

E Pluribus Unum?

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This Latin slogan describes the intentions of our founding father: that out of many colonies would come one nation. We Americans are very proud of this idea, and many think that we invented it. However, considering that the slogan is Latin, the ancient Romans certainly thought of it, as did others before them.

The small, scattered tribes of Homo Sapiens peopling Africa never looked beyond their tribes, related by blood. But as our ancestors left Africa and peopled the world (the only species to do this on their own\227(rats and cockroaches depended on us to go global), the clans grew larger and stronger clans absorbed weaker ones.

Out of ancient Rome came the story of the Rape of the Sabine Women. The early Romans were poor and hungry and their women often died during childbirth. They invaded a neighbor\222s territory, conquered and killed the men, and carried off the women to become their wives. The Romans continued to absorb all their neighbors on the Italian peninsula and gave them Roman citizenship. The Roman Empire began this way. They went beyond Italy to rule territory from the British Isles, all across North Africa, the Middle East, and as far as the borders of Persia. For centuries to come, more people lived in prosperity under Roman rule than could have as struggling independent states.

China had a similar trajectory. The ancient Chinese hosted five kingdoms that fought incessantly until one finally conquered them all. This was the first Chinese Empire, a political success for centuries.

From the first empires after the agricultural revolution (Sumeria, Babylonia, Assyria, Persia), history was a cavalcade of empires that, when they overreached and collapsed, disintegrated into warlordism, famine, and death, until another warrior tribe created a new empire.

For human beings, empires, not independent states, have been the predominant global model. Centralized governments survive for centuries, periodically collapsing into anarchy until the next empire emerged. We are so used to thinking about sovereign nation states that we forget how new this concept is and how difficult it is for most of them to survive.

The horrors of two world wars (1914-18 and 1939-45) illustrated just how weak most nation states were. Neighborhood bullies, throwbacks to savage tribes, easily created new empires that they believed would endure. The Nazis and Japanese did not count on two other empires of sorts, the Russians (involuntary empire) and the Americans (voluntary empire) wiping them out. The Russians aspired to enlarging their already enormous empire by absorbing formerly independent European states (Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine) that they ruled with an iron hand.

The United States envisioned another sort of empire: one of free nation states agreeing to a set of global legal principles. Over a period of 70 years, during which we came close to nuclear war with the USSR, we prevailed, making us the single largest superpower. Over that time, our influence and economic system lifted millions of people out of dire poverty and inspired many to attempt to become modern nation states.

History shows us that huge empires ultimately collapse because the cost of sustaining peace and order becomes more than its citizens want to pay. We are seeing this phenomenon today, with state after state (particularly in the Middle East) collapsing into anarchy and one wanabe super-state, the European Union, well intentioned but under-engineered, unraveling.

The world came close, under American tutelage, to creating a global society, a super-empire. It is in trouble right now, but historically, unity out of diversity (e pluribus unum) comes back. An invasion from Mars could unify us smartly, but short of that, global warfare will remind us how bad tribalism can be.

We are living through a period of increasing anarchy: some of it generated by neofascist militant Islam, which has a talent for destruction but no talent for governance; and other wanabe super-states, such as China and Russia, imagining that their visions are better than ours. People vote with their feet. Our vision is obviously better. Ask China\222s and Russia\222s neighbors.

677 words

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