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Meddlesome Empire: Obama and Client Britain's EU Referendum

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Good to see that history, if it does not possess historical cunning, as Hegel rather foolishly observed, has, at the very least, some humour. US President Barack Obama has been busy making it his business to make sure that Britain remains in the European Union after the referendum elections of June. The urging has all the meaning of a Wall Street plea. If Britain leaves, there will be instability. A world of chaos will ensue.

Obama in imperial mode has been some sight. Armed with words of condescension, he has treated Britons in a fashion they are rarely used to: being lectured as subjects in need of a good intellectual thrashing. For years, the nostalgic establishment Briton has become the supposedly sagacious backer of US power in various parts of the planet. The US has been assured that it can count on vassal insurance when Washington's more bizarre imperial failures come to light.

The mood from Obama on Friday was, however, not so breezy and confident. He had one target in mind: Brexit, and the consequences that might arise from it. The Vote Leavers' campaign favouring Britain's exit from EU torpor and pseudo-tyranny took a considerable battering.

Jonathan Freedland of The Guardian observed that the Vote Leavers premise of finding that other symbolically appropriate wife – the US of the "Anglosphere", rather than the more problematic European Continentals – was shattered. The Obama White House "spelled out that America had no intention of forming some new, closer relationship with Brexited Britain."[1]

Should Britain, he suggested in a joint press conference with British Prime Minister David Cameron, decide to exit the troubled bosom of Europe, it would place the country "in the back of the queue" when coming to forging a new trade deal with the US. (This, on its own, might not be such a bad thing, given the nasties that lurk within the current trade proposals.)

Then came the treading upon an article of faith: Britain's incurable obsession with the Second World War. Obama decided to issue a reminder to his hosts on the US gaze upon Europe – and a Europe free of internal squabbles. "The tens of thousands of Americans who rest in Europe's cemeteries are a silent testament to just how intertwined our prospect and security truly are."

The papers were full of scornful reproach, though they tended to centre on opinions favouring a departure. Those wanting to leave Europe were a mix of fury and desperation,

while those urging a stay vote were happy to allow Obama much leg, and fist room. What is at stake in the debate is not a truly sovereign Britain, so much as who is the best overlord in the business.

Former Tory cabinet minister Liam Fox, for one, wished that Obama consider British views on the subject for a change. He proved so keen to force the point he managed to gather a hundred MP signatures for a letter to the US ambassador to the UK urging the White House to keep its nose out of Britannia's sacred business. The hegemon's views on the subject would have to be silenced.

The US, he argued, would never permit a foreign court to overrule the decision of Congress. "The president is, of course, welcome to his view when the US has an open border with Mexico, a supreme court in Toronto and the US budget set by a pan-American committee." This otherwise meaningless distinction did shore up one vital point: a foreign power, fraternal, brutal and intrusive, was showing its hand in the domestic affairs of a client state.

The noisy anti-EU leader of the UK Independence Party, Nigel Farage, abandoned any sense of compunction altogether.

> "Mercifully, this American president, who is the most anti-British American president there has ever been, won't be in office for much longer, and I hope will be replaced by somebody rather more sensible when it comes to trading relationships with this country."[2]

The Telegraph ran with a dominant headline about the president's "woeful ignorance" in the damage the EU is said to be doing to Britain's security. Naturally, that allegation came straight from Penny Mordaunt, whose brief on the subject of keeping Obama at bay was made crystal clear during the president's visit. As Armed Forces minister, Mordaunt has little time for European institutional functions, seeing devils across the continent that need bottling.

Mordaunt's political pedigree on this point should be noted. Having been reared by experience working for George W. Bush, whose grasp of security issues was always shaky at best, her propensity to see dangers everywhere starts making political sense. It is reactionary to the highest degree, a condition that sees enemies as viral phenomena and liberties as abstractions to be regarded with suspicion.

The European Court of Justice, for instance, had an alarming tendency to throw the book of laws at the ability of the US and Britain to share intelligence (read, pinching it from others). Bulk-sharing of intelligence remains an ideological point of contention, never mind the fact that the actual nature of such indiscriminate gathering undermines cardinal principles of efficiency.

Obama's view that the EU was actually a vehicle for magnifying British influence was dismissed sheer geopolitical fiction. "Unfortunately," signed Mordaunt, "this opinion betrays a woeful ignorance of the practical reality of the EU's impact on our security, and the interests of the UK and the US."[3]

The storm of disagreement with the current White House approach continued with views that Obama had confused the virtues of "collective action and defence through Nato with

the integration-at-all-costs-and-damn-the-consequences ideology that too often motivates the EU."

What has emerged on this presidential tour is a list of political realities. Imperial centres will lecture their irresponsible satellites; hidden power will eventually manifest itself in speech and warning, and the only thing left, irrespective of which side of the debate one endorses, is that Britain is being roasted by the prong of the EU and the strategic thrust of the United States. Either way, a truly sovereign Britain is hardly likely to eventuate.

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Notes:

[1]
http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/22/barack-obama-crush-brexit-fantasy-eu-referendum

[2]
http://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/661483/Barack-Obama-Brexit-interference-Liam-Fox-Nigel-Farage-warning

[3]
http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/23/barack-obamas-views-betray-a-woeful-ignorance-on-the-impact-of-t/
