



The World Today

THE MAGIC IS GONE: THE US EMPIRE IN DECLINE?

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There is an intangible quality to an empire. There is something beyond naked military force that sustains obedience and exploitation. The British had it. The Romans had it, long before them, when running the Roman Empire for a thousand years, adding an extra millennium (476-1453) for the Eastern branch. Even the Soviets had it for their short lived empire, 1922-1991.

What is this nimbus something? Maybe ability to project a sense of mission, the myth that they are working for something beyond themselves and their own aggrandizement. For that they need a contrast between those who are and are not imperialized; those people out there who are not included and maybe even refuse to be, those outside the lines, the limits, the Wall? The Romans called them barbarians. So do the Chinese, surrounded by the Northern, Eastern, Southern and Western varieties.

The Spanish, greatly legitimized by the Spanish born Pope Alexander VI and his decree, his Bolla Papale of 4 May 1493 made their empire a community of the baptized. So did the Muslims long before them, with their incredible expansion, reaching Baghdad around 700 and founding the Sultanate of Delhi in 1192 (but massacred in Baghdad 1258 at the hands of Djenghis Khan's grandson Hulagu in close cooperation with the Pope.)

The British, like the French, Belgians, Dutch, Germans and Italians, and lately the Americans, were out on a civilizing mission, spreading civilization to those short on that

commodity. Curiously, to be civilized included willingness to trade on the terms stipulated by the imperialists. But they certainly also made it clear that the God of their variety was on their side, somebody you better respect, or else.

For the Soviets substitute History for God, with a very capital H. How about the Americans? All of the above.

Backed by both the Judaic Yahweh and the Christian God the USA sees itself as justified in claiming exceptionalism, being above the law for ordinary peoples, an indispensable nation, even ushering in nothing less than the End of History, not merely one more stage of that commodity.

There is a problem in laying the mission on that thick. With that backing military, economic and political implications follow: winning every war with unconditional surrender of the Other, closing every deal to their own advantage, extracting obedience wherever. So what if they start losing, like not winning in Korea and then losing in Vietnam and now in Iraq and Afghanistan? What if the deals run against massive resistance? What if obedience has to be extracted with bribery, CIA covert and Pentagon over intervention, so well illustrated by John Perkins in

Confessions of an Economic Hitman?

The lustre becomes less shiny. There will be desperate efforts not to look weak. The USA should be obeyed being almost interchangeable with God, not because of the "I give something, you give something" of ordinary countries. How then to explain that so many countries, even peoples, refuse to submit? There can be only one explanation: they are as chosen by Satan as the USA by God. They are simply Evil, maybe even organized in an Axis (of three, like Germany-Italy-Japan, in the Good War).

And this is where we are today. If military, economic and political power are justified by cultural power, myths, beliefs, then the magic can unravel in any corner. Power becomes naked, less divine. And with the magic gone, the Empire will follow.

Prof. Johan Galtung was the featured speaker at the Second Herb Addo Memorial Lecture on Friday November 23rd 2007. This event was hosted by the Institute of International Relations and will be held at the Institute of Critical Thinking, UWI St. Augustine.