

# Opinion: Sun always shines on Calif. Empire

By Joe Mathews

The sun has set on the British Empire. Its successor, America, is showing signs of decline. But one empire still has plenty of battery life: California.

This is true even in the capital of the old empire. When I visited London earlier this month, the newspapers were full of stories about the United Kingdom voting to leave the European Union in a June referendum. But what caught my eye as I walked and took public transportation around London were the garrisons of the Golden State.



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“London Has Fallen,” a dumb new Hollywood thriller, might as well have been the city’s new slogan, given the ubiquity of its advertising. Within blocks of where I was staying, I encountered two Hollywood production studios and testing space for films and TV that would play overseas. And on the telly, our TV shows—“The Muppets,” “Last Man on Earth,” “American Horror Story”—were everywhere.

When I wanted a bite, I stopped at Tortilla, which served me “real California burritos” as I scrolled through my iPhone. And for most of one day, I wandered around Silicon Roundabout, a cluster of technology companies in Central and East London.

British Airways had blanketed Underground stations with ads for its new direct flights to San Jose.

An old friend took me around the perimeter of the property near King's Cross where Google has planned to build its giant new U.K. headquarters. He also recounted the drama involving proud British architects prostrating themselves before the men from Mountain View to earn this commission.

The building of such a bold public monument to United Googledom would be a reminder that the California Empire is something different than the timid American Empire, which the British historian Niall Ferguson described in one book as "an empire in denial" because it "lacks the drive to export its capital, its people and its culture to those backward regions which need them most urgently."

The California Empire is thus more like the British one, unapologetic in its conviction that it represents a better way of thinking. The cult of California technical "disruption" bespeaks a confidence that we can do your work better than you can, no matter how long or expertly you have been doing it.

Hollywood has prospered by making big, nasty pictures designed to obliterate the senses of people around the world. Californians are busy colonizing the world with inventions in social media, food, bioscience, and energy. While the American government is withdrawing from space travel, Hawthorne-based Space X is leading a renewed global push for cheaper space exploration.

One could argue that California-based tech executives have assumed some of the "leader of the free world" space once occupied by American politicians. While the lame-duck Illinois president leads from behind, Golden State CEOs—most notably Apple's Tim Cook—practice foreign diplomacy and wage cyber-war against everyone from American intelligence agencies to European regulators to censors and hackers in the employ of

the Peoples Liberation Army. Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg made a point of learning Mandarin, as successful would-be colonizers do.

California will never amass all the colonies and protectorates that the British did. But our reach is greater. At its height, the British Empire held sway over only one-fifth of the world's people, while California firms have convinced more than half the people on earth to carry phones that allows us to track their movements, choices, and behaviors. California's virtual empire controls the hearts and minds of more people than any previous empire in history.

Both empires have been delivered big blows by Washington. In the British case, it was George Washington, and the revolution he led, that robbed it of a crucial piece of the empire. In California, it is Washington, D.C.—and its gridlock on energy and immigration policies, not to mention the intrusive surveillance of its intelligence agencies—that have slowed the state's progress and threaten the credibility of Silicon Valley around the world. European continentals whose ancestors once warred with the British now fight the California empire with European commissions and anti-trust regulations.

The California empire, like when Elizabeth I authorized British raids against Spanish shipping, is not above piracy. And the California empire is finding it difficult to relate to the former jewel of the older empire: India. Recently, the Silicon Valley investor Marc Andreessen, angry at a decision by India's telecommunications regulatory board that went against Facebook, recently started a firestorm by tweeting that India was better off as a colony.

There are many books offering many reasons why the British lost their empire: arrogance, overreach, wars, doubts about the wisdom of colonization. It remains to be seen if California's empire can learn from those mistakes, or whether its days too are numbered, on account of its hubris.

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