

Empires in World History

In our times, people in many walks of life, both in the US and around the world, believe the United States has become an imperial power backed by the world's largest and most modern military. Given this assessment, it is important to put empire in perspective and understand how and why empires have arisen. The **conquering** of empires has always involved ambitious empire builders who resorted to massacres, slaughters, and appropriation of land and wealth to achieve their goals. Once empire builders and their armies completed the conquering phase, many of them then employed authoritarian, dictatorial methods to achieve security and prosperity. Others tried to decently uphold ethical standards, serve the common good, build infrastructure, and unify the land.

There have been roughly 50 empires conquered and established throughout human history. Ancient and pre-modern empires include: Sargon of Akkad's, Old or New Babylonian, Tutmose III, Ramses II, Hittite, Assyrian, Persian, Athenian, Hellenistic, Mauryan- Chandragupta I or Ashoka, Gupta, Chin, Han, Tang, Sung, Carthaginian, Roman, Byzantine, Sassanian, Parthian, Macedonian, Carolingian, Bulgarian, Abbasid, Almoravid, Mongolian, Kanem, Mali, Ghana, Songhai, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Khmer, Burmese, Teotihuacán, Aztec, Incan, Mayan, Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal.

Modern Empires include: Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, British, Belgian, German, Russian, Chinese, Mughal, Ottoman, and American

Background Information on Empire

Empire can be defined as political and economic rule over a large territory by an emperor or leader. Empire builders have always had large military organizations, up-to-date weaponry, and the ambition to plunder vast areas exerting control over indigenous peoples and their resources. Empires were typically ruled from a capital city where the imperial family and their attendants lived in palaces with servants, fine clothing, choice foods, and exotic, luxury goods.

Empires have had positive and negative consequences in history.

Positive Aspects of Empire

When we consider the positive aspects of empires we see that they have **brought together diverse peoples who have interacted and learned from each other**. This **collective learning** led to synergies which fostered new technologies, better ways of organizing, and new knowledge of spiritual beliefs, art, stories, and foods.

Empires were constructed for security. They followed policies which would deter enemies and, in the event of attack and invasion, ability to fight back.

Empires fostered trade that was more extensive and dynamic than in earlier eras when people lived in smaller, more isolated communities. In this way, empires integrated regions and brought people together. Often emperors built roads, ports, and market places to insure survival and prosperity.

Well-known **pro-imperialists** who have justified empire are Thucydides, Machievelli, Kautyilia, and Li Si. Pro-imperialists assume empire is not a choice, but a necessity.

Negative Aspects of Empire

When we discuss the negative aspects of empires, we see that the **conquering** of empires has always been a brutal affair. It included massacres, slaughters, appropriation of land, plundering, forced labor, and forced migrations. Empire builders often had ruthless advisors who justified brutality with an ideology (an ideology is an entire thought system) of conquest. The ideology of conquest included justifying that survival meant conquer, dominate, and control. It meant defeating one's enemies and expanding one's territory and resources. The assumption was, according to the laws of nature, the strong would dominate the weak and, therefore, aggression, wars, and violence are inevitable.

Empires were organized in a hierarchical manner with large beaucracies of government officials (including administrators, secret service spies, census takers, and tax collectors), engineers and artisans, and large militaries. These government officials were ranked and higher ranking officials received more pay, benefits, and privileges.

Anti-imperialists who question empire assert that killing and violence can rarely be justified. They believe cooperation, not domination and coercion is the basis of society. They say political elites in the past used violence out of expediency and self-interest and engaged in warfare to maintain and expand their power. Anti-imperialists assert that conflict can be resolved peacefully and has traditionally been resolved through the intervention of members of the community who intervene and mediate.

The Roman historian Tacitus showed himself to be anti-imperialist when he wrote of how the Romans conquered England: “Robbery, butchery, raping – the liars call it Empire, but they create a desert and call it peace.” (Agricola, 30) Other anti-imperialists were: Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Leo Tolstoy, and Henry David Thoreau.

Famous Readings pertaining to Empire are:

The “**Melian Dialogue**” in the History of the Peloponnesian Wars by **Thucydides**. This is the discussion between the Athenians and Melians at a time when the Athenians were trying to persuade Melians to join their imperial league. The pro-imperial argument presented by Thucydides is a realist argument. Realists assert empire is inevitable because it is inevitable that the strong will dominate the weak in life and war should be entered into and fought according to “practical” considerations. They reject the need for a moral evaluation.

Facing the Myth of Redemptive Violence by **Walter Wink**, a Christian theologian, condemns the use of violence even though violence has been legitimized and justified for thousands of years.

Recessional a poem by **Rudyard Kipling** questions if empire is justified in the long run.

THE UNITED STATES AS AN EMPIRE

Returning to where we began, discussing the United States as an empire, for the past 60 years, the **US GOVERNMENT** has eschewed **direct** political rule over foreign countries; rather it has employed **indirect** rule to acquire access to international labor, natural resources, and trade. American bases are secured through contracts which are often beneficial to the host country

involved. When American multinational companies operate in foreign lands, they operate with the support of the people and governments of those lands.

The **AMERICAN PEOPLE** have had extremely ambivalent feelings toward the concept of American empire. Cavalier unilateralism is questionable when the US has, in the past, led efforts for internationalism. Americans must address the grievances which are justified. What seems clear is that the US should return to internationalist policies where cooperation, partnerships, and mutual self-interest prevails.

In the final analysis everyone acknowledges that achieving a stable international order with the goals of insuring security and reconstructing the world economy - is one of the greatest challenges in our times.