

Jay-Z vs the Game: Lessons for the American Primacy Debate

By [Marc Lynch](#) ■ Monday, July 13, 2009



Late last week, the Los Angeles rapper the Game **launched a blistering attack** against the legendary New York rapper ~~blogger~~ rapper :-> Jay-Z. Over the weekend, he released "**I'm So Wavy [Too Hardcore to be a Jay-Z]**" an inconsistent but catchy attack on Jay-Z (note: all links are to songs which are almost certainly NSFW and which you might find offensive; you've been warned). When I started feeding **this stuff** to my friend **Spencer Ackerman** last week, his first take was that "the countdown to the end of the Game's career starts today." Mine, me being a professor of international relations, was to start thinking about how this could be turned into a story about the nature of hegemony and the debate over the exercise of American power. (That, and how I could waste time that I should be spending on real work.)

See, Jay-Z (Shawn Carter) is the closest thing to a hegemon which the rap world has known for a long time. He's **#1 on the Forbes list** of the top earning rappers. He has an unimpeachable reputation, both artistic and commercial, and has produced some of the all-time best (and best-

selling) hip hop albums including standouts Reasonable Doubt, The Blueprint and the Black Album. He spent several successful years as the CEO of Def Jam Records before buying out his contract a few months ago to release his new album on his own label. And he's got Beyonce. Nobody, but nobody, in the hip hop world has his combination of hard power and soft power. If there be hegemony, then this is it. Heck, when he tried to retire after the Black Album, he found himself dragged back into the game (shades of America's inward turn during the Clinton years?).

But the limits on his ability to *use* this power recalls the debates about U.S. primacy. Should he use this power to its fullest extent, as neo-conservatives would advise, imposing his will to reshape the world, forcing others to adapt to his values and leadership? Or should he fear a backlash against the unilateral use of power, as **realists such as my colleague Steve Walt** or liberals such as John Ikenberry would warn, and instead exercise self-restraint?

The changes in Jay-Z's approach over the years suggest that he recognizes the realist and liberal logic... but is sorely tempted by the neo-conservative impulse. Back when he was younger, Jay-Z was a merciless, ruthless killer in the "beefs" which define hip hop politics. He never would have gotten to the top without that. But since then he's changed his style and has instead largely chosen to stand above the fray. As Jay-Z got older and more powerful, the marginal benefits of such battles declined and the costs increased even as the number of would-be rivals escalated. Just as the U.S. attracts resentment and rhetorical anti-Americanism simply by virtue of being on top, so did Jay-Z attract a disproportionate number of attackers. "I got beefs with like a hundred children" he bragged/complained on one track.

His ability to respond actually declined as his power and enemies list grew, though. As **a young 50 Cent spat at him** (twisting one of Jay's own famous lines), "if I shoot you I'm famous, if you shoot me you're brainless." He's generally avoided getting embroiled in beefs since reaching the top, only occasionally and briefly hitting back at provocations from rising contenders like 50 Cent, Lil Wayne, and others. Responding to every challenge does not become a hegemon. Indeed, it would be counter-productive and exhausting, and would likely trigger even greater resentment among other rising rappers. Better as hegemon to rise above the fray and accept the sniping of the less powerful while reaping the rewards of a status quo which he dominates and profits from excessively. And that's what happened: his wealth, status, and structural power rose inexorably despite the potshots and abuse and unmet challenges -- indeed, the only real hit he's taken was self-inflicted, the critical shrug given to the middling "Kingdom Come" album.

When he learnt this lesson might also offer insights into how great powers in IR learn. He changed his style after his most famous beef, and the only one which he lost: his battle with the Queensbridge legend Nas. The reasons for his loss are instructive. Jay-Z launched what Nas **later described as a "sneak attack"** at a time when the latter's mother was ailing. Why? Because Nas was at the time recognized widely as the king of NYC rap, and Jay-Z (the rising power) saw that only by knocking off the king could he seize the crown for himself. A few brief skirmishes -- a Jay-Z freestyle mentioning Nas, the **first "Stillmatic" response** from Nas -- then led to the full blast of **"The Takeover"**. Rather than fold, Nas hit back with the instant legend **"Ether"**. It went back and forth, and then, crucially, Jay-Z misplayed his hand. In **"Super Ugly"**, about 2 minutes in to a pretty good track, he escalated to a crude personal revelation about his sexual exploits with the mother of Nas's child -- prompting Jay's mother to call in to a radio station to complain and forcing Jay to apologize. The lesson: just because you've got an ace card doesn't mean you should play it... better to keep it in reserve, for fear of triggering a backlash.

But what happened next is even more interesting. The beef actually helped both: it lit a fire under Nas, who renewed his career, while Jay-Z continued to ascend to his current position (with the Black Album probably still standing as the pinnacle). Jay-Z acknowledged his defeat (on Blueprint 2) and learned lessons from it (while taking a few last shots, and claiming credit for reviving his rival's career ("I gave you life when n**** had forgotten you MC'd"). Nas opted to settle the beef, reconcile, and **sign on with Def Jam Records** -- where he became one of Jay's leading and most valuable artists. In a world of unipolarity, both win through co-optation, reconciliation between enemies, and the demonstration that the gains of cooperation outweigh the gains of resistance.

Which brings us back to the Game. The Game (Jayceon Taylor) is a wildly erratic, brilliantly talented L.A. gangsta rapper, a protege of Dr. Dre who started off with 50 Cent and G-Unit. After an ugly break with them, he unleashed a **barrage of brutal attacks** on G-Unit and 50 Cent culminating in an epic 300 bars freestyle. The Game clearly won the battle on its merits, but 50 Cent's career continued relatively unharmed (he was #1 on last year's Forbes list before being displaced by Jay-Z this year, though his reputation as a rapper has declined significantly after some mediocre albums and a humiliating defeat in a public showdown over album sales at the hands of Kanye West, of all people). Meanwhile, the Game established himself as a solid solo act. In that war between a rising power and an upper-echelon middle power, both ultimately benefited.

Jay-Z is a bit different, given his hegemonic status and the absence of a prior relationship. The Game has always had a particularly odd, passive-aggressive relationship with Jay-Z. His first hit "**Westside Story**" contained a line about not driving Maybachs (Jay's signature car) which everyone took as a diss. The Game panicked, and spliced into the title track of his debut album "The Documentary" a radio interview explaining that he had meant it as a shot against Ja Rule (everyone's favorite hip hop punching bag) and that he "never takes shots at legends, that's just not something I do." Yeah, right. Over the next few years, he would routinely go out of his way to say that he was not dissing Jay-Z even when it sounded like he was ("**before you call this a diss**, and you make Hova pissed, why would I do that, when I'm just the new cat, that was taught if a n****take shots to shoot back, defending his yard, yeah standing his ground, I'm sayin if you gonna retire then hand me the crown.") Think of him as a rising middle power (#13 on the Forbes list, down there with Young Jeezy, he helpfully explains on I'm So Wavy) eyeing the king, ambitious and a bit resentful, and looking for an opening.

So what prompted him to finally cross the line and attack Jay-Z? There doesn't seem to be anything in the public record to speak of -- the proximate cause was a throwaway line in a Jay-Z freestyle which didn't even attack him ("I ain't talkin' about THE GAME"). His ego has always been there, and the Jay-Z obsession (in "**360**" **earlier this year**, he memorably rapped over Jay's Million and One beat "I'm the king and you better respect it, all I need is Beyonce and a Roc-a-Fella necklace"). Maybe he really just wants to test himself (he says **on his Twitter feed** "I ALWAYS FELT I WAS GOOD ENUFF 2 GO BAR 4 BAR @ JAY IN A "LYRICAL BEEF"), the way rising powers do. Or maybe he just is hoping for publicity... wouldn't be the first. But none of that explains the timing, even if it might account for the attack itself. So let's go with the IR analogies for a moment.

The Game's own account suggests that he saw vulnerability in Jay-Z's over-extension. First, supposedly Jay-Z got Chris Brown blackballed from the BET Video Awards by threatening to stay home if he performed. Second, D.O.A., the first single off of Blueprint 3, attacked a whole generation of rappers using the Autotune program to sing (including such great powers as Lil Wayne, Snoop Dogg, and Kanye West as well as the hapless T-Pain). Taken together, that might add up to a growing resentment which could be exploited. Maybe he calculated that now was the moment to strike, and that the rest of the middle powers will ally with him to topple the tyrant.

But still, the timing is odd for a "power transition" narrative, given that Jay-Z is set to release his new Blueprint 3 album in September and has done a whole series of verses with other leading rappers in

recent years (including Nas, Lil Wayne, and T.I.) which is to hip hop as "alliances" are to International Relations. He may be old, but hardly looks like a declining power.... although perhaps Game simply detects weakness in Jay-Z's age. After all, he **tweeted at one point** that he "really don't hate jay's old music, but this new sh!t is convalescent home elevator music." He clearly understands the extent of Jay-Z's structural power, daring a long list of influential DJs to play I'm So Wavy.

So what does Jay-Z do? If he hits back hard in public, the Game will gain in publicity even if he loses... the classic problem of a great power confronted by a smaller annoying challenger. And given his demonstrated skills and talent, and his track record against G-Unit, the Game may well score some points. At the least, it would bring Jay-Z down to his level -- bogging him down in an asymmetric war negating the hegemon's primary advantages. If Jay-Z tries to use his structural power to kill Game's career (block him from releasing albums or booking tour dates or appearing at the Grammy Awards), it could be seen as a wimpy and pathetic operation -- especially since it would be exposed on Twitter and the hip hop blogs.

The Realist advice? His best hope is probably to sit back and let the Game self-destruct, something of which he's quite capable (he's already backing away from the hit on Beyonce) -- while working behind the scenes to maintain his own alliance structure and to prevent any defections over to the Game's camp. And it seems that thus far, **that's exactly what he's doing**. We'll see if that's a winning strategy.... or if he's just biding his time getting ready for a counter-attack. Either way, I've succeeded in wasting a lot of time so... mission accomplished!