

Why Anglos Lead

Lawrence M. Mead

OVER THE last few years, due to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, many commentators have discerned the emergence of a new American empire. Some critics blame the Bush Administration, arguing that, but for Bush, there would be no crisis over American “unilateralism” or “hegemony.” Others blame the end of the Cold War for “unleashing” America on the world.

Actually, American pre-eminence extends much further back—to World War II or before. It really continues a British primacy that dated back at least to 1815. During the 20th century, Germany, Japan and Soviet Russia challenged the Anglo ascendancy, but they were turned back. So today the world order bears a remarkable resemblance to the late Victorian era. Now as then, the world is globalizing, and English is its *lingua franca*. The United States has merely supplanted Britain as the leading power.

American primacy is not an accident of this or that administration. It reflects the special capacity of English-speaking countries to lead the world order. These “Anglo nations”, or the “Anglos” as I will call them, include Britain and the chief territories that were settled initially from

Britain—pre-eminently the United States but also Australia, Canada and New Zealand. What makes a country Anglo is that its original settler population came mainly from Britain. So even though a minority of Americans today have British roots, they inherit a political culture initially formed by the British. Some other countries that Britain ruled, such as India or South Africa, are not Anglo in this sense because British settlers never formed the bulk of their populations. They may be English-speaking, and their public institutions have British roots, but British culture did not form the society as it did in the Anglo countries.

The Anglo nations—singly or in concert—have taken a special responsibility for the world order. Somehow, they are available to deal with chaos and aggression abroad, as other countries usually are not. One or another of the Anglos has led all the major military operations of the last fifteen years. Besides the current Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts, instances include the 1991 Gulf War, the ensuing no-fly zones over Iraq, military operations in Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999, and humanitarian interventions in Somalia, Haiti, Sierra Leone and East Timor.

What explains Anglo primacy? One immediate cause is that other rich countries that might show leadership have abdicated. Following the devastating wars of the 20th century, the continental nations and Japan sought to banish war

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by subordinating themselves and other states to international institutions—the United Nations, NATO and the European Union. Germany and Japan even adopted legal curbs on the use of their militaries abroad or for offensive purposes. The ethos of most of the developed world now runs strongly against war, even for a good cause. Thus, in moments of military crisis, America seems “bound to lead” because no other country can do so.

But beyond this, the Anglo nations also possess, to an unusual degree, the resources needed for war—wealth, a capacity to project force, confidence in war and the deference of other countries. Other commentators have noted these assets. What I add is chiefly the argument that all these resources ultimately stem from the Anglo’s *political* achievements: Good government at home is the ultimate reason for Anglo leadership abroad.

Wealth and Law

BRITAIN AND America came to primacy in part simply because they were the richest countries of their day. They had the wealth and the technology to build dominant militaries and sustain them. The British built a bigger and better navy than rival European powers. The United States has overwhelmed its major opponents by both quantity and quality of arms. Washington funds high-tech weapons development on a scale that no other country can approach. The Anglos also buy influence abroad. The British financed alliances against their European rivals. They exported capital overseas just as they did colonists. The United States lavishes economic and military aid on its clients.

But why are the Anglos so rich? Principally because they are comfortable with capitalism. A special propensity to “truck, barter and exchange” appeared in England even in medieval times. The English

became rich by developing a larger and freer internal market than rival countries. They also had an aristocracy more open to enterprise than continental rivals, and other entrepreneurs arose outside the landed elite. Due to these assets, the Industrial Revolution appeared first in Britain. The resulting wealth largely explains Britain’s hegemony during the 19th century. It took Britain’s European rivals most of a century to catch her.

The United States, lacking any pre-modern social order, built its culture and institutions even more fully around the market economy. And where Britain was an island, the United States was a continent. The American combination of confident capitalism with massive scale is equaled nowhere else. So the United States became a powerhouse of wealth and innovation with which, it seems, no other country can compete.

In recent decades, it did seem that Anglo economies were losing ground to eager rivals in Europe or Asia, pre-eminently Japan. But over the last quarter-century, the Anglos have trimmed taxes and subsidies, deregulated markets, curbed trade unions, cut welfare benefits and exposed their private sectors to ruthless restructuring. The end result is that the United States remains the world’s richest country, while the British have the most dynamic large economy in Europe. At the end of the 20th century, the five Anglo countries led the world in overall economic policy. Not by accident, they also rank high in military expenditure.

Most other countries, in contrast, are a lot less comfortable with the marketplace. In Europe, continental governments try to shield citizens and companies from competitive pressures, leading to higher taxes and more social spending. In Asia, capitalism is even more compromised. Japan and its imitators used skilled workforces, strong technology and exports to the West to advance themselves. But in the 1990s Japan and other Asian

countries suffered financial reverses. That showed that they still lacked the internal institutions and practices needed to rival the West. And while China may generate the wealth needed to finance a military juggernaut, it is much weaker in all the other attributes of world leadership.

The success of the market in Anglo countries did not occur in a vacuum. It reflects good governance. As early as the twelfth century, independent royal courts gained authority over all of England. The rule of law protected property and contract against force and fraud, and that was critical to the country's early economic dynamism. A broader tradition developed that government should be impartial. It should publicly explain its policies, and functionaries should be honest.

Impartial governance worked over time to liberate enterprise. The medieval economy, in Britain as elsewhere, was riddled with monopolies, guilds and other restrictions. But over the centuries these came to be seen as corrupt. In a regime where policies had to be explained, special privileges could not ultimately be justified. So mercantilism was ended, monopolies abolished, financial markets developed. Adam Smith proved the superiority of the free market, and in the 19th century Britain became the first country to adopt free trade.

The British passed the rule of law, like capitalism, on to their colonies, and it was the most precious of their gifts. In America, political and economic competition can look like a free-for-all, but it is undergirded by a formidable legal order. Enterprise is free, yet regulated to limit collusion and other abuses. Most people pay their taxes and obey the law. A civic ethos suffuses the regime. Abuses and corruption occur, but they are exposed and redressed, as in the recent Enron scandal. American judges and juries are not for sale, which is why drug kingpins fear extradition to the United States. Equal opportunity, based on an elaborate

education system, is generous. The whole system rests on a commitment to public impartiality that America imbibed, like mother's milk, from its British forebears.

In the Third World, in contrast, lack of the rule of law is a worse hindrance to development than any economic problem. Regimes are systematically corrupt. While nearly all economies today are formally capitalist, few are fully competitive. Officials often shield favored firms from answering to the law or the consumer. Without an ethos of impartiality, democratization achieves little. Elections merely change which politicians have their feet in the trough.

Thus, nurtured by the rule of law, the Anglos' economies became a golden river, pouring forth the wealth needed to sustain their ascendancy around the world. No country without an equal trust in markets and in law is likely to challenge them.

The Projection of Force

WEALTH AND law, however, cannot fully explain Anglo primacy. By the 21st century, Britain was no longer the richest country in Europe. Germany is larger and potentially more powerful. The affluent European Union might potentially outspend even the United States on arms. But neither Germany nor the EU has made any serious attempt to challenge the Anglos' military leadership.

It is true that in NATO and UN peacekeeping operations, non-Anglo nations often participate. But they usually contribute only token forces, or their forces are untested to battle and thus of limited value. In Africa, local peacekeeping forces have sometimes created more disorder than they solved. The sole recent case of non-Anglo intervention by a single country is France's expeditions to its former colonies in West Africa.

Many countries, of course, mobilize

military force within their own borders. But in the capacity to prevail militarily far from home, the Anglos are pre-eminent. For one thing, they invest in the naval and airlift capacity needed to operate overseas. France is their only conceivable rival. Other major powers have no such capacity. Russia once could project force, as it did in Afghanistan, but ability has degraded sharply since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In part, the Anglos' capacity reflects habit. They have been sending armies overseas for centuries. The British built their empire that way. The United States has eschewed a formal empire, but it has intervened regularly in Latin America and the Caribbean.

A deeper reason, however, is again good government. Just as a capable regime made Anglo countries rich at home, so it helped them project power abroad. To an unusual degree, Anglo governments combine strong executive leadership with legislative consent. Both features make for effective warfighting overseas.

Among European states, England was unified unusually early. Following the Norman Conquest, it developed the strongest monarchy in Europe. But the idea arose almost as early that government should be by consent. The Magna Carta codified the principle that the king could not change the law or raise taxes without the consent of the realm. Kings created Parliament to obtain taxes, conceding "redress of grievances" in return. As a result, British politics treated executive and legislative power as complementary, not opposed.

Both dimensions made the government effective abroad. The king had clear authority to govern, but he needed parliamentary consent to fund his enterprises. While this limited his personal power, it also allowed him to build greater political and financial support for foreign policy than in other states. Armed with these resources, English kings controlled

much of France for centuries. In contrast, most continental rulers downgraded their parliaments and sought to rule on a personal basis. Such regimes were perpetually underfunded and politically insecure, as was proven by the French and Russian revolutions.

In Britain, Parliament pre-empted the power of the monarch rather than the other way around, but without compromising the authority of the regime. Still today, the essence of British government is a strong executive that requires parliamentary consent to govern. The American Constitution creates added checks and balances within the regime, but in foreign policy the arrangement is still British. The president has undoubted power to initiate policy, including war, but Congress must provide support and funding. Actions approved by both branches are highly likely to succeed abroad.

Deploying these institutions, Anglo regimes routinely out-mobilize their adversaries. The combination of unusual wealth with a unique capacity to tax and borrow allowed Britain to defeat France in the wars of the 17th and 18th centuries, even though France was then a much larger country. British military and trade pressure finally drove the Bourbon regime into bankruptcy and revolution. In much the same way, American arms and economic pressure forced the Soviet dictatorship to open up politics to get broader support, whereupon it, too, collapsed. The paradox was that the country most committed to the state was far worse governed than the capitalist one, and this was its undoing.

When the two Presidents Bush sought support from Congress before fighting Iraq, they observed a ritual that English kings initiated in the 13th century. The need for popular consent can delay Anglo acceptance of conflict, as was true in both the United States and Britain before World War II. But what looks like weakness is ultimately a strength.

Once support is won, Anglo governments typically fight resolutely. Only if wars go badly for a prolonged period is consent withdrawn, as happened in Vietnam and could happen in Iraq.

Other countries that might rival the Anglos have no such tradition of forming a public will for war. In Anglo elections, two political parties typically dominate, and the use of single-member districts usually generates a majority with a clear mandate to govern. In continental countries and Japan, by contrast, there are more parties or factions, and proportional representation is often used, leading to fragmented parliaments and cautious coalition governments. In China, the regime fears any open debate, by elected representatives or the public. So its capacities to lead and to build support are far more limited.

Confidence in War

A FURTHER asset of the Anglo countries is that they approach war more confidently than their potential rivals. That partly reflects their favorable geopolitical situation. No Anglo country shares a common border with a threatening neighbor. Britain, Australia and New Zealand are islands, while the United States abuts only much weaker Canada and Mexico. So the Anglos often can wait to fight opponents until they are likely to prevail. The same cannot be said of France, Germany or Russia, still less the hapless east European countries sandwiched between Germany and Russia.

A second reason is again rooted in political success. For the past two centuries, Anglos have gone to war to defeat aggressors that threatened not only themselves but the stability of the world order. They are willing to do this in part because such struggles continue their liberal domestic political project. Their history is all about taming political power—schooling rulers

to serve society rather than themselves. If they have succeeded in that endeavor at home, they believe they can do so abroad. To battle foreign tyrants is a further venture in the taming of unaccountable power. So they tend to approach war with purpose.

The Anglos think of war as confirming, not threatening, their deepest values. The British regime derived much of its confidence from its victories over Spain, then France, then Germany. That a free country, ruled by law and consent, could defeat dictatorships was Britain's pride. Both Britain and the United States look back on World War II and the Cold War as glorious crusades. Those victories led to the rebuilding of much of Europe under Anglo auspices. The same confidence has led George Bush to attempt the rebuilding of Afghanistan and Iraq, a much tougher challenge. Due to their dread of conflict, the continental nations today could not imagine such an enterprise.

The Anglo taste for war does not reflect militarism. These countries are less in love with soldiers than some of those they have defeated, such as imperial Germany and Japan. Anglo political culture promotes skepticism toward public institutions, including the armed forces. Civilian control of the military is strict. The military's ability to impose itself on politics is far stronger in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Rather, Anglo acceptance of war reflects the confidence of the political class as a whole. Regimes that have governed successfully at home naturally think they can prevail abroad as well.

The Deference of Others

A FINAL resource that promotes the Anglos' primacy is what Joseph Nye has called "soft power"—the uncoerced admiration of other countries. Traditional realists would expect that a nation as dominant

as the United States is today should provoke counter-alliances. But Anglo power is used mostly for ends others perceive as disinterested, so it is tolerated. When the Anglos go to war, it is usually against widely recognized threats and in alliance with others. These brave campaigns served Anglo interests, but they also sheltered weaker nations. Relatively rich and secure, the Anglos act most of the time as status quo powers that defend the international order rather than pursuing their own narrow interests. As Charles Krauthammer argued several years ago in these pages, the United States has sustained an international system that provides for open seas, open trade and open societies lightly defended.¹

Foreign trust is such that most European and Asian countries would rather have the United States organize security for them than do it themselves. The Germans, Japanese or Russians would be far less trusted, because they ravaged large regions within living memory. America is also the financial mainstay of many international bodies. Far from exploiting smaller countries, America is the strong nation that is exploited by the weak.

Of course, the current Bush unilateralism has undermined American legitimacy abroad. The United States also disappointed others by withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia and by refusing to join several new international agreements, including the Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse gases and the International Criminal Court. In these cases, our leaders judged that international cooperation was too costly for us. However, no other nation or grouping has stepped forward to take up the burdens that America declines. Europe has begun to form a military capacity separate from NATO, but it is as yet nascent. There is still no alternative to Anglo power as a basis for world order.

Again, the Anglos' political successes stand in the background. Other coun-

tries accept Anglo foreign policy goals, in part because they arise from a transparent political process that foreigners can understand and even influence. The Anglos also have an unusually long history of governing in accord with individual rights. In politics, they practice what they preach, however imperfectly. That heritage makes it implausible that they could be oppressors abroad. This open and democratic tradition is the real source of Anglo soft power.

As noted above, Anglo foreign policy tends to express domestic values; realpolitik is secondary. Both William Gladstone and Jimmy Carter lectured other countries about human rights. Such language unsettles the realist minds of foreign statesmen, but it also reassures them. It might tempt America to unwonted crusades, but it also announces an identity of ends with other countries. Bismarck, the master of realpolitik, envied Britain's "uncanny gift for provoking the jealousy yet attracting the support of European Powers." Much of the time, if not presently, America does the same.

Some Qualifications

I DO NOT say that the Anglos dominate every aspect of world politics. Japan, Germany and other European countries are major sources of foreign aid. These and other countries contribute to the UN and international development agencies and shape world trade rules. It is only in crises requiring force that the Anglos move inevitably to the fore. However, that capacity is so critical and so costly that it is enough to make them overall world leaders.

I also do not necessarily defend the foreign policy pursued by the Anglo nations, let alone the current Bush unilateralism. Traditionally, Anglo policy has

¹"The Unipolar Moment Revisited" *The National Interest* (Winter 2002/03).

emphasized maintaining law and order abroad, skepticism toward international institutions and free trade. The continental countries would rather emphasize economic relations, international cooperation, generosity to the developing world and restraints on globalization. Yet any world system must cope with aggressors and the breakdown of order. That is where the Anglo capacity for war seems indispensable, and this is what chiefly gives them their primacy.

I also do not assume that the Anglos always agree among themselves. American and British interests have sometimes clashed, most notably over Suez in 1956. New Zealand withdrew from the ANZUS alliance rather than accept American ships carrying nuclear weapons. Canada refused to support the Iraq War. Recently, Britain joined other Europeans in pursuing a negotiated solution to the Iranian nuclear buildup, despite American doubts. It also backs the current world initiative to reduce world poverty through increased foreign aid; America is more skeptical.

Still less do I assume that there is or ought to be any explicit condominium among the Anglos. No “Anglosphere”, where English-speaking nations collaborate to run the world, is likely to emerge.² If the Anglos so often act in concert, especially in military matters, the reason is their shared histories, geopolitical situations and regimes. Any “special relationship” among their leaders is secondary.

Path Dependence

TO A LONG view, Anglo world leadership is not due to the Bush Administration or any recent event, not even to the crusades of the last century. Rather, the key fact, as Bismarck noted, is that the North Americans speak English. Britain defeated France for the control of the New World. The Battle of Quebec in 1759, which sealed that victory, might

be the most decisive of modern times. In Europe, Britain had already proven the peerless capacity of capitalism, law, and consent to generate wealth and power. Its conquest of North America assured that the United States would become, in geopolitical terms, Britain writ large. Just as Britain came to lead Europe, so the United States would come to lead the world, and for similar political reasons.

Anglo primacy will probably persist precisely because its roots lie in good government, which is deeply path dependent. It is hard for any country to become well governed that has not always been so. Somehow, the British formed an effective regime early, and it went from strength to strength. Each advance generated the confidence and the trust needed for the next. The British passed on that legacy to their Anglo heirs, and these countries, too, have had beneficent histories. In terms of political gifts, the richest countries have been English-speaking. Their wealth and power ultimately derive from this great fact.

Most other European countries were less fortunate. Their development was more delayed and uneven. Only since World War II did many of them achieve regimes that were both effective and democratic. Outside the West, political traditions are still less fortunate. Regimes have typically been venal and incompetent. Weakness persists, because past failure undermines the assurance and the cooperation needed to improve. In recent decades, only a handful of non-Western regimes, mainly in Asia, can be said to have crossed the line from bad government to good.

While elected government has recently spread widely, the actual quality of government—its ability to rule legally, effectively and responsively—grows much

²See, for example, James C. Bennett, *The Anglosphere Challenge* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

more slowly. What institutions do exist in Third World countries are often a legacy of imperialism. A return to empire, perhaps under UN auspices, may be the only solution to “failed states.”³ Either good government must be exported to the Third World, or those peoples will immigrate to the West in search of it, which poses its own problems.

Could China become powerful despite a regime that is both corrupt and undemocratic? The jury is still out. While China’s recent growth is remarkable, the country is still far below Western levels in per capita wealth and in the resources needed for a leading military. On past precedent, China will need much better government before it can truly challenge the West. While its regime has shown some moves toward legality and popular responsiveness, it has far to go.

For decades, international institutions such as the World Bank largely ignored governmental weakness, but that has changed. Increasingly, development aid is given subject to conditions on the receiv-

ing regimes. Aid donors use private organizations to run projects, sidestepping corrupt rulers. The human rights movement seeks to use American courts to indict foreign governments, in effect seeking to project American law, like American military power, beyond our shores. Thus the fortunate West works around the chief tragedy of the non-West, which is its politics.

This increasing focus on institutions, or lack thereof, highlights the real reasons for Anglo primacy. Bismarck was right; the fact that good governance arose first in the English-speaking world and was bequeathed to America is truly the most fundamental fact about world affairs. The great division in today’s international system is between countries that are well governed and those that are not. As long as that divide continues, Anglo primacy will endure. □

³See Vladislav Inosemtsev and Sergei Karagonov, “Imperialism of the Fittest”, *The National Interest* (Summer 2005).