “If I have one

¹⁷ Samuel Davies, “The Crisis: or, Uncertain Doom of the Kingdoms at Particular Times” (Hanover, Va.: 1756), quoted in Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 41.

¹⁸ Samuel Cooper, Sermon: Ps. 29:10-11, 11 Aug. 1763, quoted in Charles W. Akers, *The Divine Politician: Samuel Cooper and the American Revolution in Boston* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1982), 35.

ambitious wish, 'tis to see Great-Britain at the head of the world, and to see my King, under God, the father of mankind."¹⁹

It was not long, however, before the victory began to appear in darker shades. These ecstatic sentiments, after all, represented a betrayal of a quarter-millennium-old ideology of anti-imperialism. For centuries, Britain had (she told herself, at any rate) eschewed empire, making it her mission simply to ensure that no one else gained a dangerous dominance over the world. How was a people appointed by God to *prevent* the establishment of "universal empire" to respond when they found the scepter of the world in their hands? How to adapt the policy of the "balance of power" when they themselves had thrown it out of balance? And how could the balanced constitution of liberty be applied to vast new territories of subject peoples? The conventional wisdom, after all, was that extended territories demanded despotic powers to be effectively ruled. To many American colonists, the jarring new policy of the Stamp Act came as a rude reminder that Britain's empire of liberty was not immune to this inexorable political logic. John Adams was among the first to highlight the role reversal, discerning in the Act "a design . . . to strip us in a great measure of the means of knowledge," a classic hallmark of "the man of sin, the whore of Babylon, the mystery of iniquity" against which the colonists had always set themselves.²⁰

The British themselves soon began to have second thoughts about the situation. The Scots, as attentive students of Montesquieu and ambivalent co-participants in England's imperial glory, were particularly quick to voice concerns. Before the war, David Hume had observed in his essay "On the Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," that "Extensive conquests when pursued, must be the ruin of every free government; and of the more perfect governments sooner than of the imperfect; because of the very advantages which the former possess above the latter."²¹ His fellow Edinburgher Adam Ferguson elaborated at length upon this theme in his *Essay on the Idea of Civil Society* (1768). Like Montesquieu, Ferguson saw in the experience of the Roman Empire a salutary warning. For a long while, it was able to increase the boundaries of its republic without undermining its public spirit or bonds of mutual loyalty; but at some point, the expansion passed a critical threshold, "ruinous to the virtue

¹⁹ James Otis, "The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved" (1763), in Bruce Frohnen, ed., *The American Republic: Primary Sources* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), 123.

²⁰ John Adams, "A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law," in George W. Carey, ed., *The Political Writings of John Adams* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2000), 20, 9.

²¹ David Hume, "On the Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," in Miller, ed., *Hume: Essays*, 529.

and the happiness of mankind.”²² Inevitably, the point was reached at which the ordinary Roman citizen realized that the new possessions meant nothing to him except the steady diminution of his own political relevance; they were of value only to the wealthy and powerful who could monopolize the booty of conquest or the profits of trade. As ordinary citizens lost their sense of loyalty to a common project, they could no longer be governed freely, but only despotically: “Hence the ruinous progress of empire; and hence free nations, under the shew of acquiring dominion, suffer themselves, in the end, to be yoked with the slaves they had conquered.”²³ Fusing the insights of Montesquieu and Vattel on the separation of powers within nations and the balance of powers between nations, Ferguson concluded his *Essay* with the extraordinary warning, “In every state, the freedom of its members depends on the balance and adjustment of its interior parts; and the existence of any such freedom among mankind, depends on the balance of nations. In the progress of conquest, those who are subdued are said to have lost their liberties; but from the history of mankind, to conquer, or to be conquered, has appeared, in effect, the same.”²⁴

The British experience in North America during the 1760s and 1770s seemed to eloquently bear out these sobering words. As if Parliament’s effort to assert its authority over the long semi-autonomous American colonies were not proving disastrous enough, there was the question of French Canada to resolve. Although both Britain and her colonies had captured Quebec to pry this valuable territory loose from the grip of popery and secure North America for Protestantism, now they had to figure out what to do about their new Roman Catholic subjects. The classic curse of territorial empire immediately came back to bite: how could diverse peoples, religions, and cultures be integrated within a free and representative government? With the Quebec Act of 1774, Britain sought to steer a middle course, granting free exercise of Roman Catholicism but denying the Canadians any representative legislature and some of the protections of English law. The American colonists, already near the boiling point after Parliament had responded to the Boston Tea Party by effectively imposing martial law on Massachusetts, interpreted the Quebec Act as proof positive that the spirit of popery had infected the English government. The rights of Englishmen had been sacrificed on the altar of universal empire, and the dreaded “arbitrary government”

²² Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 7th ed. (Edinburgh, 1814), 97.

²³ Ferguson, *Essay*, 100.

²⁴ Ferguson, *Essay*, 454

that had characterized Catholic monarchies was now to be the norm in America. Many felt that the Act's incorporation of trans-Appalachian North America into Quebec province was a betrayal, robbing the colonies of the fruits of victory in the Seven Years' War, which they had fought to ensure that popery would *not* dominate the American interior. More conspiratorial minds wondered if the Quebec Act might not perhaps mark the prelude toward the establishment of Roman Catholicism in the Thirteen Colonies.

Indeed, conspiracy theories abounded on every side in the colonies, as old Jacobite fears gave rise to the notion that the Catholic Stuart pretender Bonnie Prince Charlie was secretly controlling a cabal in Parliament to subvert the Protestant constitution, and that King George III had been reduced to a puppet. How else to explain such a defection from English principles? The First Continental Congress itself (via the pen of John Jay), declared that it "was evidently the object of the act" that by empowering French Catholics devoted "to an administration so friendly to their religion, they might become formidable to us, and on occasion, be fit instruments in the hands of power to reduce the ancient, free Protestant colonies to the same state of slavery with themselves."²⁵ The young Alexander Hamilton wrote in his *Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress*,

Does not your blood run cold, to think an English parliament should pass an act for the establishment of arbitrary power and popery in such an extensive country? If they had had any regard to the freedom and happiness of mankind, they would never have done it. . . . This act develops the dark designs of the ministry more fully than any thing they have done, and shows that they have formed a systematic project of absolute power.²⁶

It took only a few months for majority sentiment in the colonies to realign around the idea that, now that their beloved Britain had become the feared universal monarchy, the agent of popish despotism, it was up to the colonies to lift the fallen standard of Protestant liberty and display to the world a new birth of freedom. As one pamphleteer declared in 1774, it was clear now that "all the spirit of patriotism or of liberty now left in England" was but "the last snuff of an expiring lamp."²⁷ However,

²⁵ John Jay, *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay, I: 1763-1781*, edited by Henry P. Johnston (New York: Burt Franklin, 1890), 34.

²⁶ Alexander Hamilton, *A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress*, in *Alexander Hamilton: Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 2001), 34.

²⁷ Matthew Robinson-Morris, Lord Rokeby, *Considerations on the Measures Carrying on with Respect to the British Colonies in America*, 2nd ed. (London, 1774), 148, quoted in Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 141.

America herself would “ere long will build an empire upon the ruins of Great Britain; will adopt its constitution purged of its impurities, and from an experience of its defects will guard against those evils which have wasted its vigor and brought it to an untimely end.”²⁸ God was at work “in America now giving a new epocha to the history of the world.”²⁹

Between Two Antichrists: The Delicate Dance of Early American Foreign Policy

Now that the scales had fallen from their eyes, the old idea that Britain’s empire was different and free because it was a *maritime* empire seemed increasingly implausible. John Adams now pooh-poohed the old orthodoxy that France had posed the greatest threat of universal monarchy: “Universal Monarchy at land is impracticable; but universal Monarchy at sea has been well nigh established, and would before this moment have been perfected, if Great Britain and America had continued united.” If America failed in her war for independence, “there would be an end of the liberty of all other nations upon the seas. All the commerce and navigation of the world would be swallowed up in one frightful despotism.”³⁰ Just as England had long held in her hands the balance of Europe, America must now hold in her hands the balance of the world, re-asserting both the international balance of powers and the constitutional separation of powers by declaring independence and coordinating an anti-British alliance on behalf of liberty. As Robert Morris wrote to John Jay in 1781, “[consider] what might have happened, had this country continued in union with Great Britain, and had great Britain pursued those schemes of universal empire, which the virtue and fortitude of America first checked, and which it is the object of the present war to frustrate.”³¹

As necessity would have it, that meant coordinating an alliance with Catholic France and Spain, the erstwhile agents of Antichrist; indeed, Jay

²⁸ Ebenezer Baldwin, *The Duty of Rejoicing under Calamities and Afflictions* (New York, 1776), 38, quoted in Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 141.

²⁹ William Hooper to James Iredell, April 26, 1775, in W. L. Saunders, ed., *Colonial Records of North Carolina* (Raleigh, 1886-1890), IX: 985-86, quoted in Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 141.

³⁰ “Letters from a Distinguished American,” [ante 14-22 July] 1780, No. 1: 541-44; No. 6: 562, quoted in David C. Hendrickson, *Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas), 166-67.

³¹ *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay, II: 1781-1782*, edited by Henry P. Johnston (New York: Burt Franklin, 1890), 48.

was at that time in Madrid for just this purpose. Since Antichrist, however, had now to all appearances changed his abode, and taken up his seat in the former temple of English liberty, most colonial leaders soon reconciled themselves to this diplomatic revolution. The Loyalists, however, had a field day, accusing Patriots of rank hypocrisy and betrayal of the Protestant cause. Charles Inglis of New York fulminated, "They have leagued with the Popish, inveterate Enemies of our Nation, of our Religion and Liberties—they have virtually, and as far as in them lay, delivered this Country into the Hands of a despotic Power—a Power which has extinguished Liberty, and extirpated the Protestant Religion from all its Dominions."³² He worried that, if the Patriots actually won the war, they would simply succeed in putting the colonies under the oppressive domination of France.

Many Patriot leaders were more alive to such concerns than he realized. Particularly in the northern colonies, where the old flame of Protestant zeal had burned hottest, the alliance with France was viewed with some apprehension, and considered a necessary evil to be discontinued once independence had been achieved and the global imbalance of power restored. John Jay, descended from French Huguenot ancestors, had particular reason to distrust France, and confided to Gouverneur Morris in 1778 that if Great Britain "would acknowledge our independence, and enter into a liberal alliance with us, I should prefer a connexion with her to a league with any power on earth."³³ The way he saw it, a successful war of independence would suffice to check the threat of British universal monarchy and restore a basic equilibrium between the two great European powers. This done, there could be no American or Protestant interest in further humbling their former motherland or raising up France at her expense. As one of the three American negotiators at the 1782-83 peace talks, Jay was determined not to go along with French grand strategy, but to make a bargain with England that would lay the foundations of future friendship and leave America free of undue French influence. He found that his fellow diplomat, John Adams, had come around to the same view, and together they negotiated a Treaty of Paris that restored the balance of power, ensured American autonomy, and left the French out in the cold, miffed at what they considered American ingratitude.

³² Charles Inglis, "The Duty of Honouring the King, Explained and Recommended," (New York: Hugh Gaine, 1780), 26, quoted in Gregg L. Frazer, *God Against the Revolution: The Loyalist Clergy's Case Against the American Revolution* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2018), 210.

³³ Jay, *Correspondence and Public Papers*, I:180.

With his diplomatic triumph, the fault-lines of early American foreign policy were laid. Within New England and New York, relations with England began to quickly normalize, and old feelings of Protestant fellow-feeling began to re-assert themselves. Congregationalist churches remained established in most of these colonies and Catholics continued to labor under significant disabilities. Within the South, however, where a Cavalier Anglicanism had always been somewhat more muted in its Protestant fervor, a general pro-Gallicanism took hold, full religious and political liberty for Catholics became common, and hatred and suspicion of Britain became if anything more deeply entrenched. When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, these sectional suspicions persisted. Although the Revolutionaries roundly abused the Catholic Church, their expansionist French nationalism and willingness to go to war with all of Europe rekindled only recently-buried fears of French universal empire among New Englanders. Indeed, northerners quickly found that they were even more outraged by French atheism than French popery. In Virginia, however, sentiment sided almost entirely with France, which was cast as the heroic champion of liberty against the monarchical tyranny of Great Britain.

From this first great foreign policy debate emerged our two-party system. On the one side were the Gallican Democratic-Republicans, led by Jefferson; on the other, the Anglophile Federalists, led by Hamilton. Significantly, however, both parties continued to make their case within the traditional framework of the balance of power and America's mission to be an empire against universal empire. Indeed, Hamilton himself had invoked this paradigm in *Federalist* No. 11, arguing that

the continuance of the Union under an efficient government would put it in our power, at a period not very distant, to create a navy which, if it could not vie with those of the great maritime powers, would at least be of respectable weight if thrown into the scale of either of two contending parties. . . . By a steady adherence to the Union, we may hope, ere long, to become the Arbiter of Europe in America, and to be able to incline the ballance of European competitions in this part of the world as our interest may dictate.³⁴

With power so delicately balanced between Britain and France in 1793, however, it was easy for different American observers to arrive at different readings of the global strategic situation, and thus radically different proposals for American policy. Hamilton, biased by his northern Anglophilia, quickly became convinced that post-Revolutionary France

³⁴ Alexander Hamilton, "Federalist No. 11," in *Writings*, 204.

was poised to revive the ambitions of Louis XIV, establishing domination over Europe and perhaps in due course the New World. Britain's maritime power might count for little should a new Caesar arise from the ruins of the French Republic to take command of her countless millions—a premonition that Hamilton saw fulfilled in Napoleon's rise at the end of the decade. Jefferson, biased by his southern Gallicanism, was convinced that the great shift inaugurated in 1763 had by no means yet been reversed. As mistress of the seas, Britain posed a global threat of universal empire, and if she could succeed in stamping out the flames of liberty in France, she would surely turn victorious and still ravenous upon her former colonies.

Throughout the 1790s and into the early 1800s, this debate raged in a great swaying tug-of-war to see whether America would go to war and with whom. Democratic-Republicans howled with indignation when John Jay, again appointed as chief negotiator with Britain, produced the Jay Treaty of 1795 which strengthened relations with Britain at the expense of France. Federalists in turn fulminated against the atheistical Jefferson's flirtations with France and betrayal of the historic bulwark of ordered Protestant liberty. As the Democratic-Republican policy veered steadily toward war with Great Britain in 1812, New England leaders were horrorstruck. Gov. Caleb Strong of Massachusetts lamented any conflict with "the nation from which we are descended, and which for many generations has been the bulwark of the religion we profess," and he declared his hope that God "would preserve us from entangling and fatal alliances with those governments which are hostile to the safety and happiness of mankind."³⁵ So fierce was New England Federalist sentiment on this score that the region contemplated secession from the union in 1814-15.

Amidst these profound differences in policy, however, early American statesmen tended to share the following fundamental tenets: (1) the security of the world is constantly threatened by states that seek to establish first regional, then global hegemony; (2) such states tend to become increasingly despotic in their mode of rule as they seek to extend its scope to new subject peoples; (3) this threat of "universal empire" can only be resisted by the vigilant maintenance of a balance of power between independent nation-states; (4) the most effective such states

³⁵ Caleb Strong, "A Proclamation, for a Day of Public Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer" (Boston: Russell and Cutler, 1812), quoted in Jonathan L. den Hartog, *Patriotism and Piety: Federalist Politics and Religious Struggle in the New American Nation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 70.

will be those that balance their powers of domestic government via republican constitutions of checks and balances with expansive individual rights; (5) such states will extend their power throughout the world not by force of arms, but by free maritime commerce; (6) at this stage of world history and for the foreseeable future, America has been providentially called upon as the chief arbiter of the balance of power and chief bearer of the torch of liberty.

In Search of Dragons to Slay: Prospects for American Foreign Policy Today

Thus, the 200-year-old ideology of Protestant England was faithfully reproduced in an appropriately secularized form. Increasingly stripped of references to the “whore of Babylon,” but still held with often religious fervor, it was able to function as a guiding ideology for the American republic in the following two centuries. Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian wings persisted, with Jeffersonians more inclined to idealism, free trade, and minimal military spending, and Hamiltonians more realist, protectionist, and emphatic about the need for a strong navy. But both shared a vision of America as an “empire of liberty” that avoided interfering in other nations’ affairs while using its power to ensure that no old-world empire succeeded in extending its despotic sway over the globe. Early on, this was applied in the comparatively modest Monroe Doctrine, which disclaimed concern for European affairs but asserted America’s role as anti-imperial guardian of the Western Hemisphere. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, American power had waxed to the point where she could be not merely the “arbiter of Europe in America,” but succeed Britain as arbiter of the balance of power in Europe itself. The demands of maintaining such a balance in the face of German militarist ambition compelled American entry into both twentieth-century world wars, and the frightening hegemony of Soviet Russia in 1945 committed American statesmen to continuing this role of “an empire against universal empire” throughout almost the duration of the century.

Only in 1990 for the first time did America find herself, far more even than Britain had in 1763, standing high above every conceivable rival, in danger of becoming the very beast she had always sought to slay. No wonder that the ensuing decades have witnessed such a malaise of statesmanship, a prolonged national identity crisis, and from 2004 onward, a growing bipartisan revulsion against America’s hegemonic role in the world order. Our task—as we had described it to ourselves

at least—had always been a defensive one, protecting first ourselves and then weaker states throughout the world against the depredations of strongmen aiming to establish vast despotic empires. But any such claims rang increasingly hollow in a world deprived of any strongmen of more than regional significance. America had always been in the business of spreading liberty throughout the globe—but ideally only by the force of her example and the protection of fragile regimes of liberty against invaders. Even Woodrow Wilson, remembered as a starry-eyed crusading internationalist, had remarked “I am not fighting for democracy except for the peoples that want democracy. If they don’t want it, that is none of my business.”³⁶ From 1990 onwards, however, America found itself increasingly in the awkward role of seeking to impose democracy on peoples that, at the very least, seemed distinctly ambivalent about it.

By the end of the 1990s, it was increasingly clear to the American foreign policy establishment that America could only plausibly continue to play her dominant global role if she were able to re-assume her accustomed persona of slaying imperial dragons—but this required finding dragons to slay. The Bush years were marked by a highly implausible and ultimately self-defeating effort to conjure from a motley collection of tinpot dictators a resurgent “Axis of Evil” that America alone must take on for the protection of the free world. The Obama presidency, recognizing that Americans required a unitary adversary if our anti-imperial vocation were to remain plausible, sought to fixate the nation’s attention upon Russia, desperately trying to evoke old images of the Russian steamroller threatening to absorb Europe under an oriental despotism. But genuine though Putin’s threat to liberty may be, no sober observer could mistake emaciated post-Soviet Russia for a universal empire in the making—as Putin’s failed Ukrainian gamble has confirmed. Meanwhile, throughout nearly two decades of tilting at windmills thought to harbor dragons, America largely ignored the vertiginous rise of a power more authentically imperial in its structure and universal in its aims than any we have seen in generations. Indeed, China’s casual suppression of dissent and embrace of universal surveillance offer more than an echo of “popery” as our ancestors defined it: the attempted domination not merely over the bodies, but also the minds and souls, of its subjects.

If the abortive tragicomedy of the Trump administration leaves only one legacy for American statecraft, it may still prove to have been an

³⁶ Woodrow Wilson, remarks to foreign correspondents, April 8, 1918, in Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 69 vols. (Princeton, NJ: 1966-1994), 47: 288, quoted in Hendrickson, *Union, Nation, or Empire*, 309.

invaluable one. For the first time since 1989, Americans were invited to fix their gaze on a singular, dominant threat to the international order, a power that could genuinely imbalance all powers. Trump, in spite of his own tendency toward incoherence and self-contradiction, gave a clarity and focus to American foreign policy for the first time in three decades, and a focus that, crucially, comported with the nation's nearly half-millennium old self-conception inherited from Protestant England. In the years ahead, America will have to mine the heritage of Anglo-American statesmanship to rediscover the art of balance-of-power politics, forestalling and restraining Chinese hegemony as their ancestors resisted that of Charles V, Louis XIV, and George III.

Of course, merely to name the threat is not to counter it, and history is only ever suggestive, not prescriptive. In the analogy we have explored, if 1990 was America's 1763, the humiliating and impoverishing Iraq War was perhaps to us what the American Revolution was to Britain. If so, there is cause for hope, as Britain soon picked itself up and, under the leadership of Pitt and Burke, rallied the nation for another great—and spectacularly successful—containment effort against the hegemonic aspirations of Napoleon. Can America do the same today with China? If so, it will have to be with Pittian cunning rather than Trumpian bluster. America has waited almost till the dawn of Chinese supremacy even to wake up to the reality of Chinese rivalry, and we may find ourselves soon in the politically uncomfortable but culturally comforting role of the underdog. In this role, we can and must learn from the canny balance-of-power politics practiced first by Elizabeth I and William III, cultivating and coordinating a multipolar world of regional power blocs that can together contain the threat of “popery”—the thirst for universal empire that is always inimical to liberty.