

## The Imperialism Virus

As an adolescent growing up in the U.S.A., the first time I heard the U.S. Marines Hymn, I was puzzled about the lines: "From the Halls of Montezuma /To the shores of Tripoli; /We will fight our country's battles /In the air, on land, and sea." I was of course aware that American forces had been heavily involved militarily in South East Asia since the 1940's, and had almost started a nuclear war with the U.S.S.R. during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, but... when did the U.S. Marines land in Mexico City D.F., or fought on the shores of Tripoli?

I now know after a bit of research that the line "To the shores of Tripoli" refers to the First Barbary War, and specifically to the Battle of Derna, Cyrenaica, in 1805, which was carried out by a mercenary army recruited and led by the U.S. Marines under the command of U.S. Army Lieutenant William Eaton, diplomatic Consul to Tripoli. (The First Barbary War was an attempt to deal with piracy affecting shipping and to assert American naval interests in the Mediterranean. The Barbary pirates operated from Tripolitania –a semi-independent branch of the Ottoman Empire.)

On the other hand, "The Halls of Montezuma" refers, not to Tenochtitlan, but rather to the Battle of Chapultepec, on September 1847, during the Mexican–American War, where a force of U.S. Marines stormed Chapultepec Castle. Strictly, the usage "Halls of Montezuma" is poetic license, as the building which the Marines stormed had been erected by the Spanish rulers of Mexico, more than two centuries after the Aztec Emperor Montezuma was overthrown. At the time of the assault, the fort was actually the newly-founded Mexican Military Academy. \*

Of course, as a Latin-American, I'm aware that the U.S.A. has been exercising the self-proclaimed right to interfere militarily in the affairs of other nations in the Western hemisphere since the 1840's; but 1805 seemed a bit too early –less than three decades since the American Declaration of Independence.

As the new war in the Middle East is escalating beyond the borders of the original two contestants, perhaps it's a good time for us to stop and reflect on the question: What triggers in any nation-state the urge to expand militarily and commercially beyond its geographic boundaries and, ultimately, the urge to create an "**empire**?" Or, in other words, "What is **imperialism**?"

In this essay, we will attempt to inquire into the historical reasons why –for example– a fledgling federation of "states" like the U.S.A. would choose to develop an empire, while other similar nation-states did not?

In *Globalization and Violence* (2006), Tom Nairn and Paul James define **empires** as polities that "extend relations of power across territorial spaces over which they have no prior or given legal sovereignty, and where, in one or more of the domains of economics, politics, and culture, they gain some measure of extensive hegemony over those spaces to extract or accrue value." \*\*

This begs the question: what is a **polity**? Historically, the word comes from **polis** –or the self-governing city-state in ancient Greece. The etymology of "*polis*" appears to derive from *ptolis* – "citadel, fort, city, one's city; the state, community" or further back from the Proto-Indo-European *tpolh-* –"citadel; enclosed space, often on high ground; hilltop." \*\*\* This reference to a community residing within the clear boundaries of a fairly well-protected space, can be evidenced in ancient city-states both in Europe and elsewhere. I will illustrate this with two very distinct poleis:

(1) The Island country of Sri Lanka –originally known as Ceylon– with an area of 65,610 km<sup>2</sup>, has existed for more than 3,000 years as an independent dominion, and has never sought to expand beyond its shores to conquer other nations.

(2) The Island of Great Britain is the geographical core of the modern United Kingdom. With an original area of 130,395 km<sup>2</sup>, Britain has acted as an independent kingdom since the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The core of the United Kingdom as a unified state came into being in 1707 with the political union of the kingdoms of England and Scotland, into a new unitary state called Great Britain.

There are similarities in both Sri Lanka and Great Britain: They both harbour a variety of different ethno-cultural groups, they both have been subject to multiple invasions from foreign kingdoms, and they both have suffered through internal conflicts and civil wars before arriving at their modern constitutions. As Sri-Lanka did not create an empire, the question we should therefore now be asking is: What or who drove Britain to expand beyond its borders, to interfere in the affairs of other nation-states and to colonize other territories throughout the globe to such an extent that it earned it the boast in 1821 (*The Caledonian Mercury*) that “the sun never sets on the British Empire?”

These are some possible answers:

First, imperialism became fashionable for many European nation-states starting in the 15<sup>th</sup> century because they were mystified and exhilarated by the idea of emulating the legendary example of the Rome Empire, which had started from one small city in Italy, and ended up conquering most of the “civilized world”, from Iberia and Britain in the North West, to Mesopotamia in the South East, in the span of 1,900 years.

Second, the typical political structure of many European nation-states tended to concentrate military and economic power into the hands of a homogeneous ethno-racial and faith-based elite, headed by a hereditary monarchy –fashioned after the Roman emperor model.

Third, constant rivalry and war between these various kingdoms exacerbated imperial and colonial expansion through conquest of non-European territories up to and including the last century.

Finally, these factors would help to explain why the U.S.A., which started out as the model of an egalitarian and democratic republic, ended up infected by the “Imperialism Virus”, and why it adopted many of the elements described in the second answer above.

Perhaps the mortal enemies engaged in the Israel-Gaza war have both been bitten by the Imperial Virus, for which there is no known cure except truce and peace negotiations.

\* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marines%27\\_Hymn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marines%27_Hymn)

\*\* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empire>

\*\*\* <https://www.etymonline.com/word/polis>

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