Episode Book

EPISODE #5498

Who Was a Superpower Before America?

PUBLISHED	23 September 2026 at 23:18 UTC
DURATION	23:49
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/history-of-superpowers/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.2
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:36 UTC

SYNOPSIS

The word "superpower" was coined in 1944 by William T.R. Fox to describe exactly three countries: the United States, the Soviet Union, and Britain. So what happens when you try to apply it to Akkad, Assyria, Persia, and Rome? This episode works through a listener's request for a chronological list of superpowers from the oldest recorded history to today — and runs straight into a definitional problem that no two sources agree on. There is no single canonical list, the criteria shift between the ancient, medieval, and modern periods, and the anachronism runs in both directions.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

There's a thing that happens when you learn a word late. You start hearing it everywhere, and you assume it was always there. Gravity. Democracy. Inflation. Words that feel like they were carved into the world before anyone showed up to name them.



Herman

And then you find out somebody sat down at a desk and made it up.



Corn

Somebody sat down at a desk and made this one up in nineteen forty-four. Which is the problem at the heart of what Daniel sent us this week.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

Here's the shape of it. Daniel points out that right now, the global superpower is the United States, and has been for a while. But that hasn't always been true. At various points, some country, some empire, some entity that wasn't even a state yet, has held that spot. So he wants a chronological list. From the oldest point in recorded history through to today. Recognized superpowers, in order.



Herman

And he's generous with the definition.



Corn

He is. He calls it a broad juristic definition. A superpower, for his purposes, is a country or a territory or a pre-state entity with disproportionate influence over global affairs and the course of history. Broadly analogous to the role the US plays today. That's his phrase.



Herman

"Broadly analogous.



Corn

It's doing all the work. And then he asks the follow-ups. What actually defines a superpower, and how far back does that definition stretch before it breaks? Which empires held disproportionate influence at each major period? How has the nature of the thing changed from ancient empires to the modern United States? And the one I think is the real question: is America the first truly global superpower, or did earlier powers play a comparable role?



Herman

Four questions and a definition that swallows the whole thing.



Corn

So before we can list them, we have to admit the word itself is a problem.



Herman

The word is a problem. It's not a timeless category. It was coined in nineteen forty-four by a man named William T.R. Fox, in a book called The Superpowers: The United States, Britain and the Soviet Union. He was building on lectures Nicholas Spykman gave the year before. And Fox named exactly three.



Corn

Which three?



Herman

The United States, the Soviet Union, and Britain. That's the original roster. Three. And the word was invented to describe those three, in that moment, at the end of the Second World War.



Corn

So the word is younger than the atomic bomb.



Herman

Slightly older than the end of the war, younger than the bomb. And here's the trap. Britannica's definition is a state that possesses military or economic might, or both, and general influence vastly superior to that of other states. Fine. But Britannica also admits the thing that sinks the whole exercise, which is that scholars generally agree on which state is the foremost power of an era, and then often disagree on the criteria that distinguish a superpower from other major powers.



Corn

So they agree on the answer and disagree on the test.



Herman

Every time. And the anachronism runs both directions. Wikipedia's own article on superpowers notes that the term gets applied retrospectively to preeminent ancient empires. There's a Channel 5 documentary literally titled Rome: The World's First Superpower. The New Cambridge Medieval History refers to Sasanian Persia as "the other superpower." Those are modern authors reaching backward with a nineteen-forties word.



Corn

What do the medievalists say about that?



Herman

They push back. The medieval great powers list carries an explicit warning. The term "great power" has only been used in historiography and political science since the Congress of Vienna in eighteen fifteen. And then the line that matters: in historiography of the pre-modern period, it is more typical to talk of empires.



Corn

Empires. Not powers.



Herman

There's a useful distinction from a legal scholar named Gerry Simpson. He separates "Great Powers" with capital letters, which is an elite legal club with formal rights and a seat at the table, from "great powers" lowercase, which is just empires whose might defines an era. The first one is a membership category. The second one is a description of gravity.



Corn

And Daniel's definition is the second kind.



Herman

Entirely the second kind. He's not asking who had a seat at the treaty table. He's asking who bent the world around them.



Corn

Which is the harder question, because gravity doesn't leave a paper trail.



Herman

Right. And the first thing you find when you go looking for the list is that there isn't one.



Corn

There isn't one?



Herman

There is no single canonical chronological list of superpowers. I looked. Wikipedia has three separate lists. Ancient great powers, medieval great powers, modern great powers. Three lists, three different sets of criteria, and they don't join up cleanly at the seams. And then there's the National Interest's list of seven, which is deliberately unranked and puts Canada at number one.



Corn

Canada.



Herman

Canada. It's a Heritage Foundation branding exercise, not a historical claim. So the honest position is that we're going to build this list ourselves, out of three lists that don't agree with each other, using a word that didn't exist for most of the period we're covering.



Corn

Great. Let's do it badly and honestly.



Herman

Let's start at the beginning, because the beginning is spectacular.



Corn

Akkad.



Herman

The Akkadian Empire, roughly twenty-three fifty to twenty-one fifty BC. And it's often described as the first empire in world history. Sargon of Akkad comes down out of the north, takes Sumer, and holds it. That's the first time anyone stitches multiple cities under one crown and keeps them there.



Corn

What made it hold?



Herman

Administration, mostly. A standing army, appointed governors, a taxation system, and Akkadian as an administrative language across a patchwork of peoples. The innovation isn't the conquest. Conquest is old. The innovation is the keeping.



Corn

The keeping is always the hard part.



Herman

Always. Then Egypt's New Kingdom, fifteen seventy to ten seventy BC. The Hittites at their fourteenth-century peak. And then the Neo-Assyrian Empire, nine thirty-four to six oh nine BC, which at its height dominates from the Caucasus to Nubia, Egypt and Arabia.



Corn

That's not a country. That's a time zone.



Herman

It's most of the known world from where they were standing. And the Assyrians are the ones who perfect the machinery of empire as a permanent institution. Deportation of populations, provincial administration, a standing army that doesn't disband between campaigns. When Assyria falls in six twelve BC, Babylonia takes the top spot almost immediately.



Corn

And then Persia.



Herman

The Achaemenids, five fifty to three thirty BC. Territorially the largest empire of antiquity. At its height around five hundred BC, roughly five and a half million square kilometers.



Corn

Five and a half million.



Herman

From the Aegean to the Indus. And here's the thing that makes the Achaemenids interesting for Daniel's question. They're the first power that has to solve the problem of governing people who will never see the king, never speak his language, and never share his gods. And they solve it with tolerance, essentially. You keep your religion, you keep your local customs, you pay your tribute, and you don't revolt.



Corn

That sounds familiar.



Herman

It should. Every empire after them either copies that or spends a century reinventing it badly.



Corn

So the ancient sequence runs Akkad, Egypt, the Hittites, Assyria, Babylon, Persia. Where does Rome come in?



Herman

Rome comes in after the Hellenistic period and runs a very long time. But I want to flag something before we get to Rome, which is how much the criteria shift between the lists.



Corn

Shift how?



Herman

The ancient list is about territorial extent and the ability to project force across a region. The medieval list is about something different. It's about duration and cultural reach. China appears throughout. The Byzantine Empire from five hundred to ten fifty. The Caliphates from six fifty to eight fifty. The Carolingian Empire, seven fifty-one to eight forty-three. The Vikings, eight hundred to ten fifty. The Mongol Empire, twelve fifty to fourteen fifty. Mali at thirteen hundred and again at fourteen fifty. The Mamluks, twelve fifty to fifteen seventeen. The Holy Roman Empire, nine fifty to twelve hundred. Venice and Genoa from eleven hundred. The Inca at fifteen hundred. The Grand Duchy of Moscow at fifteen hundred.



Corn

The Vikings are on the list.



Herman

Which tells you the criterion has quietly changed from "holds territory" to "changes the world whether or not it holds anything."



Corn

The Vikings held very little and changed everything.



Herman

They reached four continents before Columbus was born. They founded Dublin and Kiev. They traded down the Volga into Baghdad. If the test is disproportionate influence on the course of history, the Vikings pass it easily. They just don't pass it the way Assyria passed it.



Corn

So the list is measuring different things at different points and pretending it isn't.



Herman

That's the whole problem in one sentence. And then the modern list changes the criteria again.



Corn

How?



Herman

The modern list is about global reach and economic integration. Portugal, fourteen fifteen to eighteen twenty-two, described as the first empire to have territory on all continents. Spain, fourteen sixty-nine to eighteen nineteen, the foremost global power of the sixteenth century. The Ottoman Empire, fourteen fifty-three to eighteen seventy-five, the universal empire. Mughal India, fifteen twenty-six to eighteen eighteen, at roughly twenty-five percent of world industrial output. Qing China, sixteen eighty-three to nineteen twelve, at roughly thirty percent of world GDP in eighteen twenty.



Corn

Thirty percent of world GDP.



Herman

In eighteen twenty. And then the Netherlands, sixteen forty-eight to seventeen ninety-five. France. Britain. Russia.



Corn

Britain is the one everybody thinks of.



Herman

Britain is the one that earns the word. After eighteen fifteen, the British Empire holds sway over twenty-five percent of the world's population and twenty-four percent of the Earth's land area. And the pound sterling is the main reserve currency from eighteen fifteen to nineteen twenty.



Corn

A century of the pound.



Herman

A century. That's the Pax Britannica. And that's the point where the modern definition of superpower actually starts to fit, because Britain has the navy, the finance, the industry, and the currency all at once.



Corn

And then it ends.



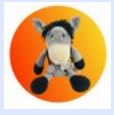
Herman

It ends, and the ending has a date. Nineteen fifty-six. Suez.



Corn

The Suez Crisis.



Herman

The moment Britain and France intervene in Egypt and the United States forces them to stop. That's the end of Britain as a superpower in any meaningful sense. Not a treaty, not a defeat. Just the discovery that you can be told to stop and you have to.



Corn

That's a brutal way to find out.



Herman

It's the cleanest example in history of a status ending in a single week. Then the Cold War gives you the two superpowers the word was invented for. The United States and the Soviet Union. And then nineteen ninety-one happens, and there's one.



Corn

And that's when the new word shows up.



Herman

That's when the new word shows up. Hyperpower. Popularized by the French foreign minister Hubert Védrine in the late nineteen nineties. The point of the word is that "superpower" no longer covered it. When you have to invent a bigger word, you're admitting the thing you're describing is qualitatively different from the last one.



Corn

So the chronology is done. And I want to go back to something you said earlier, because I think it's the hinge of the whole episode.



Herman

The regional versus global thing.



Corn

Because it decides half the list.



Herman

It decides almost all of it. James Jay Carafano, who wrote the National Interest list, argues that Rome pretty much invented global reach. And his list is explicitly limited to powers that competed on the world stage. That criterion rules out Egypt. It rules out Song China. It rules out the Maya, the Inca, the Iroquois.



Corn

On what grounds?



Herman

On the grounds that they were regional. They dominated their neighborhood and never projected beyond it. And Carafano is honest about the cost of that choice, because he also says trying to compare power across time and world makes no sense, so presenting a ranked roster of all-time all-stars is ultimately arbitrary.



Corn

He wrote the list and then told you the list is arbitrary.



Herman

He did. Which I respect enormously.



Corn

But here's my problem with the regional criterion. If the test is relative dominance within your known world, Egypt's New Kingdom wins.



Herman

Say more.



Corn

Rome at its greatest extent holds roughly sixty million people. About a quarter of world population. That's the National Interest's own number. Egypt's New Kingdom, Song China, the Inca, they dominate their known universe more completely than Rome dominates the Mediterranean. Rome shares its world with Parthia, with Han China, with Aksum. Egypt's New Kingdom doesn't share its world with anybody of comparable weight.



Herman

That's the strongest version of the counter-argument, and I think it's right. If you measure by share of the world you can see, several regional powers outrank Rome. If you measure by share of the actual globe, Rome is a Mediterranean power with a very long shadow.



Corn

So the answer depends entirely on whether "global" means the planet or the map in your head.



Herman

And that's not a technicality. That's the whole question.



Corn

Which brings us to the one Daniel actually asked. Is the United States the first truly global superpower, or did earlier powers play a comparable role?



Herman

There's a real case that Spain and Portugal get there first. The Age of Discovery in the late fifteenth century is described as an early form of globalization, connecting previously isolated parts of the world for the first time. Portugal is the first empire with territory on all continents. Spain is the foremost global power of the sixteenth century.



Corn

So the Iberians are the first with intercontinental reach.



Herman

Intercontinental reach, yes. But Britain is the first to combine global reach with industrial primacy. That's the combination nobody had before. You can have a global empire, or you can be the workshop of the world, but Britain is the first to be both at once.



Corn

And the US?



Herman

The US is the first with simultaneous military, economic, and cultural reach across every region at the same time. Not most regions. Every region. There's no ocean the US Navy doesn't operate in, no currency that clears trade the way the dollar does, no cultural output that travels the way American cultural output travels. Spain had two continents. Britain had a quarter of the map. The US has the whole board.



Corn

Which is why the word broke.



Herman

Which is why the word broke and Védrine had to build a new one.



Corn

And there's a nice piece of evidence that Rome wasn't in the same category, which is that Rome's hegemony has actually been dated.



Herman

It has. There's a paper from the last few years called "Rome as a Hegemon" that dates Roman hegemony to three hundred four BC through four hundred ten AD. Calls it one of the longest in history.



Corn

Seven hundred years.



Herman

Seven hundred years, and Mediterranean-scoped. That's the honest description. Enormous, durable, and regional.



Corn

So the US is the first truly global one.



Herman

It always is. And this is where the episode stops being history and starts being a live argument.



Corn

Lay it out.



Herman

On one side, Arthur Herman in the Wall Street Journal in January of this year, with a piece titled "America Is the Sole Superpower Again." And Andrzej Demczuk in Historia i Polityka last November, arguing that multipolarity is an illusion and the US remains the global superpower.



Corn

Two academics, same conclusion.



Herman

Same conclusion, different evidence. And then the counter-view, which is older than people think. Samuel Huntington in nineteen ninety-nine called the world a strange hybrid. His phrase was a uni-multipolar system with one superpower and several major powers. And he warned that Washington must relearn the game of international politics as a major power, not a superpower.



Corn

That was twenty-seven years ago.



Herman

Twenty-seven years ago. Huntington was already predicting the adjustment.



Corn

And China?



Herman

Contested,. Marco Rubio called China a superpower at his confirmation hearing. Trump has called China a superpower. And then the skeptics. Jo Inge Bekkevold in Foreign Policy, Frank Dikötter at Hoover, both arguing it isn't one. Not yet, or not in the way the word means.



Corn

What's the skeptics' argument?



Herman

That China has economic weight and regional military reach but not the alliance structure, not the currency, not the cultural pull. That a superpower has to be able to make other countries do things they wouldn't otherwise do, and China can buy influence but can't yet command it.



Corn

And the polling says something different from the analysis.



Herman

The polling says something very different. Gallup International ran a survey across thirty-seven countries. The US and China came out tied as superpowers. And forty-one percent expected Russia to be a superpower by twenty thirty.



Corn

Russia.



Herman

Russia. Which is a striking number when you look at the Russian self-image data. A Levada poll in twenty nineteen found seventy-five percent of Russians believed Russia was a superpower. In two thousand five, that number was thirty percent.



Corn

So Russian belief in Russian superpower status went from thirty to seventy-five percent in fourteen years.



Herman

While the objective indicators moved the other way. Which tells you that superpower status has a psychological component that doesn't track the balance sheet.



Corn

That's the most interesting thing you've said all episode.



Herman

It's the most interesting thing in the data. Because it means the list we've been building isn't just a list of capabilities. It's partly a list of who believed what about whom.



Corn

And then there's BRICS.



Herman

The eighteenth summit was in New Delhi, September twelfth and thirteenth of this year. Xi Jinping's first visit to India in seven years. The bloc is now eleven members, representing roughly forty-nine percent of world population and forty percent of global GDP.



Corn

Forty-nine percent of the people on Earth.



Herman

Forty-nine percent of the people on Earth, in a club that exists partly to argue that the current arrangement is wrong. Zhou Bo, a retired PLA officer, said at the summit that a lot of other countries may say China is now a global superpower. And Alejandro Reyes from the University of Hong Kong said the BRICS bring together countries that disagree with one another but share an interest in having greater room for maneuver internationally. His phrase was that it bespeaks the idea of multipolarity as agency.



Corn

Multipolarity as agency. That's a good phrase.



Herman

It's a good phrase for a thing that may or may not be happening. And that's where I'd leave the analysis. The 2026 answer to Daniel's last question is that the US is still the sole superpower by capability, and increasingly contested by perception.



Corn

Capability says one thing, belief says another.



Herman

And the gap between them is where the next decade lives.



Corn

Which is a good place to stop, except we have one more voice in the building.



Hilbert

Twenty-two pounds.



Corn

Sorry?



Hilbert

The atlas. Twenty-two pounds, that's what it weighed. It was a Philips Imperial Atlas, nineteen oh two, and it lived on a trolley at the back of the map library because you couldn't lift it off the shelf.



Herman

You catalogued it.



Hilbert

I catalogued the whole collection. Night shift, small university, donated by a family that didn't want it. Nineteenth-century British imperial atlases, the kind where whole continents are shaded pink and the legend just says "British Possessions." I spent four months with those books.



Corn

Four months of pink continents.



Hilbert

And the thing that got to me wasn't the size of it. It was the shading. A map is supposed to tell you where something is. Those maps told you who it belonged to, and the answer was always the same color.



Herman

The shading was an argument.



Hilbert

The shading was the argument. The geography was just the paper it was printed on. And I'd say the same about the list you two just built. The act of listing is a claim about what counts. You didn't find that list. You made it.



Corn

That's fair.



Hilbert

There was one volume. The India volume. Somebody had gone through it with a pencil, in a hand that looked contemporary to the printing, and crossed out "British" in the margin notes and written "disputed" next to about a dozen territories.



Herman

Who would have done that?



Hilbert

No idea. It wasn't a librarian's hand. It wasn't a student's. It was somebody who cared enough to bring a pencil to a reference book, which you weren't supposed to do.



Corn

Did you ever find out?



Hilbert

No.



Corn

And the library still has it?



Hilbert

I have a delivery coming that needs a signature and the window shuts at four.



Herman

So the penciled corrections. You never traced them.



Hilbert

Never traced them. Somebody sat in a reading room in, I'd guess, the nineteen hundreds, arguing with an atlas in the margins, and then closed it and went home. That's the whole story.



Corn

Alright. Then I'll take the point you left us. If the word "superpower" was invented in nineteen forty-four to describe exactly three states, and we've spent the last twenty minutes applying it to Akkad and the Mongols, then the list isn't a discovery. It's a preference.



Herman

It's a preference with footnotes.



Corn

And the footnotes are getting contested in real time. The Gallup poll has the US and China tied. The BRICS summit just happened. The next entry on the list may already be in dispute, or the list may be the wrong shape entirely.



Herman

Carafano's line is the one I keep coming back to. Presenting a ranked roster of all-time all-stars is ultimately arbitrary. He wrote the roster and then said that.



Corn

Which is the most honest thing anyone in this episode has said.



Herman

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing, and for the atlas.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want to send us something, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.