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The End of the Indispensable Nation

By Fran Shor
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“This is the end, my only friend, the end/Of our elaborate plans, the end/Of everything that stands, the end/No safety or surprise, the end.”

— Jim Morrison, *The Doors*

The ascension of Donald Trump to the imperial presidency marks the nadir of the declension of the United States as *the* global hegemon. While Trump’s fantasies about “making America great again” do not explicitly rely on promoting the US as the “indispensable nation,” they, nonetheless, deploy strategies to resurrect the fossil fuel driven expansion of the military industrial state that marked the post-World War II period of US global dominance. That period suffered its initial setback in the early 1970’s with the loss of the war in Southeast Asia, the OPEC oil shock, and the elimination of the gold standard.

An attempt to staunch that decline through financialization, corporate globalization, and neoliberal foreign and domestic policies took another hit with the economic crises of 2008. However, the precipitous decline in pre-eminence of the production of manufactured goods from a high point of 60 percent in 1950 to about 25 percent at the end of the twentieth century cannot be halted by the kind of flim-flam tax breaks by Trump and Indiana to industrial manufacturers like Carrier and its parent company, United Technologies, the billion dollar Pentagon profiteering corporation. Although the United States had dominated industrial production in electronics and electrical equipment at mid-century, by the beginning of the twenty-first century,

non-US corporations occupied nine out of the top ten positions. Even in the banking sector, nineteen of the top twenty-five banks in the world were located outside the United States.

While the dollar still remains the primary reserve currency in the world (with growing challenges by Russia and China to the dollar), the recent massive international financial failures are a direct result of the financialization that was promoted by US interests from the 1970s onward and continue to play an outsized role in policies of the federal government irrespective of which party is in power. As a consequence of those toxic financial arrangements, uprisings against the banksters in various countries, from Iceland to Latvia, Greece to Martinique, had led to challenges to the flawed logic of US-dominated financialization.

The national security and warfare state that Trump wants to prop up is incapable of subduing the very chaos that it contributes to around the globe. As prophetically noted by French critic Emmanuel Todd at the start of the Iraq War in 2003: “the United States is pretending to remain the world’s indispensable superpower by attacking insignificant adversaries. But this America – a militaristic, agitated, uncertain, anxious country projecting its own disorder around the globe – is hardly the indispensable nation it claims to be and is certainly not what the rest of the world really needs now” (*After the Empire*, xviii).

Trump’s intended employment of generals (Flynn, Mattis, and maybe Petraeus) associated with the debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan suggest at best an arrested development of that warfare state. In his trenchant criticism of the military brass in books and articles, Andrew Bacevich has emphatically highlighted the failures of Washington’s war machine, a machine that has little hope of repair even with the hypermilitarism of the ruling Republican Party. As Bacevich contends in *The Limits of Power*: “How is it that our widely touted post-Cold War military supremacy has produced not enhanced security but the prospect of open-ended conflict? Why is it that when we flex our muscles on behalf of peace and freedom (sic), the world beyond our borders becomes all the more cantankerous and disorderly” (156).

While Trump appears to be drawing back from the confrontation promoted by Obama and Clinton with Russia, he has not hesitated to encourage aggressive postures towards China, Iran, and Cuba. It is hard to imagine that a Trump presidency would not embrace the kind of imperial policies and gestures that continue to make the US an outlier in the international community. Moreover, as Eric Hobsbawm has argued in *On Empire*: “There is no prospect of a return to the imperial world of the past, let alone the prospect of a lasting global hegemony, unprecedented in history, by a single state, such as America, however great its military force. The age of empires is dead. We shall have to find another way of organizing the globalized world of the twenty-first century” (25).

The xenophobic and racist nationalism embodied by Trump cannot avoid pronouncements and policies that generate arrogance and aggression towards people of color around the world and in the US. An “America that continues to relate to the world by a unilateral assertion that it represents civilization,” opines Immanuel Wallerstein in *The Decline of American Power*, “cannot live in peace with the world, and therefore will not live in peace with itself...Can the land of liberty and privilege, even amidst its decline, learn to be a land that treats everyone everywhere as equals” (215)?

It is clear from Trump's assertion that a wall will still be built on the Mexican border with a US, even in the face of diminishing numbers that have any desire or need to enter the country, that he, and many of his followers, are fearful and paranoid about the hordes of brown-skinned others. But as Barbara Kingsolver observes in *Small Wonder* about the metaphoric wall spawned by imperial and narcissistic enclosures: "The writing has been on the wall for some years now, but we are a nation illiterate in the language of the wall. The writing just gets bigger. Something *will* eventually bring down the charming, infuriating naiveté of Americans that allows our blithe consumption and cheerful ignorance of the secret ugliness that bring us whatever we want" (262-3).

Everywhere that US nationalism and imperialism will try to build walls growing bands of insurgents, migrants, and miscreants will undoubtedly scale those walls. Identifying with those who seek to tear down such walls, let us recall the lyrics of a song by *Los Lobos*, that driving rock band from East LA: "Some day that wall will tumble and fall/And the sun will shine that day." For that day to come, however, acts of intervention must be undertaken. As stated eloquently by Rebecca Solnit in *Hope in the Dark*: "Blind faith faces a blank wall waiting for a door in it to open....The great liberation movements hacked doorways into walls" (13-14).