



Recall America's imperial past, understand its present

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One-page article

Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power

Robert D Kaplan

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Deliberate forgetting, like deliberate remembering (in museums, in monuments, in public commemorations) is an integral part of political memory and, indeed, in our everyday lives. It is human nature to omit parts of our past, or to relegate them behind carefully constructed narrative frameworks that avoid excessive scrutiny.

The imperial and colonial past of the United States of America is one such example of this institutional amnesia and would explain Donald Rumsfeld's petulant declaration in April 2003 that "we don't seek empires ... we're not imperialistic, we never have been." Rumsfeld was not particularly in

conversation with history when he made his statement. He was responding, perhaps, to the long list of journalists, academics, public-policy thinkers and government employees who argued America should embrace its already-present empire. An early, and forceful voice, was Niall Ferguson, an economic historian, who penned in October 31, 2001 an opinion piece entitled "Welcome the new imperialism" which urged a similar burden onto the United States. The "new", however, is rather galling.

Starting from the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the continental spread of America towards the Pacific is deemed neither colonial nor particularly imperialistic. It is the conflicts with European powers - France, Spain and England - that frame that particular version of the past. Manifest Destiny ("to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" as described in 1845), once specifically articulated in the 1840s, was abundantly realised in the annexations of Texas, Kansas and California. Expansion, commerce, some notion of "popular sovereignty principle", were clearly marked in the opening up of the seas beyond the continent.

Furthermore, the 1856 Guano Islands Act claimed for the United States any "unclaimed" island with sufficient supplies of bird waste (to be used as fertiliser by American farmers) by any American entrepreneur, and this annexation would be defended by the US Navy. The list of island territories annexed, claimed or contested - Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, Hawaii, the Philippines, and so on - is long and scattered around the globe.

The last of these, the Philippines and the Spanish-American War in 1898 are two particularly glaring omissions in American historical memory. It was to mark, and urge towards, a global colonial strategy for the United States that the "old India hand" Rudyard Kipling penned his *The White Man's Burden: United States and the Philippine Islands* (1899) and sent it directly to Theodore Roosevelt, then the governor of New York.

The "silent, sullen peoples" - who await salvation from bondage, freedom from the iron rule of kings - watch with trepidation and with hope the march of the American imperial might ("The ports ye shall not enter / the roads ye shall not tread / Go, make them with your living / And mark them with your dead"). The Kipling invocation to do empire better has lived on in other inheritors of that particular worldview, such as Ferguson. But Kipling himself, as a model of a citizen-journalist, firmly attuned to the greater glory and greater hubris of his own state, and committed to a deep knowledge of the charges of his empire, is now forgotten. Kipling, born and employed in British India, was about to embark on a trip to the United States and possibly meant his poem to be his calling card. As a reporter for the *Civil and Military Gazette* in Lahore and *Pioneer* in Allahabad, he urged that his critiques of the failures of imperial strategies were based on his intimate knowledge of India: "I met a hundred men on the road to Delhi and they were all my brothers" was the epigraph he chose for *Life's Handicap*.

His many short stories, reportage, travelogues were genuinely multilingual, multivocal and strove to present all the corruptions and contradictions of his imperial age. Yet, he managed to always convey a singular vision of greater good - achievable only via a united empire - for the populations he called family and territories he called home, which were far away from London. That need to argue for a better strategy for empire meant, for Kipling, a deep involvement for those to whom the empire dictated.

In *Letters of Marque* (1887) he contrasts the travelling "King of Loafers" who has an "unholy knowledge" of the natives via his life lived among them with the "Globe Trotters" who claim expertise by staying in hotels and who produce nothing but banal observations: "With rare and sparkling originality he remarked that India was a 'big place,' and that there were many things to buy."

Robert D Kaplan is an eminent globetrotter. His list of previous publications puts him in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, South America, West Africa, North Africa, South Asia and South-east Asia. He is also an eminent articulator for the need to do empire better.

"Where's the American empire when we need it?", he asked in a long essay in *The Washington Post* on December 3. A heartfelt plea to not go gently into that good night ("The American empire has always been more structural than spiritual"), Kaplan locates American imperial power as a magnetic pole - which attracts certain configurations and repels others. In his previous works such as *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* (1993), *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey to the Frontiers of Anarchy* (1996), and the most recent *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (2010) the US empire exists mainly to thwart other anarchic forces - political, such as the Soviets, and maybe the Chinese; but mainly the historical, the geographical and ethnic.

Kaplan argues for a new cartography of empire - one that takes as its centre the Indian Ocean world. This configuration, which he holds was the key to the European colonial hegemony, has fallen out of America's strategic sights during the last half of the 20th century and the first decade of the new century.

While America has focused on the Middle East or Central Asia, a new world order is emerging in the port sites of Oman, Yemen, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Zanzibar. This world order, which is a revival of medieval and early modern trade networks, is being financed by the Chinese, in a blatant effort to project soft power throughout the Indian Ocean (to become a "two-ocean" empire).

India is the only contender in this space, and as both of these emergent world powers divide up the ports, the supply routes, the fuel and tank depots, America will lurk uneasily in the background, despite having both aerial and naval superiority. In this network, lies for Kaplan, the emergence of a new global class of African and Asian merchants and consumers who are key to both military and civilisational domination. Kaplan argues that the struggle is not for military hegemony between China and America, but a co-existence that emulates patterns of habitations that have been centuries in the making. To buttress his claim, Kaplan travels to ports and cities that feed into the Indian Ocean trade and presents an uneasy mixture of academic analysis and first-person narrative.

Kaplan's central thesis, of an Indian Ocean *oikoumene* comes largely from the work of historian Janet L Abu-Lughoud - whose *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250-1350* is cited numerous times and provides Kaplan with the bulwark of an Arab-Asian trading network across the Indian Ocean - and from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz - from whose nuanced *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (1968) Kaplan emerges with the highly problematic dialectic "Desert Islam"

versus "Tropical Islam". Between these central texts, Kaplan reproduces in a prose both clunky and confused a wide array of secondary academic scholarship, academic talks, academics who talk to him, and policy and position papers.

The various contradictions and examples of ill-digested scholarship that mark Kaplan's pages cannot truly be appreciated without reproducing entire chunks of pages. To this reader, they appear not to be contradictions or confusions in Kaplan's thought, but simply the efforts of a studious neophyte, eager to marshal everything he has read - and he has read everything - into the narrative. This makes for headache inducing; historical fact after political factoid after cultural stereotype constantly clashing on the page.

A more fruitful exercise would be to deal specifically with two intertwined thematic underpinnings of *Monsoon*: geography and civilisation. As Kaplan writes: "Geography rules", "Geography encompasses", we remain at the "mercy of geography". Geography also guides, dictates, determines. It is impersonal, but "politics must follow geography," as does culture. Geography determines "national character." The desert is one such manifestation of an over-determining geography. The desert is dry, "unforgiving", "violent", "constricting", gives its people "extremities of thought", "chaotic". As such, the desert not only contains such anthropomorphic qualities, it formulates them in those who come near it, or live in it - to provide a one-sentence summary: "Indeed, the deeper and broader the desert, potentially the more unstable and violent the state". It is in this cradle that Islam is born.

He contrasts this with the world of the ocean. The ocean is wet, "encompassing", "stimulating", "a global agglomeration", "culturally sophisticated". It is when Islam comes into contact with this geographical force that it develops from "Desert Islam" to "Tropical Islam" - representing precisely the qualities which Kaplan imbues in the respective geographical features. In its essentialising of diversity, and diversification of essentially material realities, Kaplan's dichotomy - yes, the two Islams are at war with each other - beggars belief. Not to mention, it beggars geography. How exactly will he explain Egypt, one wonders.

He is misreading not only Geertz's careful ethnographies of agrarian practices in Morocco and Indonesia, he is contradicting his own deeply held beliefs. Because, for Kaplan, geography isn't really all that powerful. It must bow before the will of man. Now, granted in Kaplan's reading only a handful of men - historically speaking - have been capable enough to stand up to geography's predestination. These men, and the regimes they built, are fulsomely praised by Kaplan. These men have much in common: they are brutal, in thought and in acts, men of action and few words, men who make the right decision even at the cost of righteous moral claims.

These are men like Alfonso d'Albuquerque, the 16th-century Portuguese conqueror of the Indian Ocean; Robert Clive, the 18th-century governor of the East India Company and the conqueror of Bengal; the current Sultan Qaboos of Oman, and the current President Mahinda Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka, as well as the faceless men who run China. Kaplan finds that such men, carved new destinies out of blood and sweat (mostly blood) for their historically afflicted regions and are to be praised, even emulated. After describing the horrors inflicted by the Portuguese in their conquest of India, Kaplan concludes: "Indeed, there is much the United States can learn from

the positive side of the Portuguese national character, with many Catholic converts and the persistence of the Portuguese language in places like Sri Lanka and the Maluccas".

The most glaring lack, in Kaplan's imagination for the empire, is ultimately his inability to actually know. The languages, the customs, the rhythms, the cultures of places he visits, from Oman to Gwadar, to Kolkata, to Dhaka, to Zanzibar remain out of his purview. He makes a valiant effort to let historical writing, act as a substitute for his incomprehensibility of the present: "Here, along a coast so empty that you can almost hear the echo of the camel hooves of Alexander's army, you lose yourself in geology." He is often surprised ("Miniature donkeys emerging from the sea!"), often overwhelmed (by the poverty on display in Dhaka and in Zanzibar) and always dependent on others to explain to him the significance of what he observes. The significance of what he does observe, and what he argues for in *Monsoon* is what is at stake for most readers of his book. Kaplan is, after all like Kipling, offering prescriptives to the American empire, whether he considers America an empire per se.

Kaplan forgets that America and Americans remain intimately intertwined with lives in the Indian Ocean world. In its long-storied past, Elihu Yale - who founded Yale University, the birthplace of American Indology - was a governor of the East India Company. The opium trade network which sustained the East India Company coffers in the mid-19th century by supplying Bengal-raised opium to China was also remitted through American cotton. And in its tumultuous present - the drones which fly over Afghanistan and Pakistan dispensing justice, reportedly use bases in Balochistan.

Neither those American mercantile interests nor the drones receive any mention from Kaplan. He also forgets that his argument for American engagement is suspiciously similar to his argument for supporting the Iraq War. The after-effects of Iraq linger throughout his pages, but are explicitly commented on only once, and in relation to the conditions in Pakistan: "Because Pakistan and its stability had figured so prominently in Bush's foreign policy, the lack of improvement here constituted an indictment of his strategy, and an indictment of the diversion of resources to Iraq, a war I had supported early on". The significance of what he observes, and what he argues for in *Monsoon* cannot be unmoored from this compromised position as a herald of a false dawn of democracy in Iraq. The only lesson he has learnt is to temper his claims for democracy - he praises military rule in Bangladesh as a viable option - and to add a note of caution to American power.

Hence, this is a text with a vague unease with an unqualified notion of American empire - and to clarify here, not an unease with empire itself. This unease is perhaps the dominant factor in the largely conciliatory gesture Kaplan maintains towards China (a state whose economy and military are not at par with the United States but which has shown an intellectual awareness that outsmarts the US). He argues that China can easily be considered a "partner" that can be counted on to maintain a precarious balance of power in the Indian Ocean. This balance is necessary to reintegrate places like Yemen, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Zanzibar into the global commercial classes and to bring closer the two faces of Islam.

The policy readers of this book will find it sober reading. The empire, which does listen to Robert Kaplan, will surely invite him to speak to groups with

shiny brass and shinier domes. The historians reading this book will have less cause to be charitable. The now-standard collapse of lived history from "Alexander the Great" to "us" would be laughable if it wasn't so tragic.

Again and again, centuries disappear from Kaplan's narrative as routinely elaborated customs and practices are relegated to either geographic determinism or something called "Desert Islam". Those inhabitants of the climes in which Kaplan locates his narrative will have more than ample reason to be offended by his caricatures or by his invocations to the healing power of violence - be it Robert Clive or Sultan Qaboos. In this, however, Kaplan is neither unique nor exemplary in a pantheon of great American commentators which stretches from Thomas L Friedman to Fared Zakaria. The empire requires a particular kind of information, alone.

What is more glaringly at stake is that nearly eight years after the invasion of Iraq and under a new administration in the White House, the "debate" of the global war on terror remains stuck in the same analytical framework as it did in 2001. Contrasting Robert Kaplan in 2010 with Niall Ferguson from 2001 is an exercise akin to examining a patient suffering from a fugue state: the amnesia is stark and starkly present.

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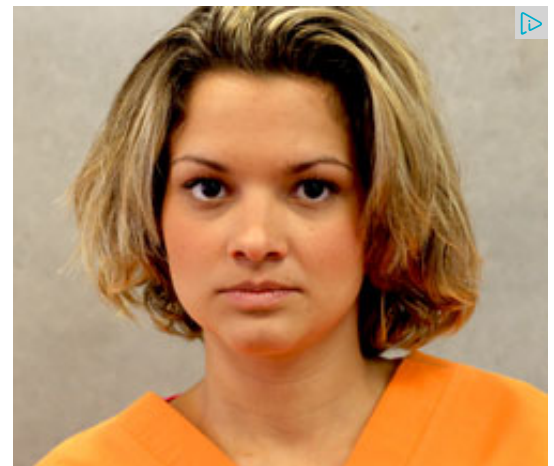
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