

Veni, Vidi, Tweeti (I Came, I Saw, I Tweeted) An Obituary for the Republic

Posted by Joan Russow

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By [Tom Engelhardt](#)

http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/176527/tomgram%3A_engelhardt%2C_hail%2C_caesar%21/

What dreamers they were! They imagined a kind of global power that would leave even Rome at its Augustan height in the shade. They imagined a world made for one, a planet that could be swallowed by a single great power. No, not just great, but beyond anything ever seen before -- one that would build (as its [National Security Strategy](#) put it in 2002) a military “beyond challenge.” Let’s be clear on that: no future power, or even bloc of powers, would *ever* be allowed to challenge it again.

And, in retrospect, can you completely blame them? I mean, it seemed so obvious then that we -- the United States of America -- were the best and the last. We had, after all, outclassed and outlasted every imperial power since the beginning of time. Even that other menacing superpower of the Cold War era, the Soviet Union, the “[Evil Empire](#)” that refused to stand down for almost half a century, had gone up in a puff of smoke.

Imagine that moment so many years later and consider the crew of neoconservatives who, under the aegis of George W. Bush, the son of the man who had “won” the Cold War, came to power in January 2001. Not surprisingly, on viewing the planet, they could see nothing -- not a single damn thing -- in their way. There was a desperately weakened and impoverished Russia (still with its nuclear arsenal more or less intact) that, as far as they were concerned, had been molycoddled by President Bill Clinton’s administration. There was a Communist-gone-capitalist China focused on its own growth and little else. And there were a set of other potential enemies, “rogue powers” as they were dubbed, so pathetic that not one of them could, under any circumstances, be called “great.”

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In 2002, in fact, three of them -- Iraq, Iran, and North Korea -- had to be cobbled together into an “[axis of evil](#)” to create a faintly adequate enemy, a minimalist excuse for the Bush administration to act preemptively. It couldn't have been more obvious then that all three of them would go down before the unprecedented military and economic power of us (even if, as it happened, two of them didn't).

It was as clear as glass that the world -- the whole shebang -- was there for the taking. And it couldn't have been headier, even after a tiny Islamist terror outfit [hijacked](#) four American jets and took out New York's World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. As President Bush would put it in an address

[at West Point](#)

in 2002, "America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge, thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace." In other words, jihadists aside, it was all over. From now on, there would be an arms race of one and it was obvious who that one would be. The National Security Strategy of that year put the same thought this way: "Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States." Again, anywhere on the planet
ever

Look at more or less any document from the period and you'll sense that they weren't shy about touting the unprecedented greatness of a future global *Pax Americana*. Take, for instance, columnist Charles Krauthammer who, in February 2001, six months before the terror attacks of September 11th,

[wrote a piece](#)

swooning over the new Bush administration's "unilateralism" to come and the "Bush Doctrine" which would go with it. In the process, he gave that administration a green light to put the pathetic Russians in their nuclear place and summed the situation up this way: "America is no mere international citizen. It is the dominant power in the world, more dominant than any since Rome. Accordingly, America is in a position to reshape norms, alter expectations, and create new realities. How? By unapologetic and implacable demonstrations of will."

“How Did USA’s Oil Get Under Iraq’s Sand?”

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And soon enough after September 11th, those unapologetic, implacable demonstrations of will did, in fact, begin -- first in Afghanistan and then, a year and a half later, in Iraq. [Goaded](#) by Osama bin Laden, the new Rome went into action.

Of course, in 2019 we have the benefit of hindsight, which Charles Krauthammer, Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, and the rest of that crew didn't have as they applied their Roman-style vision of an imperial America to the actual world. It should be added, however, that the [millions](#) of people who hit the streets globally to protest the coming invasion of Iraq in the winter of 2003 -- "How did USA's oil get under Iraq's sand?" said a

[typical protest sign](#)

(which Donald Trump would have

[understood](#)

in his own way) -- had a far better sense of the world than did their American rulers-to-be. Like the Soviets

[before them](#)

, in fact, they would grievously confuse military power with power on this planet.

More than 17 years later, the U.S. military remains stuck in Afghanistan, bedeviled in Iraq, and floundering across much of the Greater Middle East and Africa on a planet with a resurgent Russia, and an impressively rising China. One-third of the former axis of evil, Iran, is, remarkably enough, still in Washington's [gunsights](#), while another third (North Korea) sits uncomfortably in a presidential bear hug. It's no exaggeration to say that none of the dreams of a new Rome were ever faintly fulfilled. In fact, if you want to think about what's been truly exceptional in these years, it might be this: never in history has such a great power, at its height, seemed quite so incapable of effectively applying force, military or otherwise, to achieve its imperial ends or bring its targets to heel.

And yet, wrong as they may have been on such subjects, don't sell Krauthammer and the rest of that neocon crew short. They were, in their own way, also prophets, at least domestically speaking. After all, Rome, like the United States, had been an imperial republic. That republic was replaced, as its empire grew, by autocratic rule, first by the self-anointed emperor Augustus and then by his successors. Arguably, 18 years after Krauthammer wrote that column, the American republic might be heading down the same path. After all, so many years later, the neocons, triumphantly risen yet again in Washington ([both](#) in the administration and as its critics), finally have their Caesar.

Hail, Donald J. Trump, we who are about to read your [latest tweet](#) salute you!

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A Rogue State of One

Let's note some other passing parallels between the new Rome and the old one. As a start, it's certainly accurate to say that our new American Caesar has [much gall](#) (divided into at least three parts). Admittedly, he's no Augustus, the first of a line of emperors, but more likely a Nero, fiddling while, in his case, the world quite

[literally burns](#)

. Still, he could certainly say of campaign 2016 and what followed:

Veni, Vidi, Tweeti

(I came, I saw, I tweeted). And don't forget the classic line that might someday be applied to his presidency, “

Et tu

, Mueller?” -- or depending on who turns on him, you can fill in your name of choice.

One day, it might also be said that, in a country in which executive power has become ever more imperial (as has the [power](#) of the Senate's majority leader), blowback from [imperial acts abroad](#)

has had a significant, if largely hidden, hand in crippling the American republic, as was once true of Rome. In fact, it seems clear enough that the first republican institution to go was the citizen's army. In the wake of the Vietnam War, the draft was thrown out and replaced by an “all-volunteer” force, one which would, as it came to fight on ever more distant battlefields, morph into a home-grown version of an imperial police force or

[foreign legion](#)

. With it went the

[staggering sums](#)

that, in this century, would be invested -- if that's even the word for it -- in what's still called “defense,” as well as in a vast

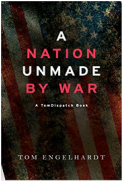
[empire of bases](#)

abroad and the national security state, a rising locus of power at home. And then, of course, there were the never-ending wars across much of the Greater Middle East and parts of Africa that went with all of that. Meanwhile, so much else, domestically speaking, was put on the equivalent of austerity rations. And all of that, in turn, helped provoke the crisis that brought Donald Trump to power and might, in the end, even sink the American system as we've known it.

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[Buy the book](#)

~~The book is cited in the 2016 edition of the book 'Disturbances at the Edge of the Nation' by Tom Engelhardt and Eric Foner. It is also cited in the book 'The American Empire Project' by Tom Engelhardt and Eric Foner. Copyright 2019 by Tom Engelhardt and Eric Foner. All rights reserved. U.S. Global Power~~