



Is the United States an empire? Competing views (2002-2006)

Is the United States an empire? Over the course of their nation's history, different Americans have answered the question in basically three different ways:

- *No, because that would be a bad thing.*
- *Yes, and it is a bad thing.*
- *Yes, but it's a good thing.*

All three of those competing views are captured in the following selections from commentaries written during the first decade of the 21st century. Those were the years following the 9/11 attacks, when international military coalitions led by the United States overthrew the governments of Afghanistan and Iraq as part of the US-initiated Global War on Terrorism. Critics of these military campaigns accused the US of pursuing "imperialism." The accusation was not new in US history, nor were the more positive characterizations of US power that were put forward in defense.

1. Bernard Porter, *British historian*

Most modern Americans are insistent that they "don't do empire," as Donald Rumsfeld put it once. This is while they are doing all kinds of things that to other people look uncommonly like empire, such as invading other countries, changing their governments, and dominating them in various ways. What Rumsfeld and Co. mean, of course, is that they have no hankering after *formal* empire: don't particularly want to conquer or annex territories or to rule their peoples directly. Some Americans would claim that what they are doing is the very opposite of imperialism: liberating people, usually from tyrannies, and making the world safer by neutralizing those tyrannies' capacities to imperialize others. [...]

The "denial" thing does not apply to all Americans. Radicals among them, for example, have regarded their country as "imperialist" for years. This usually refers to her commercial and financial presence in the world, some of which would certainly qualify as "imperialism" in my book (if an element of coercion could be shown), but which Rumsfeld presumably genuinely could not see as such. [...] This, of course, is using the "i"-word disparagingly, which is the usual way these days. It is a popular way of looking at American foreign policy by its critics in Europe, also.

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2. Dinesh D'Souza, *Indian American commentator*

America has become an empire, a fact that Americans are reluctant to admit and that critics of the United States regard with great alarm. Since the end of the Cold War, the US has exercised an unparalleled and largely unrivaled influence throughout the world—economically, politically, culturally, and militarily.

Critics of America, at home and abroad, are right to worry about how US power is being used. The critics charge that America is no different from other rapacious empires that have trampled

the continents in previous centuries. [...] America talks about lofty ideals, the critics say, but in reality it pursues its naked self-interest. [...]

Are the critics right? They are correct to note the extent of American influence, but wrong to suggest that the US is no different from such colonial powers as the British, French, and Spanish that once dominated the world. Those empires [...] were sustained primarily by force. [...]

US domination is not sustained primarily by force. [...] Walk into a hotel in Barbados or Bombay, and the bellhop is whistling the theme from *Titanic*. African boys in remote villages wear baseball caps. Millions of people around the globe want to move to America. Countless people are drawn to America's technology, freedom, and way of life.

[...W]e can hardly deny the critics' allegation that the US acts to promote its self-interest. Even so, Americans can feel immensely proud of how often their country has served their interests while simultaneously promoting noble ideals and the welfare of others. [...] America is the most magnanimous imperial power ever. [...] It shows no real interest in conquering the rest of the world, even though it can.

Sources:

1. Bernard Porter, *Empire and Superempire: Britain, America, and the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 1, 4.
2. Dinesh D'Souza, "In Praise of American Empire," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 26, 2002, <https://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0426/p11s01-coop.html>.

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