

**Anglo Primacy at the End of History:  
The Deep Roots of Power**

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To read the newspapers, one would believe that American power was in steep decline. There are prophets of error—the many critics who believe that American foreign policy has gone seriously wrong, especially in Iraq. And there are prophets of weakness—such as Paul Kennedy, who wrote even before the end of the Cold War that America had succumbed to “imperial overstretch.”<sup>1</sup> How much more are we overstretched today, when we face crises in three or four places around the globe?

I’m skeptical about these arguments. To me, the great fact is that the United States has become a dominant nation. Even if we fail in Iraq, there still is no other country that can replace us in dealing with the world’s problems. So I’m not going to get into policy debates about how to handle Iraq or other current issues. Instead, I’m going to ask a different question: How did American primacy arise? I hope by this means to convince you that American leadership will continue—and also that you, as Australians and New Zealanders, will inevitably be part of it.

### *The end of history*

The question of primacy has a special importance because of what Francis Fukuyama has called the end of history. Frank was one of my predecessors as Bonython lecturer. He got the idea of history ending from Friedrich Hegel by way of Alexandre Kojève.<sup>2</sup> He meant by it roughly that ideological conflicts in Western societies are fading away. For two hundred years, Western countries had been divided over how democratic or capitalist they should be. Those also have been issues in the world at large. But today, a consensus has emerged in favor of democracy and capitalism. I don’t say that all conflict is ended, as we see from our current struggles with radical Islam. But Communism was defeated, and socialism is in retreat pretty much everywhere in the world, and that has profound implications. It means, of course, that there is only one superpower. That is enough, perhaps, to make my country supreme.

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But the roots of our primacy go much deeper than this. The end of history implies that no ideology, no economic system such as Communism is going to save the non-Western world from its problems. Communism promised to allow what was called the Third World to become modern and powerful without going thru the centuries that development required in the West. Alas, Communism turned out to be rather like the wizard who appears at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*—he's a little old man hiding behind a screen who is a lot less formidable than we thought he was. Collectivism was not able to overcome the backwardness of the Third World, so that it could converge with places like America, Australia, or New Zealand.

For more than a century, Marxists tried to persuade us that there was some economic system beyond capitalism that we should prefer to it. There was some new world called socialism where everything would be different, which would do away with the hardships and inequities of capitalism. But this was an illusion. Markets and incentives matter. Socialism's effort to do away with them was doomed to fail. There is no new world. There is only the world we have.

And in that world, American primacy now stands out much more starkly than it did before the end of the Cold War. A gulf separates the West from the non-West. This is the great fact which we must struggle to understand.

### ***Anglo primacy***

And among Western countries, it's not just my country but all the Anglo nations that stand supreme. By Anglo nations I mean Britain and all the countries that were settled chiefly from Britain—the U.S. but also Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. Not only are these, as a group, the richest of all countries—they are also more or less running the world.

They are doing so directly through their own military and aid policies, and they are the mainstays of international institutions dedicated to peace and development such as the UN and World Bank. While America is the dominant power, the other Anglo countries are among our

closest allies. More than most others, they have sent forces to hot spots like Iraq and Afghanistan, and to peacekeeping operations around the globe. We will not always agree about when and where to fight, but we have the potential to fight is always there, and that is my main focus here. The Anglos have a capacity to project power overseas that no other countries can match.

We have in fact returned to a world order not unlike the late Victorian period, at the end of the nineteenth century. Then as now, the world economy was globalizing, and English was its lingua franca. Britain was the strongest single country, and America was just becoming a world power. Today, my country is first and Britain is second, but remarkably little else has changed. It is as if the whole twentieth century, with its calamitous wars and ideological conflicts, has faded away. The countries that challenged the Anglos—first Germany, then Russia, then Japan—have all fallen back. I believe that our current challengers, such as China, are likely to fall back as well.

### *The roots of primacy*

So where did American primacy come from? That question is closely linked to two others. First, how did Britain become a dominant country before us? Britain largely founded America. Many of the same qualities that have made us dominant we inherited from Britain. And second, how did Europe become the most dynamic civilization? As America is the child of Britain, so Britain is the child of Europe. So what we have to explain is why Europe, then Britain, then America came to dominate the world.

We have to explain, not only American military and economic power, which are obvious, but what Joe Nye has called soft power. This means the power that comes to the United States because of the respect and trust of other countries.<sup>3</sup> I include in this the idea that we are responsible for the world as nobody else is. Today, the most extreme inequalities are not in military or economic power but in responsibility. In the eyes of the political class here and abroad, some countries are responsible for nothing, not even the most elementary governmental functions. But America and the

other Anglo powers are responsible for everything. And that responsibility is the sheet anchor of our power. Just as power implies responsibility, so responsibility begets power.

To see where American primacy came from, we have to look much further back in history than we usually do. We must pay new respect to those distant centuries that prepared the ground for Anglo primacy. It's not just that my country and the other Anglos recently chose the correct economic system—they were more developed in lots of ways that go much further back. There are essentially three groups of theories about how first Europe, then Britain, then American came to dominate the world. I surveyed these in a recent course at NYU. Let's look briefly at each of them.

### *Economics*

First, economics. These theories say essentially that Europe, then Britain, then America became dominant because they were capitalist. As Adam Smith showed, the free economy has more power to generate wealth than any other. By free exchange, individuals maximize their wealth, and—by an invisible hand—make the whole society rich as well. This case argues for a free market within countries and also for free trade between them.<sup>4</sup>

Capitalism first develops in Europe during the Middle Ages, and by the seventeenth century Europe is the richest region of the world. And within the West, the Anglo countries lead. Britain becomes the richest large country in Europe. Then it became the home of the industrial revolution, a watershed that forever changed the world. And then the United States becomes vastly the richest economy anywhere. Meanwhile, in the non-Western world, there is nothing like the same dynamism. Market economies develop much more slowly—mainly due to colonialism and trade pressure from the West.

Many want to believe that the end of history has changed all that. Sunny visions of globalization suggest that the magic of the market can allow all countries to develop rapidly to Western levels. The fact that India is now taking some jobs away from Americans through the

internet has sent a shiver of fear through our middle class. But to profit from globalization, a country must have infrastructure and an educated workforce—in short, it must be modern.

Globalization does not itself generate that modernity. The only part of India that competes with the West is a tiny high-tech sector—not the whole country. Of all the large countries that might lead the world, only America is modern through and through. Globalization is really just like Communism—it's a facile economic theory that fails to address the deeper problems of poor countries.

Economic theories of development are appealing because they are impersonal. They pretend that everyone is alike. We assume, like Adam Smith, that the propensity to “truck, barter, and exchange” is a universal human trait. But capitalism makes serious demands on a society. It expects that people can be self-reliant, and strike their own bargains, and make their own way in the world. The efficiency of the system depends entirely, as Friedrich Hayek showed, on a broad willingness to bear the burdens of economizing.<sup>5</sup> Capitalism also presumes that individuals will behave well toward others, even people who are outside their family or clan—or the trust necessary to an expansive economy is impossible.

But a lot of societies lack these personal attributes. They don't see capitalism as an opportunity. Rather, they experience it as exploitative, and they want to be protected from it. That sentiment is particularly strong in Latin America—and it is not unknown even in Continental Europe. Only the Anglo countries seem fully comfortable with the market—and that precisely is why they have become so rich. In other countries, also, trust is lacking between people, so that those who are strangers to each other cannot collaborate in the production of wealth.

Capitalism also presumes good government. The free market is not something that arises naturally. It has to be created and sustained by government. But in most countries, the market isn't fair. Governments are corrupt, and they protect favored firms from having to answer to the

consumer. So the market doesn't make whole countries rich as it did in Europe. Corruption and cronyism were the underlying reasons for the recent financial problems in Japan and elsewhere in Asia.

How does a society satisfy these preconditions for capitalism—these presumptions that individuals will be capable and trusting, and that government will be impartial? This is what the other theories address.

### *Sociology*

First, sociology. How does a society come to have the sort of person who can create and sustain a capitalist economy? It's a personality I call responsible individualism. People are calculating and self-reliant, willing and able to enter into market competition. But they also observe moral norms that usually prevent them behaving unfairly toward others. In short, they are responsible for themselves in both an economic and a moral sense.

A personality like this has arisen on a wide scale only in Europe. From the beginning, Europe had a dynamism, a native individualism, found nowhere else. The religious background of the West also promoted this. Judaism and Christianity stressed the importance of the individual. Max Weber wrote that capitalism arose from a "Protestant ethic" that drove individuals to compete and succeed in order to prove that they were saved.<sup>6</sup>

But both Christianity and Protestantism also emphasized good behavior. While serving themselves, individuals must also behave well toward others. Christianity generated a moralistic culture where people internalized norms of good behavior. Those values were often honored in the breach, but they were taken seriously enough to constrain the behavior of both rulers and ordinary people. This combination of individualism and a moralistic culture allowed Europe to reconcile freedom and order. People were encouraged to innovate and advance themselves. But at the same

time, order was usually maintained without the need for an overbearing state. That personality along with capitalism, I think, explains the remarkable productivity of the West.

And within Europe, Britain was the most individualist large country. This was why it took so readily to the market and became rich. America is even more individualist. My country is a great hive of innovation and competition where people are constantly striving to get ahead. And that has made us rich and powerful. It is the Anglo countries that reconcile freedom and order most fully.

The non-West is not individualist in this manner. Cultures are not moralistic but conformist. Moral norms exist, but they are not internalized by individuals in the same way. The moral structure is largely outside people, not inside. It promotes shame more than guilt. That means that these countries generally have to choose between freedom and order. Regimes are typically authoritarian, which is contrary to economic development. But if they allow greater freedom as necessary for development, they risk political breakdown. A country with strong collective discipline can develop, as we see in Asia. Japan showed how to do it, and the other “Asian tigers” followed. China is now trying to do the same. But without individualism they cannot be as innovative as the West. There is never likely to be a Silicon Valley in Japan, let alone China.

### *Politics*

Now let us turn to politics. These theories deal with the governmental roots of primacy. Good government is essential to power in two respects. You need a strong and honest government to run an effective market economy. And you need it as well to translate wealth into military power and to project it abroad. Good government means essentially two things. First, the rule of law—government operates on the basis of general rules that are publicly defended, rather than favoritism. And second, government by consent—rulers are answerable to a political class that is wider than the government itself. What counts is that leaders accept moral accountability to the society. Whether government is democratic in the sense of elected is secondary.

The great fact is that governments with these features have arisen only within the West. Only here did regimes develop that were law-governed and also accountable to the society. One reason was the moralistic culture already mentioned. In the West, norms of honest government are taken seriously enough so that, although corruption occurs, it does not become systemic. Only a few countries outside the West can say the same.

And within Europe, Britain was again out in front. England achieves the rule of law in the twelfth century and government by consent in the thirteenth century—way ahead of any other large European state. *This early development, I think, is the most fortunate thing that has ever happened in politics*, since the Roman Empire. It is the essential reason why the Anglo countries are so prosperous and secure today. Britain's precocious regime was then a principal reason why the country developed its effective market economy, and then grew rich, and then powerful, and then projected that power to the ends of the earth.

Britain could project power because she had the capacity to tax and borrow to finance her military, and she could get consent from the society to go to war. None of her competitors—not Spain, not France—had the same capacity. America came to dominance for essentially the same reasons—we have even more wealth, we also are well-governed, and we also can project power like no other country.

All the Anglo countries have these same capacities. They differ essentially only in scale. Australia and New Zealand are small countries in terms of population. But you also project power beyond your borders. You have sent armies to fight in Europe. You have contributed forces to many recent overseas missions, as I mentioned earlier. Recently, Australia led the force that pacified East Timor, while New Zealand has intervened in the Solomon Islands. And so you are able to stand beside my country as we seek to maintain order in the tragic places of this earth. With the partial exception of France, no countries other than the Anglos have this capacity.

Good government is also the major source of American and Anglo soft power. Good governments take responsibility for problems, within and beyond our borders. Anglo regimes tend to accept leadership in dealing with international crises, even when their narrow self-interest is not involved. That is one reason why we so often send forces overseas. In contrast, other rich countries tend to draw back. Germany and Japan could well do more for world peace than they do. But due to the legacy of World War II, they sharply restrict the use of their forces abroad. They are also less trusted than the Anglos.

Meanwhile, in the non-Western world, good government has almost never arisen. This is the most tragic of all facts about the developing world. With the sole exception of Japan, no major country outside the West has ever developed a government that performs at Western levels. Most regimes outside the West are corrupt, weak, and ineffective, able to do little more than stay in power. That is a major reason why most of these countries stay poor, even in a globalizing world, and why few of them have any serious military capacity.

The prophets of globalization tend to treat political problems as an unfortunate detail that will be overcome somehow in the course of development. But there is little reason to expect this. To the contrary, bad government is a curse that impedes development and is little affected by it. In many countries, it appears to have no solution other than the imposition of honest government from outside, a prospect I return to below.

Our potential rivals have serious governmental problems. The Communist regime in Beijing is the best government China has had, but it is still thoroughly corrupt and lacking in any deep legitimacy. While it has allowed the Chinese economy to grow impressively in recent decades, there is growing unrest at the grass roots. That unrest has no legitimate outlet in the Chinese system. The people cannot march on Beijing the way they can on London, Paris, or Washington. There is a good chance that political turmoil will overtake the country, as it has in the past. In India, the regime is

Britain -based and elected, hence more legitimate. But it too is strongly corrupt and has lacked the capacity to deal with the country's serious infrastructure and social problems.

*Anglo primacy as inevitable*

My conclusion from this inquiry is that American primacy is very deeply rooted and is unlikely to be challenged. The United States may make mistakes in particular policies, but no other country is likely to displace us as the dominant power in the world. My country is strong not just in some ways but in all the ways needed to generate wealth and power. That is true of the Anglo countries as a group.

Indeed, American dominance was probably inevitable virtually from the founding of the country. Immigrants—most of them British—exploded across the interior of America, settling it and turning it into a powerhouse of wealth almost from the beginning. Europeans realized even then that they were facing a juggernaut.<sup>7</sup> The most decisive fact in history might be that Britain defeated the other European powers for the control of the New World. This ensured that America would become, not just any country, but Britain writ large. Such a country would be freed from the only important constraint on Britain's power, which was the small size of the country. A nation with British institutions but continental scale would have no equal in the world, and so it has proved. In the late nineteenth century, Otto von Bismarck, the redoubtable leader who unified Germany, remarked that the most important fact about world affairs is that the North Americans spoke English. That was true then, and it is still true today.

All of our potential rivals are weak in one or another of the dimensions I have discussed. Either they lack a native propensity for capitalism, or they lack an individualist society, or they lack good government. Only my country and the other Anglo countries have all these assets. So today, they are still running the world, and I see no end to that any time soon.

***Why American primacy is discounted***

Why do we not see this? Why do we imagine American primacy is in decline? I think it reflects the self-critical tendency that is part of America. Americans have—sometimes to an excess—that moralistic culture that I spoke of earlier. It's one of the reasons for our primacy. It means we tend to face our problems and overcome them, at least eventually. It's how we recover from errors and defeats, such as Vietnam—and perhaps Iraq. It's also one of the reasons why America has no much soft power. We allow open discussion of our shortcomings. We seek to justify our policies by something more than narrow self-interest. That promotes the trust of other countries.

The very presence of criticism implies that my country cannot be as bad as our critics say. For criticism presumes that the values that we allegedly violate are at least taken seriously. There is no point in attacking the government if nobody is listening—or if you will be locked up for your pains. So criticism is an implied compliment to the regime. The really evil countries are those that disallow criticism, that project all their problems outward, that are never responsible for anything.

But self-criticism also means that we tend to overestimate our rivals. During the Cold War, we thought the Soviet Union was far more formidable than it really was—and then it collapsed like a house of cards. We also imagined that Japan was an economic juggernaut that we could not compete with. But in the 1990s, Japan fell on hard times and has yet to recover, while America went from strength to strength. We simply didn't see the internal problems these societies had. They had covered them up far more than we conceal our problems. And today, I believe, we are exaggerating the potential of China or India.

Even if these rivals were to become dominant in economic or military terms, America would remain dominant in terms of soft power. We are trusted as the Chinese are never likely to be. Our

regime is legitimate as theirs is not. Above all, we are responsible for the world as they have refused to be.

*The danger of overload*

The threat I see is, not that American primacy will decline, but that we will be overwhelmed by the demands made upon us. This is not overstretch in Paul Kennedy's sense, of an imperial power overreaching itself, but rather overload—the exploitation of the strong by the weak.

Again, at the end of history the great fact about the world is no longer divisions between ideological blocs but the gulf that separates the West from the underdeveloped world. Exactly because they are so unready for development, most countries outside the West have nothing before them but tragedy. While their incomes will grow somewhat, conditions in these countries are bound to deteriorate due to growing populations and environmental problems.

Above all, they have no solutions to the chronic misrule which is their deepest problem. The turmoil we see today in the Middle East or Africa, or in Asia, or in much of Latin America is destined to continue. Everywhere, people from these regions struggle to emigrate to the West, and especially to the Anglo countries. They are fleeing their problems rather than staying at home to solve them. Our responses to date have been short-sighted. Either we allow too much immigration from these countries, as a safety valve. Or we respond to immediate humanitarian emergencies, especially in Africa.

The immigrants are seeking good government. Either they will come to our countries to get it, or we must export it to them. What is really required is a return to some form of external oversight of failed states, perhaps under international auspices. One form of it is the demands that world development agencies already make on dependent countries to reform their regimes as a condition of financial bailouts. It is an international version of welfare reform.

A more extreme form would be a return to direct rule from outside. . This rule would above all be less corrupt than what poor countries now suffer. A revived colonialism has already begun to appear—through UN peacekeeping forces and through non-governmental organization that take responsibility for regions in crisis. It will have to happen more. And as in the past, the Anglo countries will be in the lead.

### ***Moral responsibility***

Why should we take on these burdens? At the end of history, the reasons lie in morals rather than ideology. During the Cold War, the nonaligned movement made claims of justice on the West because of the supposed injustices of the colonial era. Fifty years later, most of the problems of the developing world are manifestly homegrown. One can argue for fairer rules of international trade, so that poor countries have a better chance to earn prosperity through exchange. But except for this, our response to them should be driven not by claims to justice but by our own moral convictions.

All the religious traditions of the West—which now include Islam as well as Judaism and Christ.—call on believers to care for the less fortunate. That is why we should care about collapsing countries, even if they have no claims on us. We owe them governance—the thing that the Anglos do best of all. And we owe them compassion. This must be the essence of our policy—governance and compassion.

We never asked for this responsibility. We are certainly not worthy of it. But it has been given to us nevertheless. In the book of the prophet Isaiah, we read:

And it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” (Isaiah 2: 2-3).

Most Americans probably believed that they would spend their lives always looking upward at that highest mountain, and striving to meet its demands. That is what the moralistic life is all about—trying to live up to the standards that have been set for us. After all, the mountain on which we stand is no more than a molehill.

But today we are amazed to find that our molehill has become the highest of the mountains, at least in worldly terms. We certainly have our own problems and limitations. Yet nevertheless, other countries look to us for salvation.

And if we resent that burden, our quarrel is with God.

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