

The Empire Within

by Bradford Tuckfield (September 2014)

Whence the urge to conquer? A quick perusal of any history book will show the obsession that humans have for conquering, for subjugating, for expanding territories and increasing subjects, in short: for building empires. Is there a reason for this obsession? Why can't, in other words, people leave well enough alone?

The reasons are probably manifold. An evolutionary biologist would say that conquering and subjugating lead to more numerous and healthier offspring, so empire is adaptive. A Christian might say that this urge is part of the fallen and sinful nature of man, like lust or envy. A sociologist might point out that even if only a tiny percent of the population consists of power-hungry empire builders, their destructive energy alone would be enough to lead societies into chaos. And so on.

All of these explanations fail to account for the apparent fact that the urge to conquer and subjugate seems to have waned today. The world map doesn't change too often, certain unstable parts of the world notwithstanding, and few heads of state are elected on a platform of conquering and empire-building. Liberal optimists like Steven Pinker argue that this is because of *progress*, because people and societies are becoming better.

As is so often the case, a closer look reveals that what looks like progress is merely change. The urge to conquer and build empires is still as strong as ever, but it has gone underground or been sublimated or morphed into a less recognizable form. Our empires today are different than they used to be. There are business imperialists, who conquer other firms through (often valueless) mergers and acquisitions. There are cultural imperialists, who believe that their values should be imposed on the rest of the world, if not by physical force, by manipulation, intimidation and invective. More subtle and sinister still, there are personal imperialists, who seek to manipulate and control the people – family and friends – who are close to them. All of these people strive to conquer just as much as Alexander or Attila, and have set themselves up as emperors of their own limited and usually petty sphere. The swords and guns diminish, but the human heart retains its capacity for wickedness and its desire to control.

Governments have not abandoned their imperialistic ambitions either. Today's governmental paternalists are seeking to control the quantities of soda that we drink, the family structures that we participate in and support, and the minutiae of our treatment of the environment, among other things. These paternalists gather power not to a strong executive,

but to an army of petty bureaucrats, would-be emperors whose urge to conquer is apparently gentler but is also more invasive and degrading than that of the ancient despots. The bureaucrats of today's governments seek not just to control the commanding heights of the state, but also the little things we do in our homes and with our families, our commercial exchanges with our neighbors, and even the beliefs we cherish and try to pass on. The power of these new empires can be measured in the paper and ink of endless regulations, and the growing payroll of the vast and unchecked regulatory bodies that monitor and seek to control us. It is a new kind of tyranny by a new kind of empire.

Each particular paternalistic law can be justified on utilitarian grounds. Individuals and society would be better off, so the argument goes, if fewer of us were obese, so we should make rules to limit people's ability to consume fatty foods. We would be better off if we all gave more to the less fortunate, so we should make rules to extract more through taxes and redistribute through the state's beneficent channels of subsidy. And so on. Though each invasive law arguably represents a marginal improvement of overall utility, the sum total of the laws is a nearly imperceptible and nearly ineffable loss – a loss of human agency, the power for each of us to fully determine our own destinies. Somehow, we have all come together and tried to make things better, only to look up and suddenly realize that we have begun to put ourselves in chains. The urge of the bureaucrats to conquer and to build empires has ensnared us, and in the name of social good, has made great progress inhibiting our personal freedom and subjecting us to the state.

Ancient tyrants could be stopped only by death. The juggernaut of invasive government regulation appears not only irreversible, but also phoenix-like in its self-perpetuating immortality. The size and scope of government has not appreciably decreased in most developed countries for centuries. However, I know at least one salve for the urge to conquer: religion. All of humanity's spiritual traditions point us away from the urge to selfishly conquer. Buddhism teaches its adherents to let go of worldly possessions like empires, because they are distractions from enlightenment. Islam teaches its followers to submit to a higher conqueror. Indeed, for anyone who believes in an afterlife, reflection on the glory to come makes worldly kingdoms seem tawdry and unimportant. Religion is a great disciplining force among today's extravagances; it teaches us to restrain our base impulse for subjugation.

We can imagine that in a great nation that truly practiced a religion like Christianity, conquerors would have no place. Citizens of a real Christian nation would lay up treasures in heaven rather than on earth. They would seek enough to provide for their families, then turn to matters of the Spirit. Like in Blake's poem, they could build Jerusalem in their own land.

Perhaps this is naïve. Can the powerful desire to build and conquer be truly extinguished without extinguishing also our humanity? In truth, the most humane of our traditions attempt not to stifle, but rather to channel this urge. Consider Christian missionaries like the Jesuits, who live militaristic lifestyles but seek only spiritual and voluntary conquests. The spiritually mature among us seek first and primarily to conquer the demons and evils within our own hearts. Perhaps a Christian nation would not be free of conquerors, but rather full of them – righteous conquerors of flesh and of wickedness.

Kierkegaard agreed: in *Fear and Trembling*, he describes the results of our struggles in life. Those who struggle with the world, he said, become great by conquering it. Those who struggle with themselves become great by conquering themselves. He went a step further, however, and said that the greatest are those who struggle with God. Kierkegaard understood that world-conquerors are great. Even today's petty bureaucrats who multiply the rules and regulations that touch our lives have achieved some form of greatness. Kierkegaard's wisdom was to point out that there are two higher levels of struggle. First, we struggle with ourselves. Even though we live in today's overtaxed, over-regulated states, we can master ourselves, refine our spirits, and come off conqueror. Even better, we can struggle with God. We can finish life with the great gift of a knowledge of God and our place in the world. This form of mastery is the greatest of all.

Our vision of a great nation must be updated in light of Kierkegaard's wisdom. A great nation is full of independent agents, acting with full power of self-determination to pursue their righteous self-interest. They build families, companies, and communities, but not with compulsory means or selfish ends. Because they understand the value of the struggle with God, all of their earthly kingdoms are built as a contribution to the heavenly one. Self control makes strong government unnecessary. They have conquered the empire within, and all other conquering is effortless, but superfluous.

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