

“The Lion and the Eagle”: The Interaction of the British and American Empires (1783-1972)

A review of Kathleen Burk's book

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*The 200 year historical span of **Kathleen Burk’s “The Lion and the Eagle”** shows the changes in the interactions between the newly formed United States and its imperial drive and the ongoing imperial drive of the British. In general, the former overtook the latter with the United States momentarily being the single superpower, but still with strong ties to Britain and the remnants of empire and the Commonwealth. Along the way there were agreements and disagreements as well as many commonalities that pervaded both empires.*

North America’s dividing line - the U.S.-Canada border

The first two chapters cover the not so well known minor conflict between Britain and the U.S. over the border between Canada and the U.S. as they spread across the continent. The only actual war, although there were other skirmishes – including one in which the only casualty was a pig – was the war of 1812 which ended with both sides able to claim some kind of victory.

Apart from these descriptions the overriding theme became that of both countries not really wanting to go to war with each other in spite of political rhetoric. Britain was preoccupied with France and other European countries all striving for a ‘balance’ in Europe from which to control all the different colonial enterprises overseas. The United States remained financially tied to Britain through various loans and debts, while the U.S. navy for much of the time could not match the power of the British navy’s ability to blockade their former colony.

By the time the border was fully resolved (1903) the power differential between the two empires had shifted. The U.S had settled many of its internal problems, and its navy grew to a strong enough position to negate any possible British threat. Throughout most of this time, while technically independent, “the U.S. was a developing country, an economic and financial colony of Britain.” The U.S.’ industrial production grew significantly but Britain “did maintain its overwhelming supreme position...in finance.” The pound sterling was the world’s “only reserve currency and the City of London was the world’s financial centre.”

A discussion that was not developed was the manner in which both empires looked at the ‘new world’ and how they treated the indigenous people and the resources of the land. For

all the talk of freedom and independence, control of the land and the people, and power and money ruled the empires. This becomes much more evident in Burk's discussion concerning China and Japan.

Empirical parallels

The histories of the "opening" of China and Japan are - or should be - relatively well known. What stands out in Burk's discussion, much of it extracted from original journals and government records, are the arrogance and self-aggrandizement of both empires in their self-righteous roles to control the resources and people of the world. Underneath it all lies the largest factor - racism.

From the Chinese perspective, "Any relationship between the Celestial Empire and a foreign country must be as one between supreme ruler and vassal...the uncultured barbarian would recognize the superiority of Chinese civilization...by bringing tribute and taking part in full Court ritual" - kowtowing. The British of course refused to kowtow and expected to be treated as an equal and indeed saw itself as the superior power.

"The Chinese saw Western Ocean barbarians as warlike and dangerous and the British as the most dangerous of all. The Emperor warned...that 'England is stronger and fiercer than the other countries in the Western Ocean. Since things have not gone according to their wishes, it may cause them to stir up trouble.'"

As for British cultural superiority, the first British ambassador, Viscount Macartney, after presenting British presents to the Emperor, "was taken from pavilion to pavilion and realised just how relatively unimpressive were the objects that he had brought from Britain."

Burk's discussion develops the history through the opium wars, the intrusions of the other European powers, and more importantly for this work, shows how the U.S. adventures in China more or less rode along on the coat-tails of the other empires, in particular the British.

Japan was different in many aspects, but the same racial arrogance from both empires becomes obvious, and the use of military power - at least the threat of using it - is one of the main bargaining points of U.S. diplomacy. Japan was a unified country but at the time of initial U.S. interventions, a power struggle was developing between the Emperor and the Shogunate. At this point the U.S. "remained an economic colony of Britain" and used mainly threats to coerce the Japanese into accepting trade relations.

The British in Japan showed the same arrogance towards the Japanese as they did the Chinese and their actions "were largely conditioned by Britons' experience in China...assuming there were few differences between Asian countries," and that "Japan had no right to prevent other countries from sharing its riches." At the initial stages the U.S. "had substantial economic interests in China, not least in the opium trade, but relatively little diplomatic or military influence," and was "running behind the British." British negotiations with Japan came mostly as military threats.

The Japanese were in a different position than China, and between the two factions, the one that succeeded to power wished to acquire "scientific and engineering knowledge" in order to push out the barbarians after they had mastered the technology.

Empires reversed...

The last chapter covers a large span from 1897 to 1972. During that period two World Wars and several financial crises affected the relationship. World War II was the final turning point as one of the U.S.' goals was "significant control over international finance." The Bretton Woods agreement which essentially established this formally is only mentioned in regards to the financial havoc created by the U.S.' Vietnam War. The Suez Crisis and the Israeli attack on its Arab neighbours combined with the financial demise of the British pound, brought the U.S. empire to full dominance militarily and financially. The U.S. became the prime supporter of the colonial-settler state of Israel militarily and financially, while Britain remained as a military empire in its own right with 145 bases around the world to complement those of the U.S.

...current events

In her very short epilogue "Envoi", Burk ends on a confusing note. She talks briefly about the U.S.' empire of bases and then mentions the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Her next statement, her next to last statement, reads, "As long as these countries can be protected without becoming protectorates, this American power will be welcomed, or at least tolerated." By the rules of grammatical sequencing this refers to Afghanistan and Iraq, making the statement a rather sad wilfully ignorant ending as there is no way the U.S.' presence in either of these two countries is either welcomed or tolerated.

If it is an improper grammatical reference to 130 countries with the military bases then its sentiment remains highly arguable. The many countries with bases (which do include Afghanistan and Iraq) may have governments accepting U.S. bribes, graft, and financial manipulation, but it is not likely the everyday citizen is as accepting of the U.S. presence.

...and beyond

That small point aside - and it is the only point in the book that I question marked - both empires have moved on. The U.S. is no longer the sole superpower, although it remains the most powerful military and financial empire. It uses both its military power (mostly - covertly and overtly) and financial power - sanctions mainly - vis a vis its control of the "Washington consensus" institutions (the IMF, World Bank, BIS, SWIFT et al). Britain remains within the U.S. thrall, supporting the arrogance and imperial lies that sustains domestic support during the election cycles. As a part of NATO, as a member of the "Five Eyes", with veto power on the Security Council at the UN, and maintaining a recently renewed arsenal of 260 nuclear weapons, Britain is no slouch.

Concomitant with that is the residual power of the "City", the London financial district. The LIBOR, the London Interbank Offered Rate still powers much of the world's financial interactions. Established much more recently, the LBMA, the London Bullion Market Association, comprises the largest gold and silver markets in the world. It would be unusual if these two organizations do not liaise with their U.S. counterparts to maintain control of the current global financial position in which the US\$ is now the world reserve currency.

Also important financially are the other polar elements of world power, China and Russia. Both have mainly extricated themselves from direct U.S. currency manipulations (it's not all that easy) and both have accumulated large amounts of the "barbarous relic" - gold - which many of the world's central banks are also accumulating or repatriating from New York and

London.

With Brexit, with the COVID crisis, and with the U.S. 'recovering' from four years of an overtly racist government, the entanglements between the two empires will continue with that racism and general arrogant outlook towards the rest of the world. Kathleen Burk's "**The Lion and the Eagle**" is an excellent history covering the events and attitudes of the politicians involved with this ongoing duet.

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