

# The Empire Finds a New Adversary

“This war represents the German revolution, a greater political event than the French revolution of the last century. ... There is not a diplomatic tradition which

has not been swept away. You have a new world. ... The balance of power has been entirely destroyed ...” So said Disraeli after Prussia had led a coalition of German states to crush France in 1870, after which the Prussian King had been crowned Kaiser of Germany at Versailles.

Disraeli recognized what others did not. Bismarck’s Germany was first power in Europe. And Britain’s balance-of-power policy—always support the weaker coalition against the stronger in Europe—would bring England into conflict with Germany.

British and Teutonic blunders would lead the British Empire, the premier but receding power of the early 20th century, into 10 years of war against the rising power, Germany. Both nations would end those wars finished as great powers forever.

To see America, dominant power of its era and, like Britain a century ago, a sea power and a world power, growing alarmed at the rise of the greatest land power in Asia is to see yesterday coming around again today. “Rumsfeld Issues a Sharp Rebuke to China on Arms,” read the headline in the *New York Times* of June 4. “Sees a Broad Risk to Asia” ran the subhead.

The lead: “Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in an unusually blunt public critique of China, said Saturday that Beijing’s military spending threatens the delicate security balance in Asia ...

“In a keynote address at an Asian security conference here, Mr. Rumsfeld argued that China’s investment in mis-

siles and up-to-date military technology posed a risk not only to Taiwan and to American interests, but also to nations across Asia...”

Rumsfeld’s remarks call to mind the British alarms at the German High Seas Fleet in the early 20th century. This can only be aimed at us, said the British Admiralty, not incorrectly.

China, in its purchases from France, Israel, and Russia of air-to-air and anti-ship missiles and submarines and its buildup of 600 rockets opposite Taiwan, appears to be preparing for a showdown with its breakaway province and for a possible war off the China coast with some great sea power. Is there another out there?

Before the United States goes down this road, we might ask ourselves: where do you suppose China got the hundreds of billions of dollars to make itself the most formidable power in Asia? Might it not be from the huge trade surpluses (\$160 billion in 2004), Beijing runs annually with an America that shovels cash, high-tech jobs, and manufacturing plants into China at a prodigious rate?

As for Taiwan, the handwriting has been on the wall since Kissinger negotiated the Shanghai Communique of 1972, which said that all Chinese agree Taiwan is a part of China and America does not dispute it. This was followed by Carter’s break with Taipei and termination of the U.S.-Taiwan security pact and the Reagan commitment to phase out military assistance.

We cannot walk the cat back now. And while the United States is obliged

under the Taiwan Relations Act to come to the defense of the island, the reality is that China grows more powerful *vis-à-vis* the United States and Taiwan, in real and relative terms, every year.

Beijing sees us bogged down in Afghanistan and Iraq, at odds with the Islamic world, alienated from allies, hectoring Russia over democracy and human rights, while Reagan’s 600-ship Navy vanishes and America can no longer fill recruitment goals for an Army that is half as large as it was at the end of the Cold War.

At the end of the 19th century, Britain found herself with two imperial rivals, Russia and France, and three ambitious and rising powers: Germany, Japan, and the United States. With wise British diplomacy, she allied with or appeased all of them—but Germany. But though Germany did not threaten British vital interests and did not want war with Britain, Britain decided she must go to war with Germany rather than let her defeat France.

History seems to confirm that the wisest course for a satiated but receding empire, like Britain in 1900 and America today, is the policy of Lord Salisbury. He drew a red line about his nation and empire’s vital interests, and practiced “splendid isolation” from the power blocs and power politics of Europe.

America needs to begin the agonizing reappraisal of foreign-policy commitments we did not do at the end of the Cold War and begin to shed them all, save those that involve vital U.S. interests. And around them, we should draw our red line.

Is saving Taiwan from the fate of Hong Kong worth a war with China? One day, this is what the question will come down to. ■

[open sewer]

# Tragedy of the Commons

The cultural filth American families can't avoid

By Gil Reavill

IN NEW YORK CITY in the early 1980s, when I first entered into it, the world of commercial sex was tawdry and downscale, a Petri dish of percolating microbes and disturbed obsessions.

I loved it.

Then again, I was a twentysomething male, and twentysomething males are such tortured and bizarre anti-exemplars of the human race almost to deserve their own subspecies.

I was raised in the Midwest. A few miles from my hometown there's a granite geological survey marker that locates the exact center of the northern half of the western hemisphere. Middle America precisely. My mother was a kindergarten teacher. My father was a traveling salesman. Ample material against which to rebel, and as soon as I could I hitched up my jeans and hitched on out of there. The country boy coming to the big city is an old story. I fulfilled the wet-behind-the-ears image in Stevie Wonder's song "Living for the City," where the rube gawks, "New York—skyscrapers and everything!"

After huddling depressed and alone in my spider hole of an apartment for a few months, I stumbled across a want ad in the *Village Voice* that said there was an editorial position open at a "controversial Village weekly." Visions of crusading muckraking journalists dancing in my head, I found myself in the Fourteenth

Street offices of Al Goldstein's *Screw* magazine.

Like most teenage boys, I had found my way to porn, but in an R-rated sort of way, not an X-rated hard-core way. The first issue of *Screw* I saw that day in 1981 made me physically ill. The rag's back pages were filled with ads for prostitutes, for which Goldstein charged the same rate as the *New York Times* charged for its advertising. *Screw* fulfilled the basic function of a pimp. The front editorial half of *Screw* presented itself as serious redeeming social content: broad-brush sexual satire, witless aggrandizement of publisher Goldstein, and rickety reportage about Manhattan's commercial sex scene. The feature article in the first issue I picked up detailed the phenomenon of "she-male" prostitutes, gender-bending preoperative transsexuals.

I stared at the pathetic publication in my hand. Had I really sunk so low? I didn't react to the sexual content so much as the depressing cheesiness of it, the low-rent stench it gave off. I had always declared my allegiance to what H.G. Wells calls the "jolly coarseness" of life, but there didn't seem much that was joy here.

The staff members were all my age—attractive, hip New Yorkers, cynical, smart, and funny. Talking to them, my initial queasiness began to fade. I sud-

denly recognized my place. It was a college newspaper, an underground newspaper. My bohemia. Rejection of the hypocritical, straitlaced, middle-class prudery of my parents' generation. I could live with that.

The next week I got two job offers. One was from a trade magazine called *Floor Covering Weekly*. The other was from *Screw*. I hesitated. That was the extent of my innocence.

The world has changed. Back when I worked in smut, sexually explicit material was fairly well segregated. Those who wanted to consume it had actively to search it out. Since then, the ways in which we can access smut have multiplied staggeringly, exponentially, absurdly, but I can still feel strongly that keeping sexually explicit material contained and separate is the right thing to do.

It offends me that so many people who dislike smut are getting it shoved in their faces. This strikes me as a tad undemocratic. No pornographication without representation. It's the cultural equivalent of secondhand smoke. I think adults should be able to use tobacco, just as I am all for adults being able to access sexually explicit material if they want it. But when we get hit with secondhand smoke—or secondhand smut—without being asked, I am offended for myself, for other people, and for the children among us.