

HOW THE UNITED STATES BECAME THE LEADING SUPERPOWER

It is a known fact, the United-States are the leading military superpower. It is interesting to wonder how this former British colony at the other side of the world managed to become the undoubtable leader of the world in only a few decades. Of course their supremacy is also built on violence. We are going to identify the factors that make them today the number 1 military superpower and go back in time to understand how these factors came into action.

1. Current elements of the American military superpower

A first glance is enough to already spot several elements: the United-States are powerful because their defence budget is by far the most important in the world.

Having been the first to obtain the nuclear bomb and their actual atomic arsenal – the most developed one along with Russia's – turned the country into a strategic security actor decades ago. Their seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, grants them a special place in international affairs.

They also have hundreds of military installations all over the globe, thanks to their overseas territories (Hawaii or Guam in the Pacific) or to all the bases implemented directly in foreign countries (Afghanistan, Japan, United-Kingdom...).

Military Budget 2015	Number of soldiers (reservists included)	Number of nuclear warheads in 2016
US\$ 536 billion	2 500 000	7000

In short, here are the main factors to remember to explain the current military supremacy of the United-States:

- A colossal defence budget
- Millions of soldiers
- A technological advance
- The nuclear bomb and nuclear arsenal
- A seat at the Security Council
- Military bases across the world

Obviously, the United-States have not become such a superpower instantaneously. Each one of these elements mentioned is the product of decades of economic, technological, territorial or even demographical evolutions. The United-States managed to exploit their inherent advantages and at the same time turn external situations to their profit.

2. The economic asset

The United-States possess several economic and financial assets that allow them to use immense budgets for their defence. Their 2016 budget states that the country can count on a GDP of US\$ 16.5 trillion.

The government will receive a revenue of US\$ 3,335 trillion that go up to reach US\$ 4,572 trillion in 2021. The government will always spend more than its revenues but will decrease progressively the gap over the fiscal years. The US defence budget almost reaches today US\$ 540 billion and should decrease over the next few years without going under the limit of US\$ 500 billion. This represents an average of 15% of the total budget.

The official website of the US government goes back to the 1960s. A quick look is enough to see that for the last 50 years, the United-States have spent without counting for their defence.

In comparison, the French 2015 budget has been of €300 billion with €40 billion going to the defence, which represents 7.5% of the total budget, being in a state of emergency.

The United-States also have other assets. They managed to make the US dollar the most important currency of the world.

The history of the dollar is actually quite interesting. It is only a century-old currency (it has been first printed in 1914). It replaced the many other currencies that were circulating in the country at that time and were affecting the chaotic financial system. The date of 1914 is obviously not random. At that time, the financial point of reference was gold or the pound sterling.

With the First World War that destroyed Europe, however, the superpowers of the old continent spent their gold reserves to their safest ally: the United-States.

The same scheme happened during World War Two, making the United-States the country with the most important gold reserves in the world.

The United-States used another opportunity during the Bretton-Woods Agreements. These agreements created a new financial order to emphasize on international exchange to limit isolationism, and created what we know today as the IMF and the World Bank. They also wanted to create a new currency, the *bancor*, to use during international financial imbalances. But the US dollar became the only currency that could follow the course of gold.

All the other currencies then took the dollar as a point of reference. Today, there are new challengers such as the euro and the yuan, but the dollar remains the absolute currency that influences the world economy and finance.

3. The geographical asset

At the beginning, the United-States were small scattered colonies. 240 years later, they are among the biggest countries of the world. They are 3rd behind Russia and Canada in size. Their geographical characteristics explain some of the undeniable assets of the United-States. The country has two very important coasts : one on the Atlantic Ocean – that opens paths to the rest of America, to Europe and Africa – and one on the Pacific Ocean – that leads to the other side of America, Asia and Oceania.

This territorial immensity explains why the US population is also 3rd in terms of size. Obviously, the bigger the population the bigger the budget revenues. Moreover, the United-States tend have always dedicated an important share of the budget to war.

Some historians think that the 1898 war against Spain is the trigger moment that started the rise of the United-States to supremacy. This war opposed the United-States against Spain that had Cuba, which wanted independence. The United-States won the war and, more importantly, obtained new territories: Puerto Rico (Latin America), Guam (Pacific) and, the most interesting one, the Philippines. At that time, the United-States tended to focus on their inner territory and they suddenly gained new foreign territories. Worse: the country exited its non-intervention policy to help a tiers party in its independence.

The United-States could not then stay unchanged after this conflict. With territories literally at the other end of the world, opportunities open and create a precedent in their long future history of external interventions.

It is worth noting a last geostrategic asset: the United-States did not have to face another superpower on the American continent.

Even though the situation has changed today with the rise of emerging countries such as Brazil, the United-States have had the chance to not have any close rival that could have undermined their development.

4. The industrial and technological assets

There is another important point: the United-States were born with good basics. The newly independent colons could use the British know-how to conquest the American continent and develop. The railroads and the telegraph greatly helped the country in its territorial expansion.

The Occidental countries of that time were a real hub for great inventors. The United-States managed, just like other European countries, to attract the brightest minds into their country and to enter the industrial competition. Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla – from Croatia – are two examples.

This wide country was only awaiting industrial development and the United-States did not - and still do not - hesitate to find the necessary labour force where it was.

The Civil War is a good example. It is considered the first modern industrial war or the last Napoleonic conflict. It would be both of them. All the technologies of that time were used and new ones created, by Americans or, if necessary, by foreigners. We know the famous Colt and Remington revolvers.

The Confederates also used a revolver invented by a French inventor living in the United States, LeMat. The telegraph and the railroads were indispensable. New inventions were created for the war: the first modern submarines, battleships, tests on new weapons...

We must add to all of this the famous American dream. In 1835, French author Alexis de Tocqueville was already praising this vivid country in *On Democracy in America*. During the 1830s, about 600,000 immigrants arrived in the country.

Later on in the 1840s, Europe was devastated by several massive famines and insecurity. The « promised land » that the United States represented attracted three times more immigrants. The discovery of gold in the 1850s interested almost 2,600,000 additional newcomers that were looking for a better future.

The immigration would remain the same until a peak in the 1880s with 5,250,000 new arrivals. Europe would know new torments that would make millions of people move away. Ellis Island, the compulsory entry point for immigrants in New York, will welcome 16 million people.

5. The turmoil of the First World War

It is necessary to focus a little more on the impact of the First World War on the current supremacy of the United States. Before this war, Europe was leading the world. The British Empire and France were the two main powers. Gold or the pound sterling were the points of reference of the financial system. Great inventors made Europe the most developed continent in the world.

Everything changed when the war started. The United States had at first a strict policy of non-intervention. They would rather focus on their internal affairs. But they detected an opportunity: intervening to help allied nations could be very productive. German attacks against American ships definitively convinced the government to enter the war.

Even better: President Woodrow Wilson stated that the country should be a model for other nations, the « light that would shine bright in obscurity ».

Thanks to the American assistance, the United Kingdom and France were victorious. But they were completely destroyed, their gold reserves empty. There was a huge gap in their demography, and all the people that could – including the great minds that made modern Europe – had fled from the old continent.

In parallel, the United States were richer and welcomed as true saviours in Europe. They had almost all the gold reserves and, as such, became the financial point of reference. Thanks to their intervention, they now had a military foot on European soil. Their population (in country) also had suffered little damage.

Woodrow Wilson's ideological turnabout had placed the United States in a brand new position of agent of the world. The conclusion was clear: the United States had become international leaders.

Conclusion

Several elements explain the current military supremacy of the United-States. There are logical reasons: the immensity of their territory, their population, their budget and immigration.

But, the United-States have also known how to seize opportunities. The First World War seems to be the main trigger moment where the country managed to use their 19th century assets to gain more power.

The country even became the financial and economic reference. It also developed a new ideology that would definitively end with its isolationism.

All these elements would put the United-States in the 1st place on the international scene, to the point they guaranteed it a seat at the UN Security Council.

With challengers such as Russia and China, the United-States' economy and ideology would shape the 20th century.

To this day, the United-States remain the sole hegemony on a military aspect. However, other countries, with the evolving economical and political alliances, emerge and increase their influence on the international balance.

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