

BOOKS

[*Day of Empire: How Hyperpowers Rise to Global Dominance—And Why They Fall*, Amy Chua, Doubleday; 432 pages]

No Tolerance for Human Nature

By John Derbyshire

FOUR YEARS AGO, Amy Chua published a striking book entitled *World on Fire* in which she drew our attention to an important contradiction inherent in the globalization project. Globalization, she argued, disproportionately benefits “market-dominant minorities” like the Jewish “oligarchs” of Yeltsin’s Russia or her own relatives, the overseas Chinese of southeast Asia. Globalization is thus at odds with democratization, which favors the less entrepreneurial “sons of the soil” and excites ethnic resentments.

In *Day of Empire: How Hyperpowers Rise to Global Dominance—And Why They Fall*, Chua continues her exploration of the shifting currents of modernity. Taking for granted that the present-day U.S. is a “hyperpower,” overwhelmingly dominant in a unipolar world, she ransacks history for clues as to how such powers rise and fall and what lessons we might learn therefrom.

Her main thesis is that peoples advance to hyperpower status by practicing tolerance toward the foreigners who, either by conquest or immigration, come within their scope. Having embraced masses of foreigners in these ways, the metropolitan power needs to come up with some kind of “glue” (the author’s word) to bond them to itself—to turn subjection into allegiance. Hyperpowers of the past have had varying degrees of success in the devising and applying of this “glue.” All declined at last—became unstuck, as it were—

because the original spirit of tolerance and inclusion was lost.

This thesis is illustrated by a parade of hyperpowers: the empires of Cyrus and Alexander; Rome, of course; China’s Tang dynasty; the Mongols, the Ottomans, Mings and Moghuls; and the maritime empires of Spain, Holland, and Britain. Each, according to our author, rose to dominance by enlisting foreign expertise and tolerating foreign customs and faiths. Some developed bonding “glue”: Roman citizenship, the trans-ethnic Islam of the Ottomans, Hellenic culture. Others did not:

The Tang policy of strategic tolerance meant that the empire never tried to impose a Han Chinese identity on its non-Chinese subjects. As a result, no common political, linguistic, or cultural “glue” bound “barbarians” and Chinese together in the sprawling Tang Empire. On the contrary, even in the early eighth century [the Emperor] found himself ruling over large numbers of distinct, fiercely independent communities with no loyalty or even goodwill toward their Chinese overlords.

I must say I found something deeply unconvincing about this whole argument. Some of it struck me as just tautological. A nation becomes a hyperpower,

HER MAIN THESIS IS THAT **PEOPLES ADVANCE TO HYPERPOWER STATUS BY PRACTICING TOLERANCE TOWARD THE FOREIGNERS WHO, EITHER BY CONQUEST OR IMMIGRATION, COME WITHIN THEIR SCOPE.**

the author tells us, by tolerantly incorporating lots of other nations or peoples. As opposed to what? Well, I suppose the emerging hyperpower might just massacre its subject peoples or enslave them, and in fact most of her examples did both things, if selectively. The Mongols were notorious for their wanton massacres, while a proposal that Roman slaves should wear a distinguishing tunic was scotched on the grounds that

it might alert the enslaved to how numerous they were.

Just so at the other end of the argument. Rome fell, Amy Chua tells us, “when it let in peoples that it failed to assimilate, either because they were unassimilable or because their culture and habits exceeded the limits of Roman tolerance,” which is to say, “strategic tolerance” works, except when it doesn’t. Well, duh.

The whole enterprise also has something Procrustean about it. *Here is a region- or world-spanning hyperpower. Let’s see if I can jam it into my tolerance-glueyness-intolerance template.* Other than the fact that they interacted with a lot of foreigners, what exactly do Achaemenid Persia and the 17th-century Dutch empire have in common? Not much that I can see or that Chua could persuade me of.

Nor is the path from tolerance to intolerance persuasively described. I am sure Chua is right to say that an 18th-century Englishman in India was more likely to take an Indian wife than was his counterpart in 1920, but that was because the first was a solitary merchant adventurer far from home comforts, while the second was a salaried employee of the Crown inhabiting a bungalow in the home-from-home “civil lines” among straitlaced and vigilant superiors and marriageable memsahibs.

No real change in metropolitan attitudes was involved. If anything, the British of 1920 were more receptive to “diversity” than those of 1750. Ask a Jew or a Catholic.

I don’t think, either, that Chua pays sufficient attention to two issues that ought always be near the front of one’s mind when discussing these issues of tolerance and “diversity.” One is the matter of numbers, the other of race.

As far as numbers are concerned, the author only shows awareness of the issue when it suits her. A key word here is “unassimilable,” as in that quote above about Roman decline. Some of the peoples the Romans failed to assimilate—the author has the Hellenized East and Germanic North especially in mind—were simply unassimilable. The disjunctive “or” suggests that “their culture and habits” exceeding “the limits of Roman tolerance” was only part of the problem. What was the rest? Surely, their sheer numbers.

Much later in the book, when she gets around to prescriptions for the present-day United States, Chua lays into immigration restrictionists:

Time and again, past world-dominant powers have fallen precisely when their core groups turned intolerant, reasserting their ‘true’ or ‘pure’ identity and adopting

exclusionary policies toward ‘unassimilable’ groups. From this point of view, attempts to demonize immigrants or to attribute America’s success to ‘Anglo-Protestant’ virtues is not only misleading ... but dangerous.

Note that the word “unassimilable” has acquired quotation marks at some point in the 277 pages between Imperial Rome and George W. Bush’s America. The target in this later selection is Samuel Huntington, whose 2004 book *Who Are We?* is regarded by Chua as wrong-headedly nativistic.

But what exactly makes a group unassimilable (or “unassimilable”)? A key determinant is simply its size. No sane person would argue that a thousand or ten thousand Somalis, Mexicans, or Chinese are unassimilable in today’s America. Ten million is a different matter, a very different matter. That is Samuel Huntington’s entire point. Probably many Romans felt the same way about Goths. They were right to do so, as events proved.

And then, of course, there is the matter of race. Our author is mighty aggrieved by any program of national or racial purity. She blames the swift demise of the mid-20th-century German and Japanese hegemonies on racial exclusivism and suggests that the ethnocentric obsessions of the Chinese will prevent their rising to hyperpower status in the 21st century. Fair enough, though I think there is more to be said in both cases.

That a perfectly unqualified racial inclusiveness can be the basis for an enduring and stable society is not, however, proven. Certainly none of Chua’s historical examples proves it. All of them, of course, included individuals of many races, but here again the issue is one of numbers. To be sure, the Ottomans and the Moghuls, both of originally north Asian stock, did rule big numbers of quite different peoples. If true assimilation had occurred in either case, however, Lawrence of Arabia would have had no ethnocentric Arabs

to command, and we should presumably have been spared the grisly partition of British India and the three consequent subcontinental wars. The British and Dutch tried their best with multiracialism, but the present condition of ex-British Africa (not to mention, some might add uncharitably, ex-British Britain) and recent ructions in the Netherlands suggest less than unqualified success.

Chua would put these problems down to an absence of “glue.” But what “glue” can bond peoples who, as we are slowly coming to understand, exhibit intractable—yes, possibly unassimilable—group-statistical differences in matters of behavior and personality? Do we actually know of any such “glue”? This book offers no evidence that we do. Will American citizenship do the trick? It did with the Irish, Italians, Poles, and Jews, but that just takes us back to the matter of race, and to Rodney King’s famous question.

At the end of this book, as at the end of her previous one, Chua appeals for more openness, tolerance, and generosity of spirit. Well, yea to all that. It is hard not to conclude from the preceding chapters in *Day of Empire*, though, that settled populations with a strong sense of collective identity cannot for long practice unlimited tolerance. Nor can subject peoples for long restrain their resentment at subjection—and this is true whether their subjection is physical, imposed by imperial conquest, or merely cultural, “imposed” (as they see it) indirectly by the machinations of distant superpowers and multinational corporations.

Human nature is what it is. If we do not accept its finitude calmly, and learn to work sanely and humanely with it instead of against it, it will bring us to ruin at last, as surely as empires must fall. ■

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[*Wonderful Tonight: George Harrison, Eric Clapton, and Me, Pattie Boyd with Penny Junor, Harmony Books, 336 pages*]

All She Needs is Love

By Marian Kester Coombs

Her Majesty's a pretty nice girl
But she doesn't have a lot to say. ...
I wanna tell her that I love her a lot
But I've got to get a belly full of wine.
Her Majesty's a pretty nice girl
Some day I'm gonna make her mine...

—Paul McCartney, 1970

MEMBERS OF MY GENERATION can tell you exactly where they were the moment they first heard John F. Kennedy had been assassinated and the moment they first heard “I Want to Hold Your Hand.” The same day JFK’s motorcade came to grief in Dealey Plaza, the Beatles’ second album was released in the UK. Within weeks, it was embraced stateside as *Meet the Beatles*, and the Baby Boomers’ most enduring love affair began.

It’s hard to overstate how the shock-trauma of Kennedy’s murder affected Americans born at mid-century. No other event, not even the horrors of the Vietnam War, so deranged the course of our development. This statement is melodramatic, and so was the event: what on earth was a child raised in the calm, ordered, idealized world of the late ’50s and early ’60s supposed to make of the president of the United States suddenly blown to bits at high noon on a public street with his glamorous, pink-clad first lady at his side? Such things were not supposed to happen.

The conspiracy angle didn’t occur to us until years later. By then the damage, compounded by Boomer narcissism, exceptionalism, and sheer numerousness, had been done. And not only to us: the punk band Dead Kennedys, of the

late ’70s, said their name was “meant to call attention” to the fact that “the Kennedy assassinations torpedoed the American Dream. America growing bigger, better! Out in space! Bigger cars! Movie-star president and his gorgeous wife! Kaboom! The balance tilts.”

The Beatles had made it onto American radio earlier in 1963 and had experienced the usual frustrating fate of British acts that tried to cross the Pond. After the assassination, though, as Pattie Boyd recounts in her wistful, prettified memoir *Wonderful Tonight*, U.S. interest in the group detonated into Beatlemania, taking the Fab Four by surprise.

The Beatles were not just exceptionally talented and winsome performers but a phenomenon in the sense of a marvel or wonder: a unifying force, a soul-poultice that came along at precisely the right time with an anodyne effect upon the seared psyche of a generation. In a word, joy. To this day, the mere thought of the Beatles—like the thought of Ronald Reagan—makes me smile.

As with CIA agents, there’s no such thing as a former Beatlemaniac. So I can say without embarrassment that I knew Pattie Boyd’s story long before I opened her book. Her own phrasing (or whoever’s—only her ghostwriter knows for sure) was all that remained to check out. Those hoping for sensational new glimpses of the famous Harrison-Boyd-Clapton “love triangle” will not find them here, alas. Even so, Eric Clapton rushed out his own autobiography within a few months of his ex-wife’s. His view of the seduction is simpler and more mundane than hers: for him it was a function of his out-of-control, drug-addled persona, while for her it was a flattering battle for possession of a latter-day Helen.

Patricia Boyd seemed like a pretty nice girl, and that’s just what she was—bourgeois almost to a fault. When George Harrison fell for her at first sight on the set of “A Hard Day’s Night,” she at first refused to go out with him because she had “a steady boyfriend of two years” and “an old-fashioned view of

romance—that it meant fidelity.” As Clapton later told her in one of many importunate letters, “you are the only one I can truly rely on for strength and cheer.” In the drug-, sex- and ego-crazed world of rock’n’roll, she was a rock of a higher order, a bastion of normalcy amid the chaos, a steel English Rose. She served this purpose first for Harrison and then for Clapton, his close friend. The subtitle says it all: “My life with ...” Pattie, born in 1944, belonged to a female generation still bred to be help-meets, for better or for worse. Sex, drugs and rock’n’roll (drugs were less of a problem than The Drink, as it turned out) were not so much her jones as her cross to bear.

One doesn’t read a rock memoir for accounts of Guitar Gods ranting over not having dinner on the table on time, yet this was the quotidian reality of life with George and Eric. When the Beatles toured, wives and girlfriends were forbidden to accompany the entourage. (If only Brian Epstein had still been alive, he’d have made short work of darling Yoko’s limpet-like attachment to John—at least that is every Beatle fan’s fantasy.) And when Clapton toured, Pattie would be frozen out by the “blokes,” so she’d soon decamp. Of course, she enjoyed glamorous moments, at parties and openings and on vacation, but it’s touching to see how prim and proper and, yes, bourgeois she remained as all around her seemed to crash and burn with an intoxicating flame.

Pattie served gladly at the altar of her husbands’ creativity, an altar at which she herself worshipped, but she proved to be more than an artist’s mate. Like her counterparts Marianne Faithfull, Nico, and Anita Pallenberg (who did crash and burn), she rose to the estate of Muse, inspiring several of George’s and Eric’s best love songs. If Pattie was no Maud Gonne or Lou Andreas-Salome or Alma Schindler Mahler Gropius Werfel (of Tom Lehrer’s immortal “Which of your magical wands / Got you Gustav and Walter and Franz?”), neither were her consorts Yeats or Nietzsche or Mahler.