

Sovereignty and the Power to Build

Empire, Finance and Human Freedom

The case for productive sovereignty, accountable power and a more hopeful American future

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The drafting of the Constitution established a framework for American self-government. Historical illustration.

A nation with a purpose

Freedom becomes durable when people have the power to build.

A nation can grow richer on paper while losing the power to provide for itself. The price of a factory may rise even as its machines fall silent. A country may hold elections yet find its choices narrowed by dependence on foreign supplies, distant creditors and institutions its citizens cannot readily call to account. American renewal begins with recovering the capacity to build: useful industry, dependable energy

and the skills that turn discovery into a better living. Sovereignty acquires substance when Americans can put their decisions to work.

Susan Kokinda of Promethean Action connects these concerns through the relationship between productive development and national sovereignty. Her analysis contrasts investment that expands human capability with financial and geopolitical arrangements that sustain dependence. Control over credit, energy and trade routes can determine whether a nation builds its own productive strength or remains dependent on decisions made elsewhere. [1–4]

A productive American economic approach seeks to increase the capabilities of labor through scientific breakthroughs, technological advances and investment directed toward those ends. Tariffs belong within a larger program of technological and industrial development. National policy should enlarge what Americans can accomplish. [4]

Alexander Hamilton's 1791 Report on Manufactures connected industrial development with independence and security. A country needed the essentials of its own supply, particularly when war disrupted commerce. His reasoning still speaks to an economy dependent on vulnerable supply chains. Political independence acquires practical meaning when a people can provide essential goods, maintain infrastructure and develop the knowledge on which future production depends. [5]

We can renew the conditions that allow enterprise, invention and self-government to flourish. The work begins by recovering a distinction often blurred in public debate: an increase in the price of existing assets does not necessarily expand the productive strength of a nation. A strong republic needs finance that helps people build, public institutions that answer to citizens, and a foreign policy that leaves room for sovereign nations to prosper.

The economic geography of empire

Trade routes, credit and industrial development have always carried political consequences.



London's financial district connects capital, insurance and international trade. Editorial illustration.

British imperial history directs attention to a neglected part of strategic analysis: power follows the routes through which goods, money and influence travel. A railway can open a region to development. The terms governing its construction can also determine who enjoys that development and who remains dependent. Geography becomes political economy when access to markets is joined to control over credit, ports and transportation.

Historians Peter Cain and Antony Hopkins connect British imperial expansion with finance and social elites. Their account of gentlemanly capitalism places the City of London and the service economy within the political relationships sustaining overseas influence. [25]

The Great Game names nineteenth-century British–Russian rivalry across Central Asia, Afghanistan and the approaches to British India, pursued through diplomacy, intelligence, exploration and military action. The phrase is generally traced to East India Company officer Arthur Conolly in 1840 and was popularized by Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* in 1901; its familiar historical meaning developed later. [31–32] The 1907 Anglo-Russian settlement divided Persia into zones of influence and addressed Afghanistan and Tibet. The British government's own historical account notes that the countries concerned were not consulted. Railways, markets and strategic access were integral to the negotiations. The lesson is plain: great powers could reduce friction between themselves while limiting the choices of the people whose territory they discussed. [6]

The 1916 Sykes–Picot agreement makes the economic dimension especially visible. Its text assigned priority in enterprise and local loans, reserved positions for advisers, specified port access and regulated railway construction. These were instruments for shaping a future regional order. Subsequent settlements and local struggles also shaped the Middle East; the agreement remains a revealing record of external powers arranging economic opportunities alongside territorial authority. [7]

Applied to present-day finance and geopolitics, the Great Game is an analogy: competition over strategic access can limit national choices. This history supports a central concern about national

independence. Formal sovereignty can be narrowed by arrangements that put a nation's essential decisions elsewhere. The transition away from colonial rule does not make financial leverage, strategic alliances or elite influence disappear. It changes the institutions through which those pressures operate. The serious question is how much freedom a country retains to choose investment, develop resources and conduct diplomacy in the interests of its own people.

America should build relationships that reward productive cooperation, secure reciprocal commercial opportunities and reduce the appeal of permanent confrontation. When nations possess viable paths to development, they have more to gain from stable agreements. A foreign policy organized around functioning ports, reliable energy, useful transport and rising productive capacity can serve American interests while helping others escape dependence.

Harvard political economist Dani Rodrik argues that international economic rules should preserve room for national democratic choices. Cooperation can enable trade while allowing citizens to determine their own economic priorities. [26]

That is also a standard for judging our own conduct. The United States should defend its sovereignty while respecting the aspiration of other peoples to govern themselves. National strength earns lasting respect when it protects the freedom to build. A republic loses part of its purpose when it treats other nations chiefly as pieces to be moved.

Put finance back to work

Capital should strengthen the productive economy and the communities that sustain it.

An investment should make something possible: a new machine tool, a better power system, a more capable workforce or a scientific breakthrough. It should sustain the industrial knowledge that lets a community solve difficult problems. Finance serves those ends when it builds capability; transferring ownership, multiplying fees and loading enterprises with debt can leave that work undone.

Oren Cass of American Compass makes a closely related case. He distinguishes genuine creation of

productive assets from transactions in existing assets and argues that financialization has weakened the foundations of the American economy. The distinction reinforces the importance of physical economic capability. A ledger can record handsome gains while the workshop loses the tools and skills on which prosperity depends. [8]

Economist Michael Hudson shows how debt and property-income claims can divert earnings toward finance while squeezing labor and production across the United States and Europe. Rising asset prices can accompany a weakened productive economy. [28]

American Compass's industry work adds a second insight: manufacturing and innovation belong together. When production departs, the surrounding expertise and future investment can follow. The strategic concern reaches beyond the jobs immediately lost. It includes the ability to improve processes, train the next generation and turn discoveries into reliable products. Rebuilding industry means rebuilding a connected field of skills, suppliers and technical judgment. [9]

The 2024 energy proposals considered here linked abundant energy, domestic supply chains and manufacturing with the creative capacities of human beings. Better energy systems expand what workers and enterprises can do. The national goal should be to turn scientific and engineering advances into dependable productive capability. [20]

A development program should make patient, productive investment more attractive. Reliable and affordable energy, workable permitting, vocational excellence, capable transport and predictable rules all matter. Public support for strategic capacity should carry clear milestones and a public account of results. Private firms should compete on performance, while citizens can see whether promised plants, apprenticeships and productive equipment actually materialize.

Development economist Ha-Joon Chang finds that wealthy countries often developed through policies different from those later recommended to poorer nations. His research strengthens the case for retaining national freedom to build productive capabilities. [27]

The same standard should govern trade policy. President Trump's January 20, 2025 America First Trade Policy memorandum identifies investment, productivity, industrial and technological strength, and the interests of workers as national objectives. The question is whether policy can increase the country's capacity to produce, innovate and negotiate from strength. Tariffs can belong to that program, alongside the domestic conditions that make production possible. [10]

There is a moral dimension to this choice. Productive work gives people responsibilities, competence and a stake in the future. A community with a serious industrial purpose is a place where experience can be passed on and young people can see a reason to stay. Finance should help create that future. Its rewards should follow the value it contributes to the people and enterprises whose work sustains the nation.

Iran and the price of dependence

Resource sovereignty and secure trade belong in the same strategic conversation.

Iran's oil nationalization in 1951 and the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1953 expose the stakes of national resource control. The U.S. historical record documents American participation in the coup; the CIA's retrospective account describes its British connection. Outside powers helped determine another nation's political choices. [11–12]

Historian of modern Iran Ervand Abrahamian argues that American officials feared successful oil nationalization would threaten investments elsewhere. His examination of newly available documents emphasizes the CIA's coordination of the coup, connecting resource control with resistance to independent development. [29]

The constructive lesson is to take sovereignty seriously in diplomacy. Energy-rich societies need the ability to translate resources into lasting national capabilities. Oil revenue alone cannot guarantee productive independence. The deeper question is whether a country develops its people, infrastructure



Tankers passing through the Strait of Hormuz illustrate the dependence of energy trade on physical access. Editorial illustration.

and industrial base, and whether agreements with outside powers support that development. A policy that leaves nations dependent on recurring crisis is a poor foundation for durable peace.

The wider Middle East must be understood through this economic geography as well as its religious and political differences. Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states sit beside routes essential to global energy trade. Qatar's liquefied natural gas exports connect the region to distant consumers. Turkey links important regional markets; Israel's security and regional relationships are central diplomatic concerns. These countries possess their own interests and choices. Effective American strategy should create workable incentives for stability and productive cooperation across those differences.

The Strait of Hormuz illustrates why this matters far beyond the region. The Energy Information Administration estimates that 20 million barrels a day passed through the strait in 2024, equivalent to about one-fifth of global petroleum liquids consumption. Approximately one-fifth of global LNG trade also passed through it, principally from Qatar. This is a dated baseline, but it establishes the scale of the vulnerability. A disruption can affect transport costs, industrial planning and household budgets far from the Gulf. [13]

One strategic interpretation views pressure surrounding Iran as a challenge to a London-centered financial and geopolitical arrangement. This perspective joins Hormuz, war-risk insurance and commodity benchmarks in one strategic picture. [21]

London's financial role warrants a further distinction. The physical passage of cargo, the pricing of oil, and the underwriting of maritime risk are different layers of the same trading system. ICE's Brent benchmark and the Lloyd's insurance market are important institutional examples. Influence over terms, risk and market access can matter greatly even when an institution neither owns the oil nor commands the sea route. [14–15]

The answer is to widen national options. A serious energy strategy combines domestic productive capacity with resilient infrastructure, dependable partners and diplomacy that lowers the likelihood of interruption. America should have the strength to withstand pressure and the imagination to build agreements that make peace economically worthwhile. Secure trade and sovereign development can reinforce one another.

Make power answerable

A republic needs institutions whose authority remains connected to public consent.

The idea of an empire of influence invites us to examine the institutions between a citizen and a consequential decision. Banking, insurance, intelligence, alliances, media, universities and policy organizations each shape the environment in which governments act. The City of London is a major financial center; the monarchy carries symbolic continuity; international organizations and security partnerships exercise other forms of influence. This interpretation treats these relationships as a strategic system. The practical task is to identify the decision, the authority behind it and the means by which citizens can demand an account.

That inquiry becomes more useful when it follows actual mechanisms. IMF quotas help determine voting power and access to financing. NATO reaches decisions by consensus among member governments. These arrangements shape how national choices are made and negotiated. [22–23]

National decisions also depend on the intelligence governments receive. Sharing it across borders can strengthen security, but accountability must extend to

how shared information is gathered and used. Five Eyes, the intelligence-sharing partnership of the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, provides a concrete example. The partnership focuses especially on signals intelligence gathered from electronic communications. It grew from World War II codebreaking cooperation and the 1946 UKUSA agreement, later extended to the other partners. [24, 33–34] Such cooperation needs clear legal safeguards for citizens' rights and national decision-making authority.

The domestic parallel is the permanent administrative apparatus. When consequential policy becomes insulated from elections, citizens can feel that voting changes the officeholders while leaving the governing direction untouched. Heritage's Robert Moffit argued in 2011 for stronger congressional oversight, more transparent rulemaking and tighter legislative control over delegated authority. His argument supplies a constructive constitutional response to concerns commonly described as the deep state. [16]

The Senate's Church Committee documented the FBI's campaign against Martin Luther King Jr., including surveillance and efforts to discredit him. Its 1976 report shows why official assurances alone cannot substitute for oversight. Protecting a republic requires enforceable limits on secret power, records that can be examined and lawful avenues for exposing abuse. King's treatment is a powerful reason to insist that national-security institutions remain accountable to the constitutional order they are charged to defend. [17]

Democratic leaders who defend expansive federal authority should explain how citizens can contest its misuse. Republican leaders should be held to the commitments on which they seek power. Congress must legislate clearly and oversee seriously. Executive officials should exercise lawful authority openly enough for responsibility to be assigned. A government that asks citizens to accept responsibility should make it possible to discover who is responsible.

The information environment deserves the same discipline. Looking past the daily spectacle helps citizens see the decisions behind the headlines. Headlines about Russia, China, Iran or Israel should

lead to questions about resources, contracts, institutions and incentives. Who is defining the options? Which interests benefit from a particular course? What would a productive alternative accomplish? Citizens become harder to manipulate when they can connect political arguments to decisions and consequences. That capacity is a form of national strength.

Choose a future of human possibility

The purpose of sovereignty is to enlarge what free people can achieve.

A country needs a vision large enough to justify the effort of renewal. Human creativity belongs at the center of economic and strategic thinking. People can discover better ways to produce, organize and cooperate. A political culture that expects only scarcity and rivalry risks overlooking the very capacities that could improve its circumstances.

Nobel laureate in economics Edmund Phelps locates much innovative strength in ordinary people's willingness to experiment. His work connects dynamism with initiative, challenging work and developing one's abilities. Renewal reaches into workshops, small businesses and everyday improvements as well as national projects. [30]

John F. Kennedy's 1962 commitment to the lunar mission offers a vivid American example. The lunar mission called on science, industry, education and national resolve to accomplish something beyond the country's existing reach. It gave demanding work a shared public purpose. The continuing lesson is that leadership can invite people to develop abilities they do not yet possess. National confidence grows through achievement. [18]

Martin Luther King Jr. placed human dignity and the overcoming of poverty within a similarly demanding moral horizon. His argument connected the resources available to humanity with the will to use them for human flourishing. Kennedy's technological mission and King's moral mission emerged from distinct commitments, yet both enlarge our understanding of



Winter wheat harvest near Beach, North Dakota: productive capability begins with meeting essential needs. Photo: USDA NRCS Montana, 2012; public domain.

what a nation owes its people: opportunity to develop their gifts and a public life worthy of their dignity. [19]

Trump's America First economic agenda brings national productive capability back into contemporary political debate. Its strongest promise is the recovery of room to act: for workers to build secure lives, businesses to invest at home and elected leaders to negotiate in the national interest. The measure of that promise must be tangible. More dependable energy, deeper industrial capability and stronger communities would make national renewal something citizens experience rather than merely hear about. [10]

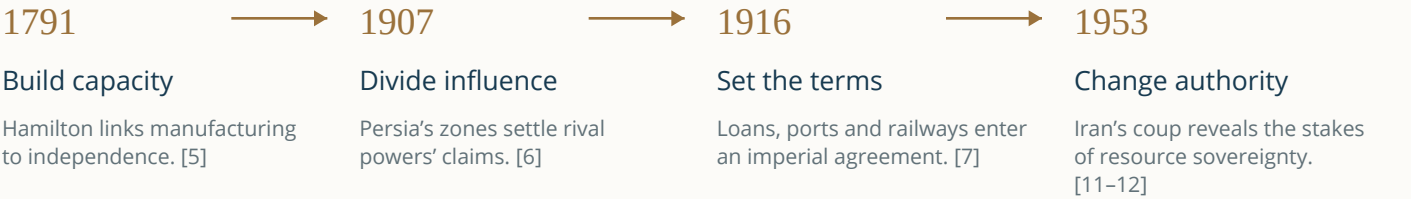
A practical program follows. Make essential infrastructure reliable enough for long-term planning. Restore the prestige and quality of technical education. Encourage capital to remain committed through the difficult years of building new capacity. Require public institutions to show their authority and account for their decisions. Pursue international agreements that reward stable production and reciprocal benefit. Each step gives people greater command over their future.

The historical struggle between power exercised over people and power developed within people remains a useful guide. The answer worthy of a free republic is to cultivate ability, reward responsibility and preserve self-government. We have the resources to undertake that work and a national tradition rich in examples of courage and invention. A brighter future becomes possible when Americans decide to build it together.

From territory to systems of influence

Three relationships that make productive sovereignty concrete

How influence moved through economic systems



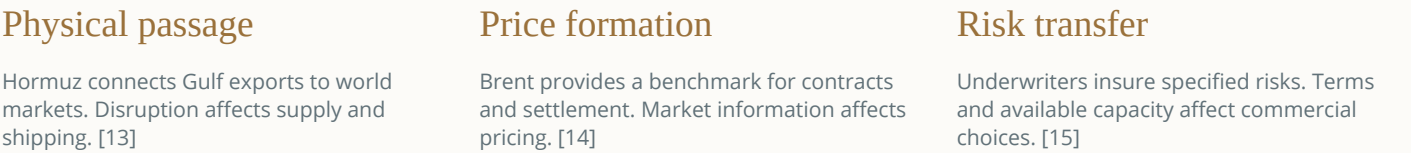
Historical progression: distinct episodes show how productive capacity and control of economic access shape national freedom.

What productive investment adds



The critical test is additional productive capability. Trading an existing asset transfers ownership; building or improving an asset expands what the economy can do. Conceptual illustration of the distinction discussed by Cass. [8]

Three layers of energy dependence



These layers interact through trade costs and access. They are separate mechanisms, with different institutions and decision makers.

Sources and further reading

Intellectual sources, analysis and historical records

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