

A Self-Repaying Empire: What Trump Is Doing to American Power. And What He Isn't

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“I’ll be back.”
T-800, *Terminator*

“I’m back.”
T-800, *Terminator III:
Rise of the Machines*

The mess in world politics created by Donald Trump in the very first weeks of his second presidential term (the mess in the domestic policy is not discussed here) caused two conflicting

spontaneous reactions at once. Both bear more emotions than reflection, which did not prevent them from immediately turning into a political fact.

The first reaction perfectly fits in the Soviet propaganda parlance: “American imperialism has thrown off its mask and shown its true face” (or “beastly grin”). This is how boorish rhetoric and illegal blackmail targeting a number of sovereign states is interpreted. Moreover, Trump puts words into deeds very quickly—and quickly achieves results, at least some. Law and rules are thrown away; from now on, strength will rule—American strength, as U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio honestly warned in his keynote speech at the Senate hearings even before Trump’s inauguration: “That a foreign policy that served the national interest could now be replaced by one that served the ‘liberal world order’... wasn’t just a fantasy; it was a dangerous delusion.” “The postwar global order is not just obsolete; it is now a weapon being used against us.” “Now President Trump returns to office with an unmistakable mandate from the voters. They want a strong America. Engaged in the world. But guided by a clear objective, to promote peace abroad, and security and prosperity here at home.” And it is “not isolationism. It is the commonsense realization that a foreign policy centered on our national interest is not some outdated relic.” “How America can promote the cause of ‘peace on earth’ if it is not first safe at home?” (Rubio, 2025). Trump is a classic, old-school imperialist, and “peace on earth” is just a cynical cover for his selfish interests.¹ America is reinforcing its power.

The second reaction is that Trump is destroying the key element of American attractiveness, American influence, and, according to many, of American imperialism—its famous soft power. The main evidence is the tightening of migration policy; the abolition of USAID, USAGM, and several other humanitarian agencies; and the suspension and revision of other international assistance and cooperation programs. But what about the Statue of Liberty and Emma Lazarus’s famous lines

¹ It is impossible to choose any one corroborating quote in that vein—there is a myriad of them and more appear every day.

dedicated to it and entrenched in its symbolic image²? And what about “greater strength throughout the world” that will be “the exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope for those who do not now have freedom” (Reagan, 1981), “the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world,” pledging “to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world” (Bush, 2001)? And what about the many millions of those who believed in these promises? Everything has been trampled upon and betrayed. American power is waning.

Both attitudes are quite solid in their own way. But they are opposite in judgment, and therefore they cannot be true at the same time. So, a third one is needed. But before we formulate it, we must make an important reservation. This is not about what Trump wants, what his plan is about and whether he has such a plan at all. You cannot read another man’s soul, especially if it is Trump’s soul. So, we will talk solely about possible and objectively observed consequences of his actions, disregarding their ulterior motives and avoiding speculative psychologization.

Importantly, these are going to be relatively distant consequences. Trump is an impetuous person, to put it mildly, and the modern world itself is extremely volatile. Much has already happened during the short time and even more will happen in the months and years to come. So, it is impossible to make any lasting interpretations in real time. (Minerva’s owl does not necessarily fly at dusk, and there is no certainty that dusk, so good for calm reflection, will ever come. But, in order to cover the entire landscape, it must gain enough height anyway. As a matter of fact, real owls are far-sighted.)

Thus, the subject of discussion should be considered in several contexts. All of them expand the time horizon of the analysis.

² “Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

THE FIRST CONTEXT

The simplest one. Imagine that we have forgotten that we learned quite a lot about Trump and his style (as Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon noted, “the style is the man himself”) even before and during his previous presidential term. Back then Trump’s business background was the subject of scrutiny. Trump attacked his counterparties like a storm (without drawing much distinction between allies, partners, and opponents), stunning them with a barrage of peremptory accusations, harsh complaints, rogue threats, and ridiculous demands backed up by decisions that were often immediately postponed or corrected. Dirty tricks such as misinformation, gas-lighting, trolling, flooding, stalking, victim-blaming, ageism, ableism, etc. are employed *en masse*. The border between truth and lies, between facts and fakes, between logic and absurdity, between the possible and the impossible becomes blurred in the counterparty’s mind. When a certain relatively (compared to everything else) reasonable or at least not quite crazy-looking offer suddenly appears in this muddy whirlpool of reality, the counterparty eagerly grips onto it as a lifeline, wishing, above all, for this whole nightmare to end as soon as possible. Trump rubs his hands, his counterparty takes a sigh of relief, and both sides are happy, albeit for different reasons. It is a non-zero-sum game, a deal—at least, sometimes. If the counterparty balks too much, he is sent away to come back when he is ready. Sometimes he does. It is strange that so many seemingly serious people take all of Trump’s verbal (and non-verbal) stunts at face value and even as *fait accompli*. It is excusable for those directly targeted but not for experts.

THE SECOND CONTEXT

A man with a style like this now heads the American empire. This does not necessarily mean an autocratic master (more on that later) but nonetheless. It is no secret that the United States is essentially an empire, albeit not officially, not *de jure*, but *de facto*—this is precisely how it is portrayed in numerous self-descriptions and external assessments. Thomas Jefferson did not wait for victory in

the Revolutionary War and the adoption of the Constitution to speak of the future union as an “empire,” repeatedly invoking this vision before, during and at the end of his presidency (Jefferson, 1780). Another founding father, Alexander Hamilton, in 1787, named the United States in the opening lines of the first issue of *The Federalist Papers* “an empire in many respects the most interesting in the world”³ (The Federalist Papers, 1961, p. 33).⁴ In 1795, however, he still described the union just as “the embryo of a great empire” (Hamilton, 1795); but that embryo, truth be told, turned out to be quite viable and capable of evolvment.⁵

Throughout the 19th century, the definition of the United States as an empire was broadly used, causing no doubt or embarrassment. In 1861, one of the stairs in the Capitol Building was decorated with Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze’s giant fresco (which is still there) called “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way.” In 1900, Albert Beveridge’s (a Republican Senator from Indiana) fiery speech widely published under the title “In Support of American Empire,” made quite a splash. It contained, among other things, the following wonderful passage: “Our fathers wrote into the Constitution these words of growth, of expansion: of empire, if you will, unlimited by geography or climate or by anything but the vitality and possibilities of the American people” (Congressional Record, 1900, p. 708).⁶ Or God “has made us the master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns. He has given us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth. He has made us adepts in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples. Were it not for such a force as this, the world would relapse into barbarism and night. And of all our race He has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally

³ How true that is! And the longer it lives the more it proves that’s true.

⁴ In total, Hamilton used the same term 13 times in the *Federalist Papers* referring to the Union; James Madison used it once, too.

⁵ For more detail see Tucker and Hendrickson, 1990; Weeks, 1996; Wood, 2009.

⁶ See below for where exactly in the Constitution Beveridge read these words.

lead in the regeneration of the world. This is the divine mission of America" (Congressional Record, 1900, p. 711).⁷

In the 20th century, the term 'empire' practically fell out of use with regard to the United States due to its desire to dissociate and distance itself from the old European empires and oppose their techniques (first in China, then everywhere) with its own ones such as free trade, open-door policy, equal opportunities, and influence on formally sovereign but essentially more or less controlled governments instead of using force to seize certain territories, albeit with the support of local elites and administration. There really was a difference, which Niall Ferguson convincingly described as the American manner of "going soft" (Ferguson, 2004, p. 19); but both *modi operandi* fit well into Charles Tilly's framework of defining imperial domination as "indirect rule": "1) retention or establishment of particular, distinct compacts for the government of each segment; 2) exercise of power through intermediaries who enjoy considerable autonomy within their own domains in return for compliance, tribute, and military collaboration with the center" (Tilly, 1997, p. 3). One way or another, there began a period described by Ferguson as "denial of empire" (Ferguson, 2004, pp. 3-7) but, remarkably, not its "abolition" or "dismantling." And Michael Cox added that the "denial of empire" had become a rather effective way of maintaining and asserting it (Cox, 2003; 2004).

However, the taboo was gradually lifted. In 1986, Geir Lundestad of Norway published a resonant article titled "Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945–52," which, however, did not arouse indignation (Lundestad, 1986).⁸ In 1993, the first volume of *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Policy*, prepared by Bradford Perkins, came out under the title "The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776-1865" (Perkins, 1993). America's victory in

⁷ It looks very similar to the reference definition of the imperial mission and program made by Virgil:

"But thou, O Roman, learn with sovereign sway
To rule the nations. Thy great art shall be
To keep the world in lasting peace, to spare
humbled foe, and crush to earth the proud" (Eneida: VI, pp. 847-853).
This similarity is not accidental.

⁸ Later he developed the same idea in other valuable works: Lundestad, 1998, 2003, 2012.

the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union along with the entire socialist camp, the emergence of a unipolar world, an attack on its symbolic center on 11 September 2001, and the international community's reaction to it (including Russia)... all this finally lifted the taboo against applying the term 'empire' to the United States. There are countless examples of this, both in academic and broad public discourse. The inertia of the "denial of empire" makes itself felt even in the first quarter of the 21st century though less often. Andrew Bacevich (2002, p. 244) stated quite harshly: "Like it or not, America today is Rome, committed irreversibly to the maintenance and, where feasible, expansion of an empire... This is hardly a matter for celebration; but neither is there any purpose served by denying the facts" (Bacevich, 2002, p. 244). Michael Ignatieff added: "Americans may not have thought of the World Trade Center or the Pentagon as the symbolic headquarters of a world empire, but the men with the box cutters⁹ certainly did, and so do numberless millions who cheered their terrifying exercise in the propaganda of the deed" (Ignatieff, 2003, p. 22) And, without sympathizing with the terrorists and their supporters, he asked a reasonable question: "Yet what word but 'empire' describes the awesome thing that America is becoming?" (Ibid). Well, now this "awesome thing" is led by an "awesome guy."

THE THIRD CONTEXT

The structural and functional framework of the American empire is its federative institutional design. This framework ensured both its very formation as a union of 13 colonies and its further expansion. As early as in the *43rd Federalist Paper*, James Madison insisted that federal authorities be granted the right to admit new states into the Union as he considered non-provision of this issue by the Articles of Confederation a major drawback (The Federalist Papers, 1961, p. 33).

The issue was later addressed in Section 3 of Article IV of the U.S. Constitution, which now reads: "New States may be admitted

⁹ A reference to the terrorists who captured the planes for the 9/11 attacks. Such details tend to be forgotten with time.

by the Congress into this Union.”¹⁰ It is noteworthy that neither the American Constitution itself (unlike, for example, the Russian one), nor the amendments to it contain either a closed or even an open list of states. A new state is admitted by the Congress alone, which is a relatively simple procedure, provided a new unit has made such a request by properly confirmed consensus. No unilateral annexation is possible, which is quite prudent, for who knows what may happen in the future. After all, it is easy to add another star to the U.S. flag at any moment.

Moreover, all federations in the modern era were created on the American experience. But hopes that federalism would become the same source of strength for other polities generally proved false. However, the very possibility of expanding the federation by forming and incorporating new units is explicitly stated in the constitutions and legislation of Austria, Australia, India, and Russia;¹¹ it is difficult to say a priori whether this option exists implicitly in other federations, but it cannot be ruled out either.

Practical, not hypothetical, feasibility of such scenarios is another question. So before discussing seriously—or at least without breaking into hilarious laughter—the prospects of Canada and Mexico joining the U.S. as its states, it would be nice to recall that both countries are actually federations themselves (ten provinces and three territories in the former, and 31 states and one federal district in the latter). Therefore, it would be necessary either to abolish the federative system as such (no chance) in both countries, or to grant the rights of an American state to each of their current political units separately. And

¹⁰ Remarkably, in this very section, namely in: “The Congress shall have Power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting the Territory or other Property belonging to the United States; and nothing in this Constitution shall be so construed as to Prejudice any Claims of the United States, or of any particular State” Beveridge found the “words of growth, of expansion: of empire, if you will,” quite freely interpreting “the Territory or other Property belonging to the United States,” and even claiming that not just the Philippines (whose acquisition prompted his fiery speech) is U.S. property, but that “the Pacific is our ocean” (Congressional Record, 1900: 704). Rhetorical frenzy can lead far enough, and Trump is not a trailblazer in this respect.

¹¹ And prior to it, the USSR, if we consider it a genuine, not fictitious, federation, which is difficult given the actual omnipotence of the Communist Party. And yet, there are more reasons to consider it a genuine empire, with the (pseudo)federative design perfectly suiting its needs.

what would happen in this case to the composition of both houses of the U.S. Congress (especially the Senate) and the electoral map of the United States? Moreover, one should remember, firstly, that Quebec is a freedom-loving Francophone province, and that Canada is actually a constitutional monarchy headed by the British sovereign, while Article IV of the U.S. Constitution (Section 4) clearly says that “The United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a Republican Form of Government...”¹² No, one cannot help but laughing. So, we have to put Trump’s verbal stunts in the first context and consider them a smokescreen designed to hide (but not for long) the real matters requiring discussion with the immediate neighbors (border control, drug trafficking, tariffs).

THE FOURTH CONTEXT

There are no permanent limits to the expansion of the American empire or any other empire for that matter. This is commonplace in all studies focusing on the imperial political form. The only indication of any geographical frame is contained in the very name—the United States “of America.” A whole part of the world is, indeed, quite a lot. However, this broad frame was easily overcome in 1959, when Hawaii, located not in America but in Oceania, became a new American state.

However, not only states are “united.” The American empire, like any other empire (as well as many federations), is multi-layered and asymmetric—cf. Tilly’s above-mentioned reference to “retention or establishment of particular, distinct compacts for the government of each segment” of the empire. There is no need to analyze the case of the District of Columbia, which in many respects, including the nearly square shape of its territory, resembles Rome’s *Templum Pacis*, where the Eternal City (as well as its analogues in other federations that followed the American example) originated. But there are also all kinds of “associated territories,” a significant part of which is not

¹² Eight years later, in 1795, Immanuel Kant reproduced the same norm in the treatise “Perpetual Peace” (Kant, 1903) as a *conditio sine qua non* for his ideal federation project, and it really became such in almost all federations, not ideal but real. However, Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates live without it quite well. There was another curious nuance in Kant’s project, which will be mentioned in another footnote.

located in America, and a couple of them are not even in the Western Hemisphere (in “this hemisphere,” to be precise), 200 years ago declared by President James Monroe the sphere of exclusive interests of the United States (Monroe, 1823).¹³ On the one hand, Trump’s openly declared territorial claims—to Canada, Mexico, the Panama Canal Zone, and Greenland—concern specifically the Western Hemisphere and therefore fit well into the tradition set by the Monroe Doctrine, with the latter two options looking somewhat less absurd than the former two, considering the phenomenon of “associated territories.” Reports of Trump’s statement that the CIA “will have a greater focus on the Western Hemisphere” (Schechtman and Volz, 2025) can be attributed to the same tradition. On the other hand, it is impossible to understand, at least for now, what exactly Trump meant when he stated his intention to “take over” the Gaza Strip and “own” it (Reuters, 2025). That is, it can be understood in any way.

But “the background and the semantic horizon” (Filippov, 1992, p. 105) of the American empire is not limited to the Western Hemisphere, no matter how it is defined. “Americans, at least many of them, were undoubtedly expansionists both before and after independence; and even prior to it, most of them believed that ‘America’ was something more than just a geographical concept” (Perkins, 1993, p. 7). Simon Bolivar, who did not particularly like the United States but held it in high regard, warned a congress of several newly formed independent Latin American states, he convened in Panama in 1826, that in the future North Americans “might perhaps become a sole nation, covering the universe (*cubriendo el universo*)—a federation” (cited by Pagden, 1995, p. 195). And in 1893, an eccentric Democratic congressman from Wisconsin, Lucas M. Miller, submitted a constitutional amendment (which was naturally rejected, but the bad taste lingered, which proposed changing the country’s name into the “United States of the

¹³ There are different opinions about where exactly the boundary between the hemispheres passes. If it is drawn, as geographers most often do, along the Greenwich meridian, then almost the whole of Great Britain, all of Ireland, part of France, all of Portugal and almost all of Spain will end up west of it. How Monroe himself visualized this border is not known for certain, but surely somehow differently.

Earth”¹⁴ (Bomboy, 2018; Cowdon, 1892, p. 51¹⁵), suggesting that since it is inevitable anyway, then why not do it?¹⁶

Neither a world nation nor a world federation happened to materialize. Yet something else, quite similar, happened. The United States turned into the center of the global empire of the West. President James Carter claimed the central position for his country even before the term ‘empire’ began to be surreptitiously brought back into use, for which reason he did not use it explicitly: “By the measure of history, our Nation’s 200 years are very brief, and our rise to world eminence is briefer still. It dates from 1945, when Europe and the old international order lay in ruins. Before then, America was largely on the periphery of world affairs. But since then, we have inescapably been at the center of world affairs” (Carter, 1977).

It is the empire of the West but global, and it is a global empire but of the West since its values, institutions, and practices are of undeniably Western origin (clearly not Eastern). Most of its elites and functionaries, as well as their main loci are also in the West. The core¹⁷ of the global empire is not reducible either to the United States or to the West, which also includes Europe, in an expanded geographical, i.e., transatlantic, and cultural, including religious and linguistic, sense. The case of Japan stands out, but there are also such very specific outposts of the imperial core as South Korea, Taiwan, and Israel.¹⁸ Moreover, the concentric circles of the West’s global empire’s power and influence cover *orbis terrarum* entirely. All its opponents without exception, including China and Russia, not to mention its allies and client states, exist in the empire’s strong power field and cannot ignore it.

¹⁴ I thank my thirteen-year-old son Yakov Kaspe for reporting this wonderful fact.

¹⁵ The text of the amendment was published here before its adoption.

¹⁶ Incidentally, another *conditio sine qua non* for a federation of republics and therefore perpetual peace that Kant dreamed of was its universal nature (Kant, 1903).

¹⁷ On the usefulness of distinguishing in analysis between the imperial structure and the dynamics of the ‘center’ and the ‘core’ see Kaspe, 2022.

¹⁸ Just as the Roman Empire was not limited to the city of Rome, or to Italy, or even to the Mediterranean (Britain, Germany, Armenia... up to the Farasan Islands in the southern part of the Red Sea and, according to some assumptions, the Arikamedu trading post in southeastern India).

This empire has recently been bursting at the seams and staggering. Fewer countries (because of the clumsy moves undertaken by the empire itself but not only because of that) are now ready to claim affiliation with and swear allegiance to it. Today far fewer people and states would subscribe to *Le Monde* Editor-in-Chief Jean-Marie Colombani's words "We are all Americans" (Colombani, 2001) that spread around the world on that most tragic day 9/11. Transatlantic solidarity, which seemed to be the strongest factor uniting the global empire, is also broken. It is amazing how fast the "collective West" cliché, repeated hundreds of times before, has disappeared from Russian official narratives.

However, a crisis and a complete collapse are two different things. All empires experienced crises; and at least some empires survived some of the most dramatic crises of comparable, or even greater, magnitude. This happened to the first, the second, and the third Rome. By the way, very many people (including myself) viewed the disintegration of the USSR as the final collapse that ended the history of Northern Eurasia as an imperial space irrevocably and forever. We should not have worried because political configurations change, but neither the space itself nor its operators have so far become, and will not become in the foreseeable future, post-imperial. And will they?

So, there is a lot of unexpected, much less fundamentally new and almost nothing absurd in what Trump is doing to the American empire and its power. It is just that some of the unique features of American politics have long been overlooked (including in America itself) as if they were long obsolete and insignificant, as if America were just a regular state among others. No, they are not obsolete. No, they are certainly not insignificant. And no, America is not a regular state (if its political form can be considered a state at all, which has repeatedly been questioned, and not without reason¹⁹).

¹⁹ "American federal theory... has no concept of the state per se. The politically sovereign people (usually described as politically sovereign under God) compact with each other to form a body politic or a commonwealth, and then through the same compact or a subsidiary one establish various governments and allocate powers to them as the people see fit. No government is totally sovereign; it only possesses those powers delegated to it by the sovereign people, and many governments can exist side-by-side" (Elazar, 1993, p. 192). Moreover, this is why "no supreme authority exists; all authority is subject to challenge" (Ostrom, 1994, p. 254).

There is only one really unexpected, new and even absurd thing in what Trump is doing to the American empire and its power. He is knocking the value, ideological, idealistic and, to put it bluntly, sacral foundation out from under the American empire (and therefore from under the entire empire of the West). Not the set of principles and requirements that the progressive public rallying around the U.S. Democratic Party in recent decades has turned into dogma and conventional wisdom (he may as well be a transient fluctuation, if not aberration), but something much deeper and more significant—the pillar and ground of the entire project.

He has always been guided by certain shaped values (it should be borne in mind that unlike polities with a longer history, the United States did not come into being spontaneously as a resultant of multidirectional vectors and factors but was designed and constructed). Values are “non-empirical... conceptions of the desirable, used in moral discourse, with a particular relevance for behavior” (Deth and Scarbrough, 1998, p. 22), and “relatively independently of any specific instrumental ‘advantage’” (Parsons, 2005, pp. 26). Values are present in all the contexts discussed above (except for the first one, which is the reason for all this reflection).

In his famous²⁰ sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630) delivered before crossing the ocean, the first governor of Massachusetts, John Winthrop, conditioned the success of the entire risky enterprise and the hope that “The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways,” on the ability of the future colonists “to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God.”²¹ Then and only then “we shall be as a City upon a Hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken,

²⁰ It is true though that it became such only in the 20th century, serving as a source of inspiration for President John F. Kennedy and repeatedly for President Ronald Reagan. In fairness, it should be noted that Trump also mentioned Winthrop in his speech at the National Prayer Breakfast on 6 February 2025 (Trump, 2025b). But the only thing one can understand from this extremely incoherent and meaningless speech is that Trump strongly approves of faith in God and that “deep in the soul of every patriot is the knowledge that God has a special plan and a glorious mission for America”—but not what this plan and this mission are actually like.

²¹ Winthrop quoted verbatim from the Old Testament Book of Micah (6:8).

and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going" (cited by an adapted interpretation in modern English: Winthrop, 1630b; for original text see Winthrop, 1630a).

American federalism is also built on a foundation of values. It grew out of "federal theology" (aka "covenant theology"), that is, out of the version of Puritan theology that considered legitimate only those forms of socio-political organization that were created according to the Covenant between God and Israel, that is, religious, moral, social, and political obligations all rolled into one (see Weir, 1990; Kendall and Carey, 1995; Moots, 2010). Procedurally and technically it was like this: "Initially, the basic covenants of town and congregation united individuals and families. Parallel to those covenants there developed the network of voluntary associations—commercial, social, church, and civic—which represent the non-governmental aspects of a civil society founded on the principles of free contract. From the first, networks of communities were united as colonies, then states. Ultimately, the network of states was linked in a federal union, always paralleled by a similar network of associations" (Elazar, 1998, p. 16). The main feature of a covenant as a model of political form is that "its morally binding dimension takes precedence over its legal dimension" (Ibid, p. 5). Yes, even over its legal dimension because it is genealogically secondary.

At the end of the 18th century, when it had become clear to Jefferson what exactly was being created in North America, he wrote and spoke almost all the time not about an empire in general but about an "empire of liberty" (when he omitted this clarification, he did so because he thought it was obvious enough). Further elaborating on Jefferson's principle, the well-known ideologeme of Manifest Destiny (see Merk, 1995; Stephanson, 1995) was also about values. The author of this formula, publicist John O'Sullivan, at first defined it simply as

a natural need “to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions” (O’Sullivan, 1845a, p. 6), but several months later he added: “Democracies must make their conquests by moral agencies. If these are not sufficient, the conquest is robbery” (O’Sullivan, 1845b, p. 247). And in the same year 1845, a Republican congressman from Alabama, James E. Belser, offered a broader rationale: “Long may our country prove itself the asylum of the oppressed. Let its institutions and its people be extended far and wide, and when the waters of despotism shall have inundated other portions of the globe, and the votary of liberty be compelled to betake himself to his ark, let this government be the Ararat on which it shall rest” (Congressional Globe, 1845, p. 43).

Over time, the value component also manifested itself in the Monroe Doctrine—not in its initial version, stated dryly and briefly, in just four paragraphs, in the presidential message to the Congress on 2 December 1823, but in the corollary to it, voiced by President Theodore Roosevelt in a similar speech on 6 December 1904. He said that “chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation” (Roosevelt, 1904). In other words, he proposed a general principle of international politics, which was not limited to the Western Hemisphere alone and was warranted by the value imperative of suppressing evil and naming those responsible for its implementation.

Finally, American soft power is a much deeper and broader concept than USAID programs and the like. It is not by any means reduced solely to political technology, but it “comes from being shining ‘City upon a Hill’” (Nye, 2002, p. 141) and from “an enticing new Jerusalem of economic and political liberty” (Ferguson, 2004, p. 20) and only then does it get certain instrumental support.

Naturally, this is not about idealizing the American political tradition—there are already more than enough ideals in it. All explications and interpretations of “America’s mission” somehow contain the notions of burden, commitment, and sacrifice. But ideals and values coexist there with quite a few pragmatic considerations.

The latter are also present in all of the investigated contexts, this time including the first one (so it is better to discuss it last).

The New England colonists were not at all going to eat “locusts and wild honey” and were very concerned with their material well-being. The same applies to “federal theology,” in which “Protestant ethics,” strictly according to Max Weber, produced the “spirit of capitalism,” which greatly contributed to the expansion of the federal Union. O’Sullivan’s first article, which mentioned the Manifest Destiny formula, actually demanded that Texas be taken away from Mexico and had a short and clear title: “The Annexation.” The pragmatic interests of the United States were fiercely defended by House Representative Belser and especially by Senator Beveridge, who talked so enthusiastically not just about an empire but about a trade empire (in fact, in his speech quoted above, he demanded the seizure of the Philippines not for the sake of some speculative principle or, on the contrary, irrational instinct, but in order to achieve the maximum commercial benefit). It is all too known how much pragmatism there was in the practical implementation of the Monroe Doctrine (for example, in the United Fruit Company’s doings) as well as in the use of soft power.

The point is that values and pragmatic considerations can turn into each other and even merge to become completely indistinguishable, including in the consciousness and subconscious of their carriers themselves. One can hardly talk about this tight knot more concisely and accurately than the classic of the revisionist school in the historiography of American diplomacy, William Appleman Williams: “Most imperialists believed that an American empire would be humanitarian, and most humanitarians believed that doing good would be good for business” (Williams, 1963, p. 227). “The American empire has not been the result of evil intentions or irrational behavior. It was created by men who knew precisely what they were doing because they considered it necessary for their own welfare and desirable for the well-being of others” (Williams, 1967, p. 12). “Expanding the marketplace enlarged the area of freedom. Expanding the area of freedom enlarged the marketplace” (Williams, 1976, p. 43). Hence “the grand illusion” and “the charming belief that the United States could reap the rewards

of empire without paying the costs of empire and without admitting that it was an empire” (Williams, 1980, p. 170).²²

And then came Trump, who refuses to gauge and compare benefits and costs in anything other than hard currency. Mission, values, ideals, trust, reputation, honor... all this has been weighed on the scales and found wanting (Dan 5:27). All this is converted into money and redefined as deals—with a predictable result. In his inaugural speech, Trump suddenly spoke directly about Manifest Destiny²³ and even expanded it to cosmic proportions, while at the same time narrowing it, because no values were mentioned: “The United States will once again consider itself a growing nation—one that increases our wealth, expands our territory, builds our cities, raises our expectations, and carries our flag into new and beautiful horizons. And we will pursue our manifest destiny into the stars, launching American astronauts to plant the Stars and Stripes on the planet Mars” (Trump, 2025a). The desire to achieve if not total than at least better recoupment of American investments shows now even in those issues on the global agenda where there was none before or was considered shameful to be spoken about openly. It shows in relations with the closest and most devoted allies (primarily Europe but also Canada, Australia, Japan, and South Korea), wherein the tariff and trade imbalance has suddenly devalued (literally) all vows of eternal loyalty. It shows in support to Israel (the idea of creating a “Riviera of the Middle East” in the Gaza Strip or rather in place of the Gaza Strip). And it shows in support for Ukraine (a deal on rare-earth minerals of unclear nomenclature, which now also seems to include nuclear power plants. President Zelensky, who was the first to propose a similar deal in the fall of 2024, even

²² Being extremely left, he himself strongly disapproved of what he was describing. But what difference does it make if the diagnosis is accurate and justified? Karl Marx did not think up the “horrors” and “evils” of capitalism either. Williams’s sharp observations became almost the main source of inspiration for Andrew J. Bacevich, a right-wing conservative researcher of American imperialism, quoted above.

²³ What none of his predecessors did, even President James Knox Polk (from 1845 to 1849), who is considered the most zealous champion of this doctrine. During his term in office, the states of Arizona, Utah, Nevada, California, Oregon, Idaho, Washington, most of New Mexico, as well as some parts of Wyoming, Montana, and Colorado were added to the territory of the United States—a very convincing manifestation of Manifest Destiny.

before Trump was re-elected, found a sure way to pique his interest, but he hardly expected such reverberations). Furthermore, the first noticeable military operation ordered by Trump (a series of attacks on the Yemeni Houthis in March 2025) was explained solely by the need to stop the multi-billion-dollar damage to the American and world maritime trade, as well as to the U.S. Navy. Not a word was said about the Houthi attacks on Israel.

It may seem that this strategy is at variance with U.S. Vice President JD Vance's high-profile speech at the Munich Security Conference on 14 February 2025, in which he firmly vindicated democratic values and admonished the Europeans (and Biden administration, of course) for departing from them. This is a seeming contradiction because, in fact, he talked only about one value, namely that one should not be "afraid of the voices, the opinions and the conscience that guide your very own people" and be "running in fear of your own voters" (Vance, 2025). It is undeniable that this is the first and most important democratic value. But first does not mean the only one. It is well known what happens when all other elements of the democratic value package are rejected in the name of democracy. Moreover, Vance openly used this argument to stand up for those European political forces and parties that, according to the election results, are almost everywhere in the minority in Europe itself and have much weaker electoral support than the Democratic Party in the United States. This is the only reason why they get isolated by all kinds of firewalls. The fact that these forces are gradually gaining more ground does not fundamentally change much—the majority remains the majority, and the minority remains the minority. Incidentally, in the last elections to the Reichstag before Adolf Hitler was appointed Reich Chancellor on 6 November 1932, the NSDAP won only 33.1% of the vote. What is even more interesting is that while the cult of minorities, and the ideology and practices of their positive discrimination by Trumpists are supposed to be condemned, the opposite is actually taking place. If the Trump administration hopes that it will be easier to deal with European far-right forces and parties, then the prevalence of pragmatic considerations turns out to be sewn with white thread.

Why is this so? No matter what names you call Trump—egomaniac, narcissist, cynic, fool or something else—this will not bring you any closer to understanding what he is doing to American power. One may make more meaningful assumptions such as that Trump is inspired by the example of China, whose successful expansion is directly related to the absence of a value component in it and, therefore, of value-based requirements forced on partners. Also, China does not start wars detrimental for the economy—there are a lot of vague apprehensions, but there is nothing at least theoretically feasible anywhere in sight, except for Taiwan and several disputed islands in the South and East China Seas. China is powerful and its power is growing. But China is not an empire in the sense in which this term was coined and has been used in the Western world, not excluding Russia. It is something else. One of the reasons is that, unlike the first Rome and all of its subsequent replicas, China is not inclusive. Anyone could become, became and becomes a subject or a citizen of any Western empire (or any Islamic one for that matter) or a culturally kindred person if he meets certain conditions and alters himself. But you cannot become Chinese. Period. Does empire-burdened Trump not envy China? Does he not think that it will be easier for the United States to compete with China without this imperial burden? This is as viable a hypothesis as any other, especially since Trump clearly thinks that the United States, and indeed the entire West, has gone too far with its inclusiveness. But this is where the shaky ground of unreliable speculation begins, which I would not like to tread on. And then, is it really important why everything is going this way, if it is already going this way?

WHAT'S NEXT?

Now we need to introduce the **fifth context**, not so much retrospective as prospective. Trump has a lot of power, even though not everyone knows or remembers why. But it is so because the republican institution of presidency emerged in the United States (and from there spread, with certain modifications, throughout the world) as a specific variation of monarchy—not any monarchy, of course, but British monarchy. The American colonists had nothing against the British Islands' model

of government and even considered it the best, but they were not pleased with their low place in it. "A President, albeit republican, hence temporary, is our substitute for Britain's monarch, not only in the twentieth-century sense of chief of state but also in the seventeenth-century sense of chief of government... Ours is a constitutional monarch" (Neustadt, 1990, p. 10). Since then, the real available powers of the British monarchs have decreased significantly (but there remain "dormant" powers, which can hypothetically awaken). It is the other way round in America, where presidential powers have even expanded, often "without prior arrangement." Because of the same historical genealogy, American presidents wield particularly great powers in the foreign policy realm, which allowed Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. half a century ago to write the book *The Imperial Presidency* (Schlesinger, 1973) with an implied allusion to the Roman *imperium militiae*, which eventually developed into a general concept of the imperial right of command.

Trump has a lot of power, but time is short. Richard Neustadt's reference to "temporary" is of critical and crucial importance. The United States is not a monarchy.²⁴ Tennessee's Republican Representative Andy Ogles's proposed an amendment to the 22nd Amendment, crafted, by his own admission, specifically for Trump to allow a presidential candidate to run for a third term if there was a break between his first two terms (Ogles, 2025), has no chance of being adopted on time simply because the procedure for adopting constitutional amendments is complicated and long. So, to paraphrase State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin's forecast, quite striking in its boldness, that "after Putin there will be Putin" (Volodin, 2020), we can say that after Trump it will definitely not be Trump, even if the Democratic Party never gets out of the mess it got itself into, and the Republicans win the next presidency; even if Vance is elected president—some of the outstanding U.S. presidents previously served

²⁴ Although it would be interesting to fantasize about what would have happened if George Washington had been more receptive to the idea of establishing royal power (with a clear hint that he himself could have become an ideal contender for the crown) proposed to him by Colonel Lewis Nicola in 1782 (Fitzpatrick, 1938, pp. 272-273). But this is purely idle curiosity.

as vice presidents (Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt), but none of their second-in-command partners managed to become outstanding presidents themselves. John Adams was not Washington, Andrew Johnson was not Abraham Lincoln, Harry Truman was not Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Richard Nixon was not Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson was not John Kennedy, George H.W. Bush was not Ronald Reagan, and Joe Biden, frankly, was not Barack Obama. Likewise, Vance (if it is going to be him, which is quite divinatory at this point) will not be Trump. Whether Trump is an outstanding president, in a good or bad way, will become clear over time. But he is unique in all ways. Finally, it may transpire quite soon that Trump is no longer the same as before. In fact, quite a large share of his current political power draws from the Republican majority in both houses of the Congress. However, a third of the Senate and the entire House of Representatives will be contested in the November 2026 midterm elections. It is impossible now to say how high the rage of Trump's opponents infuriated by his every word and action will fly by then, and how much their ranks will grow; but the risks for him are great and keep growing every day.

Trump will only do what he has time to do. This is why he is in such a hurry to cut spending, public debt, budget deficit, trade imbalances, and bureaucracy; spur the economy and the military-industrial complex; restore the tough and masculine image of the armed forces; clamp down on drug trafficking; etc. He will not succeed in everything—one never does. But something will work out (maybe a lot) because one cannot fail everywhere. And then the value component of the American empire will begin to recover, regardless of which party is in power. It is not about parties at all but about something much deeper and more essential. The value component cannot be reformatted easily and quickly, for this would mean scrapping the entire grandiose project and re-establishing the polity, that is, radically revising (although not necessarily completely abolishing) the most fundamental framework of political action, its scenarios, legitimate behavioral stereotypes, strategies, and tactics. This, in turn, will require destroying the independence of the courts, the rights of the

states, opposition privately-owned media and much more up to the Constitution itself, and perhaps even winning a civil war. For such a great undertaking to succeed, Trump is not enough.

If the sky does not fall down, the empire will reemerge, but in order to destroy it once and for all, Trump again is not enough. However, it will be a different empire. In 1856, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Empire, Prince Alexander Gorchakov, in a circular dispatch brought to the attention of foreign governments²⁵ through the Russian diplomatic missions abroad, stated: "Russia stands accused of becoming isolated and remaining silent in the face of facts which run counter to the law and justice. Russia has grown bitter, they say. Russia has not grown bitter. Russia is focusing [recollecting—Ed.] itself" (Circular Notes Dispatch, 1881, p. 125). Russia indeed felt bitter after the defeat in the Crimean War, of course, but it was also recollecting itself. And eventually it managed to do so. The American empire is now also feeling bitter (interestingly, the reproaches being hurled at it are very similar to those Russia faced in the past), but it is recollecting itself too.

What Trump is doing to the American empire and its power (regardless of his motives and awareness) can be compared with "muscle drying" practiced by athletes, which requires a break in competition. Like an athlete, the empire will reenter the world stage in better shape, more muscular, with new ambitions, and most likely very angry about what was done during its absence. So, looking at what is happening right now, no one—neither opponents of the American empire nor its advocates—should wring their hands or rejoice. They need to prepare and get ready.

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²⁵ This document is well known in Russia, it has been repeatedly cited by President Vladimir Putin, but it has been almost completely forgotten outside Russia, which is wrong.

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