"Seven Empires In Search of Global Governance"

Speech delivered by Tom Spencer, Visiting Professor of Global Governance, SEMS University of Surrey, on Monday 2nd December 2002 to the Faculty of Widener University School of Law, Wilmington, Delaware

Ladies and Gentlemen

May I start by paying tribute to Professor Andy Strauss for his enthusiasm, energy and unfailing faith that federalist principles are a better way of organising the species than our current global jungle. May I apologise to him "in absentia" for the cyber-disjunct across the Atlantic, which has meant that he cannot be here for this lecture which he inspired.

It is my belief that better global governance is eminently achievable. The major problems we face are political, and the prime problem is "What to do about America?" It is difficult to construct a functioning global system if the biggest player thinks that global governance is a zero sum game, the increase of which means a decrease in American power. September 11th has intensified the influence of the "hegemon uni-polar" camp in Washington, at the expense of the multilateralist "uni-multipolar" camp".

In 1918, President Woodrow-Wilson announced that the "age of empires" had ended and the "age of nations" had arrived. I want to argue that we have now passed beyond the "age of nations", but that the age of "global governance" has not arrived. The best hope for sanity in the next hundred years is the establishment of a system of civilised interaction of intermediate groupings, that I will mischievously call "empires". I am using the definition deployed by Professor Deepak Lal of UCLA in his Henry Wendt Lecture on 30th October 2002 entitled "In Defence of Empires". He defines empires as "multi ethnic conglomerates held together by trans national organisational and cultural ties". Using this definition I will argue that American power is best exercised as an "empire" interacting with five or six others. In particular I believe that Americans underestimate the degree of European unification, its ultimate destination, and the fact that it functions as a modern day empire, albeit without an emperor.

The phrase empire is now fashionably tossed around in Washington, but generally with reference only to Rome. Professor Lal gives us an altogether wider perspective. He identifies two versions of empire. Firstly a group of "multi-cultural empires". Amongst these he identifies the Abbasid, the Ottoman, the Hapsburg, the British and various Indian Empires. His second category consists of what he describes as "homogenising" empires, designed to change "habits of the heart". In this he includes the Chinese and Soviet empires and the American empire, if you get it wrong! Let me explore the validity of this model by comparing the European Union as empire with the United States as empire.

The roots of the European Union lie in the trauma of two European civil wars in the twentieth century, which European thinkers ascribed to the failure of the nation state system in a crowded continent. They set out to deliberately share sovereignty under a system of supra-national law. The institutions which have resulted - the European Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament - form a triangle, held in creative tension by the interaction of the institutions and overseen by the European Court of Justice. The Convention on the Future of Europe is currently meeting to turn the ad hoc evolution of these institutions into a comprehensible constitution, that will incorporate within its framework defence, foreign policy, justice and home affairs. These three policies have been left until the late stage of European unification exactly because they touch most powerfully on questions of national sovereignty. We Europeans are currently struggling with this process in the certain knowledge that ten further nations will join the Union in 2004, and that up to a further dozen may complete the geographical unity of the continent by 2014. While the original impetus for unification was the desire to avoid further wars between Europeans, European public opinion now supports the European Union primarily as a way of defending Europe's interests in the wider world. Not surprisingly such ambitions occasionally bring Europeans into conflict with a Washington which has for fifty years seen greater unity in Europe as a desirable building block in holding back Communism and opening the markets to capitalist competition.

Europe certainly meets Deepak Lal's model of a multi ethnic conglomerate held together by multi cultural ties. Its roots indeed lie in Rome and its system of law, but also in Rome's successors such as Charlemagne's Empire and the Holy Roman Empire with its loose organisation and system of Electors, choosing amongst themselves an emperor. It also owes more than it probably realises to the Hapsburg Empire. Indeed we discover with every passing day why South Eastern Europe can only find peace under some multi ethnic imperial structure. As with the Indian Empires and Byzantium, Europe is about power, diversity and the management of complexity, backed up by an often-undeclared remaining fear of internal civil war. Like the British Empire, and one could argue the American Empire, it started from commercial inspiration and geo-political concern, and only subsequently acquired the institutions and symbols of an empire. The component nations of the European Union bring their own experience of empire, be it Dutch, Portuguese or Belgian, to the common European enterprise. Such experience has left them all with global expertise, a global memory and the habit of making extended networks work.

Harold Macmillan was fond of saying that Britain was playing Greece to America's Rome. The implication being that a sophisticated and intellectual, if failed, empire, could play a god-fatherly role towards a youthful, vigorous new Rome. The parallel is fatally flawed. America, whatever the pretensions of its imperial buildings in Washington, is different from Rome. A European Union of twenty five states, forming the largest consumer market in the world, is not equivalent to the ruined Greek city states which the Roman Empire absorbed.

What then should we say of the current aspirations of certain Americans to see the United States as a global empire? I have spent substantial time working in Washington and I am an enthusiastic admirer both of the city and of the brilliant institutions of American governance. However such governance was not designed for the exercise of external imperial power. Its system of checks and balances militates

against coherent and sustained focus on global issues. If we review the exercise of American military and diplomatic power beyond its shores in the twentieth century, its prime characteristic is the alternation between engagement and disengagement. Americans have often wanted both global power and global affection, preferably without paying a price in blood or treasure. Such a yearning could fit the definition applied to the British press barons of the 1920s as "wanting power without responsibility, the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages". It is misleading for Americans to look only at the current military "full spectrum" dominance afforded by their spending on technology and defence. "Imperial overstretch" is an unfashionable concept in Washington at this moment, but the current weakness of the dollar and problems of the US economy are reminders that there is no such thing as a goldilocks empire any more than there could be a sustainable goldilocks economy in the 1990s. America is not Rome for other and more fundamental reasons. I do not believe that Americans will ever abandon their system of democracy, with it four yearly threat of retribution for executive hubris. I hope I am also justified in believing that the strong American attachment to individual liberty will never fall victim to a countervailing authoritarianism, even one justified by the need to defend the state from external threat.

All this is brought into sharper focus by the thinking which underpins many of those at the top of the current Administration. They share a sense of "manifest destiny". They exult in the doctrine and history of "US exceptionalism". In Bob Kagan's analysis they glory in the Hobbesian independence of a powerful state entitled to exercise the prerogatives to which it feels entitled. They despise the multi lateralist, treaty-entangled world view of the Europeans as the weapon of the weak. They reach easily for Rome as a metaphor for global omnipotence. They should look more closely at their history. Rome was never global. It did not conquer the Persian Empire, subdue India or even make much contact with distant China. Rome was not one entity, it was an evolving story which transmuted itself into the Byzantine Empire which conducted a thousand year dance with Islam and the East. Above all Rome was based on "civus romanus sum". A sense of law and of equality before that law. In a sense, America as melting pot has learned this lesson internally, but appears unable to draw conclusions from it internationally.

What can this extended exercise in metaphor teach us about coherent progress towards a stable system for governing the whole species. A species which faces the universal challenges of a degrading environment, human rights abuse, international crime syndicates and terrorism, which are the symptoms of our joint political failure.

In my view, for Americans "patriotism is not enough". At the very least Americans should honour their shared roots in Toynbee's judeo-christian civilisation and return to thinking of Europe as a partner, a sibling and for many purposes as the "third coast" of a common system. They might usefully stop thinking in Manichean terms that search constantly for an enemy against which to define themselves. Such a quest offers only two candidates – Europe and China. Neither is best dealt with by imperial hauteur. I welcome the Bush Administration's concentration on "big powers" – China, India, Russia. What seems to me to be missing is a mind map capable of taking a sustained overview of the next hundred years. Deepak Lal points out rightly how much we should now regret the easy demolition of the Hapsburg and Ottoman Empires in the name of nationalism. How much easier life would now be if we were

dealing with a single coherent entity in the “Greater Middle East”. A successor state to the Ottomans at could frame the aspirations of Islam and the Arab world, rather than feed the fury of a thousand Arab streets inflamed by the apocalyptic vision of a bin Laden. Al Qaida believes that Islam can only recreate itself after mortal damage has been done to its rival civilisations. I am not a believer in Samuel Huntingdon’s Clash of Civilisations, not least because he gets his definition of civilisations wrong. I do believe that we need a conscious order in the relationship between the power clusters of the planet, as we face up to the paradigm shift from industrial to knowledge based civilisation.

My Cherokee friends have taught me not to despise the symbolism of the natural world. As I polished these few thoughts and sought for an image of what American leadership might look like in the world which we now all inhabit, I took refuge from your smoke free building with a cigarette in the December light of Delaware. As I finished my cigarette, seven geese flew south above me. There was a gap between the lead goose and the other six, but between them they formed an elegant and efficient unit. Perhaps that is a model to which the best brains of America, Europe, China, Russia, Japan and the Arab world might turn their attentions.

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