

## **America, Empire of Liberty. A New History by David Reynolds**

### **A Summary by Raj Mitra**

#### *Subject*

This vivid and fascinating book, incorporating an explosion of new scholarship, tells of the origins and development of the United States. The author is a Professor of International History at Cambridge University and he interprets the dynamics of the story within three big themes- empire, liberty and faith.

#### *Summary*

#### **Liberty**

Liberty, the core American value, was rooted in the colonial experience. Although Spain and France both gained early footholds on the North American continent-Spain in what is now known as Florida and New Mexico, France pushing down the Mississippi from its base in Canada to create Louisiana- by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century the English were far better established. Their colonies, unlike those of Spain and France were largely left to themselves by the Crown, preoccupied by its long struggle with Parliament, and the colonists enjoyed much greater liberty than those of New France and New Spain- with extensive land ownership, broad religious freedom, and colonial assemblies based on a wide white male franchise. The English colonies also flourished economically, cashing in on the booming Atlantic trade network, exporting fish and timber from New England and especially tobacco, rice and cotton from the southern colonies.

Yet the relative availability of cheap land meant there was little incentive to work as wage labour for others, so the English colonies faced a chronic labour shortage for most of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Northern families relied on their sons; Southern planters used indentured servants who worked off the cost of their passage. But with the flow of migrants tailing off after the end of the English Civil Wars, the colonists turned to the forced labour of African slaves, especially to cultivate the booming cash crops of the South. So, forced black labour became essential to operate an economy that offered unusual liberties to the whites. The distinction between freeman and slave became a fundamental dividing line in law and society.

In the last third of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the English colonies became more diverse with the inclusion of the Dutch in New York and the religious and ethnic pluralism of Pennsylvania. New waves of immigrants in the 18<sup>th</sup> century- from Scotland, Ulster and the German states- made the colonies markedly less English in character, while the growth of likes Boston, New York and Philadelphia stimulated an urban consumer society and a thriving local press. These were all signs of a precocious maturity at odds with a colonial status. The contradiction did not matter as long as London left the colonies alone but, after the Seven

Years War eliminated France's role over Canada and confirmed Britain in a vast North American empire, successive ministries were determined to make the colonies pay their share.

Initially the protestors against British taxes demanded the rights and liberties of "freeborn Englishman", especially that of no taxation without representation. But as the struggle intensified and London resorted to force, patriots in Virginia and Massachusetts pushed for full independence- on the grounds that the British Crown had become so tyrannical that the colonies had a right to form their own government. Just as freeman and slave became the great divide in society so liberty versus tyranny came to define political discourse.

After winning independence in 1783, the founding generation tried to formulate these two polarities into a new ideology. In order to propitiate the South, they turned a blind eye to the existence of slavery, focussing mainly on the construction of a stronger national government that would nevertheless respect local liberties. The war of independence had been essentially a revolt by separate colonies; only the threat from Britain forced a modicum of cooperation. In 1787 the colonies agreed to replace the existing loose alliance of states with a federal government, but only with strict controls on its authority to prevent a repetition of British tyranny. This government was created for certain specified purposes- notably foreign relations, borrowing and coining money, the promotion of trade and administration of the vast unsettled West. The real locus of politics was at the state level; in 1776 Jefferson the author of the Declaration of Independence envisaged the United States as an "Empire of Liberty"- he meant a congeries of states, a kind of commonwealth.

The United States was therefore a reluctant union and throughout its history, one of the fundamental struggles over liberty has been between the states and the federal government. To solidify support for the new nation, the Founders affirmed basic freedoms- including those of speech, religion and a nuanced right to bear arms- and this Bill of Rights has been fundamental to subsequent debate. Yet it was not enough to restrain the centrifugal forces at play in the early decades of the republic, when the South, New England and then the South again talked angrily about possible secession when national politics were not going their way. The South finally did break apart in 1861 using the language of 1776- claiming the right to form a new government because the existing regime had tyrannically overridden local liberties.

The Founders also developed a set of republican values, built on the axiom that government was a necessary evil. Given human ambition, they believed that the basic threat to liberty was the aggrandizing tendency of power. Those in power built up networks of clients-people who lacked economic freedom and were therefore dependent on others. For this reason the founders were not democrats; they wanted to reserve the franchise for property owners, those with a stake in society, rather the demos- the crowd of dependent wage-labourers- and they feared factions, parties and the corrupting influence of a national debt.

By the 1830s the United States had become a democracy, at least for white males. Married women remained legally dependants and therefore outside politics. Blacks were entirely out of the picture although an abolitionist movement got going in the North and most Northerners saw slavery as a moral evil, the focus of their animosity was more towards the South and the power of the slave owners.

The New Republican party- picking upon old republican ideology-proclaimed the exclusive right of freemen to settle in the West, not only to contain slavery but also to prevent the slave states developing a stranglehold on national politics. Slave or free became the defining question for the Union and when the South broke away in the name of liberty against tyranny, the North denied them that right in the name of America. The bloody Civil War affirmed a new sense of nationhood and resolved some long standing debates: slavery was unacceptable in the land of liberty, so too was the idea of secession. States could choose to join the Union but once admitted they could not break away. Yet the New South contained residues of the Old in the form of structural discrimination against blacks and an entrenched commitment to states' rights.

The growth of federal power was therefore a slow and uneven process usually stimulated by external challenges- the British in the early of the republic, secession in 1861-5. In the 1930s the collapse of the banking system and 25% unemployment justified a substantial expansion of the federal manpower and spending including the belated construction of a welfare state. This expansion was accelerated by the demands of the Second World War and the Cold war. In all these cases a sense of acute insecurity was required to override the state centred localism that was the norm for American politics.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, federal power was utilized more ambitiously to tilt the social balance. During the New Deal, the Democrats rewrote the law to confirm the rights of labour unions to organise and strike. In the 1960s a new generation of Democrats responding to black militancy, finally employed federal power to force Southern states to enfranchise black Americans and end legal segregation. Civil rights now trumped states rights and this gave a cue to other social groups, notably women and homosexuals. Rights-talk became the dominant discourse of late 20<sup>th</sup> century politics-consumer rights, the right to privacy, prisoners' rights, the right to die. This reflected a deeper shift in the language of liberty, previously a negative concept ('freedom from...' - usually from federal interference) but now increasingly positive in scope (freedom to do or to be something).

Since the 1970s Americans have been so polarized over social issues that Congress has hesitated to legislate in sensitive areas. Into this vacuum has stepped the Supreme Court. The judicial activism of the Court has made it the centre of controversy yet its enhanced role testifies to the difficult democratic politicians have faced in dealing with the rights revolution in an increasingly diverse society.

## Empire

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the expansion of the United States westward across North America paralleled the expansion of Russia eastward across central Asia. The US won the sprawling Ohio territory from the British as spoils of war in 1783; similarly Florida was wrested from Spain and the desert west right out to California from Mexico after victory in 1848. The vast Louisiana Purchase was extracted from Napoleon in 1803 after hard bargaining at the negotiating table. A similar blend of war and diplomacy built up earlier empires. Nor were Americans unique in the way they treated the aboriginal inhabitants- concluding treaties with them as foreign and equal nations but then driving them off their guaranteed lands as westward expansion became relentless.

Yet the American empire proved very different from the Russian. First in Jefferson's method for gradually bringing the Colonies into the Union. From the start new territories were granted their own democratic governments; when populations crossed a certain numerical threshold the territories could apply for admission as states. Equally important, the local liberties guaranteed under the American federalism gave state governments flexibility to develop economically in their own ways. On the other hand, the federal government retained immense powers of the unsettled West; policy decisions like land grants for railroads and homesteads for settlers fundamentally shaped Western history.

After the Civil War the country's new unity allowed industrialization to proceed apace. America's internal empire now spanned the whole continent-one blessed with rich resources. It lacked the internal divisions that frustrated Europe's economic integration and eventually dragged the Old World in to two ruinous world wars. So railroads and telegraphs drew together a truly national market, while the laissez faire ethos allowed entrepreneurs to amass vast fortunes and create huge conglomerates without tight government regulation. A single market dominated by big business: here were the distinctive foundations of America's economic dominance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Also important for industrial growth was the largely open door to migrants from Europe, who provided essential labour for America's industrial revolution. Cooped up in a small urbanised country this influx could have proved socially and politically explosive but that was not the American experience. In the United States the ethnic diversity of the immigrants defused class consciousness, the democratic franchise reduced the allure of political extremism and the chance to move on from there slums to the suburbs, from the east coast cities into the American hinterland gave immigrants the prospect of advancement.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the US chose to extend its global reach through finance, commerce and cultural aggrandizement. But during the cold war it developed a military nexus that now numbers 750 bases in more than 130 countries and its defence spending amounts to two fifths of the world's total. In regions particularly Western Europe, this military presence has

been by mutual agreement- empire by invitation. Elsewhere for instance in Central America or Indochina the invitees have been at most a segment of the political elite, a group of imperial clients. At home the demands of the armed forces have been a major factor in the domestic economy, prompting President Eisenhower's warning in 1961, about the influence of the military industrial complex. Major technological innovations such as the transistor and computers would not have taken off without the government as both investor and customer.

The author states that it makes sense to see the United States in a continuum with earlier imperial powers, rather than to accept the idea that the United States is both historically unique and morally exemplary. That idea has shaped the form of America's power projection overseas. Anti-imperialists were a powerful brake during the Spanish American conflict over Cuba in 1898; in the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was robust opposition to US involvement in both world wars. The architects of the America's cold war strategy were at pains to justify overseas commitments as a way to contain Soviet imperialism rather than to create an American empire. The old script of liberty versus tyranny was adapted for the international stage, with the US becoming the champion of the free market and the leader of the free world.

Yet in the post Cold War world the empire of liberty has metamorphosed again- from an Empire of production to an empire of consumption. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the US displaced Britain as the pre-eminent industrial and financial power and this economic predominance made it the 'arsenal of democracy' in the Second World War, and the Cold War. Since the 1980s, however the US has run persistent deficits on its federal budget and on its payments to the rest of the world. These soaring debts and deficits have been sustained because of the willingness of other nations to invest in the US- rather than the other way round as for the previous century.

## **Faith**

The entangled stories of empire and liberty throw light on the American experience but they need to be understood by reference to the third theme of faith. By this the author means religious faith and very much related, faith in the nation itself.

The colonies were predominately Protestant, often fiercely so. The vehement anti-popey that characterised popular Protestantism in Britain was replicated across the Atlantic. Yet the Founders of the new nation balanced religious faith with a commitment to religious liberty: no established church and complete freedom of belief and worship of people of any faith or none at all. This was made law in the first article of the Bill of rights which in Jefferson's phrase built 'a wall of separation between the church and State'.

Here was a fundamental, enduring tension- between the principal of a secular state and the ideal of a godly people. A succession of evangelical revivals pulsed through America from

the 1740s to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, confirming American Protestantism as a Bible based faith that demanded individual and conversion. Evangelicalism spawned new denominations like the Baptists and Methodists and a profusion of sects that helped give American Protestantism its distinctively democratic ethos.

A religion of conversion implied an either/or worldview- good versus evil, the saved or the damned and this inspired the crusades to redeem society that were also characteristic of 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant America. Drink was one demon-linked in the Protestant mind with papists- but the biggest crusade for Northern radicals was eradicating slavery from the land of liberty.

Evangelical Protestantism values were, however, tested as never before in America's new urban industrial age. The mass of migrants from southern and eastern Europe were one threat with Catholics still a particular bogey, because of their perceived looseness about drink and the Sabbath (too much liberty) and their authoritarian hierarchy (not enough liberty). The mounting tide of secularism inspired religious conservatives to rally round the fundamentals of their biblical faith against secular values and also liberal Christianity. Moreover Darwinism called into question the easy assumption that religion and science were simply different facets of a unified cosmic order. The notorious 'Monkey trial' of 1925 helped stereotype fundamentalism as a small town small minded faith and drove evangelical Protestantism out of national politics of fifty years.

At the same time, however, the redemptive impulse was being elevated onto the international stage. It was evident, in which American funds and people played a disproportionate role. In 1900 there were 5,000 American missionaries abroad, today there are more than 100,000. The redemptive theme was even more evident in the rhetoric of US foreign policy- the global mission articulated by Woodrow Wilson to 'make the world safe for democracy' and then the ensuing struggles against Nazism and communism. In fact, America's imperial outreach has been consistently justified through the language of faith as well as liberty. Communism was depicted as a godless society, an 'evil' empire; it threatened to impose nothing less than 'slavery' on the subject nations, which was why containment and detente were always second-best for millions of Americans. Like Lincoln speaking of the US in the 1850s, they did not believe it possible for the world to remain half slave, half free. This conception of foreign policy as an apocalyptic struggle re-emerged after 9/11 as the Bush administration discerned new global threats from Islamic extremism and from as 'axis of evil' brandishing weapons of mass destruction.

This self image of the US as a crusader state called to save the world was rooted in the evangelical worldview but usually eschewed overtly religious language. In domestic politics, however, that was not the case. Martin Luther King drew repeatedly on biblical concepts and phrases to inspire black people in the fight against discrimination-likening them to the children of Israel struggling from Egyptian bondage into the Promised Land. Although black

radicals went on to embrace Marxist models, the mainstream Southern civil rights movement was rooted in the evangelical tradition.

But, so too, in a different way, was the conservative backlash against the 1960s. White evangelicals in the South had kept to themselves since the 1920s but the sexual revolution- the Pill, abortion, gay rights- seemed to portend a breakdown of family values. This in turn was taken to portend the secularization of society-issues symbolised by the Supreme Court's ban (in the name of religious liberty) on prayer and Bible reading in schools. In a sense the south was being 'Americanised', its culture eroded by the values of the rest of the nation. But in another way, parts of America were being 'Southernised' by the exodus of millions of people out of the South since the Second World War, providing grassroots support for Reagan in 1980. Evangelicalism had now become a deeply conservative force in American politics and in contrast with the past it was no longer fervently anti-papist because Catholics featured in the new religious right.

The recent 'culture wars' suggest a deep polarisation of American society, a struggle over how far the US should be a secular society or a Christian nation. The outcome will have implications for America's global role. History suggests that the decline of empires stems from loss of faith in the imperial mission as much as from financial and economic crisis. America's distinctive empire has always been built on faith, not just power.

### ***Interpretation and Critique***

This is a really good read and I could not put it down. My summary based on the conclusion of the book does not capture the narrative of the people involved in shaping the story. The book contains hundreds of quotes from the people who lived the story- Presidents to the common man.

The history of America is rarely simple, often messy and sometimes appalling; yet also full of surprises, frequently epic and on occasions wonderfully uplifting.

It has made me want to learn and find out more about the country and we are off for a summer holiday to the 'wild west'!

### ***Implications for leadership in general practice.***

This book confirmed the importance of understanding the past so that we know which direction to lead into the future.

That where we are now is because we stand on the shoulders of the great people that came before us.

The importance of leading by consensus and having an understanding of what our followers really need.

That to lead takes courage.

Of the many quotes the one that I will remember is by Theodore Roosevelt

“The joy of life is for those whose heart demands it”

I hope this summary gives you a flavour of this excellent book which is a good read and helped me understand and appreciate one of the greatest empires the world has known.