

WAR ON THE ROCKS

The Case For A Narrower View Of ‘Empire’ In The Study Of U.S. Foreign Relations

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Many Americans would love to say that the United States is not and has never been an empire. Empire is what the British, French, Romans, and Mongols do, not the American republic, which was born of a revolt against imperial rule. Some scholars, such as Samuel Flagg Bemis, treat the U.S. seizure of the former Spanish empire at the end of the 19th century as the “great aberration” from the American norm of opposing empire. Since the Vietnam War era, however, the majority of U.S. historians have broken with this view, and the idea that the United States was and still is an empire now dominates the discipline. Calling U.S. foreign policy “imperial” has become more of a political litmus test than as a useful analytical term, leaving debates over American empire feeling stale.

Daniel Immerwahr, a historian at Northwestern University, has weighed in on this question with his new book, *How to Hide an Empire*. Immerwahr breaks new ground in a musty debate by presenting a practical definition of the American empire: territories and peoples under American jurisdiction who did not choose that status and lack full citizenship and representation. Even though he effectively presents this more precise and useful definition of empire, Immerwahr also uses the framework of empire to explain too much of U.S. foreign relations, especially the network of military bases the United States established following World War II. More generally, his book is part of a broader tendency of most historians to focus on the coercive elements of U.S. foreign relations at the expense of the cooperative ones. This over-emphasis on the coercive and imperial has pushed recent scholarship to focus on material interests and the raw exercise of power, overlooking strong anti-imperial currents in U.S. foreign policy as well as the history of the United States as a builder of international norms and institutions.

Immerwahr calls America’s territorial empire the “Greater United States,” which includes the Philippines, Hawaii, Alaska, Puerto Rico, and Guam. He argues that U.S. history took place not just in the contiguous union of formally acknowledged, politically equal states, but also in a collection of unequal territories subject to arbitrary U.S. rule. Immerwahr stresses that the history of territories is a “feature” of U.S. history, not an “episode” confined to a bracketed time period as Bemis asserts. This is not a brand-new idea, but it is presented effectively here.

Emma Ashford’s recent review of this book in *War on the Rocks* took issue with the author’s focus on territorial empire rather than on empire as a form of political control. She makes a valid point, but as Immerwahr himself noted to her on Twitter, the focus on the “oft-neglected territorial aspect” of empire is his most important scholarly contribution.

This is useful for two reasons. First, the emphasis on territory fits with a more pragmatic definition of what constitutes an empire. As the historian Charles Maier argues, imperial control can apply power directly or indirectly, but it always involves the abrogation of a colony's sovereignty and a subordinate status for it within the imperial polity. This pragmatic, if narrow, understanding of empire centers on the use of coercive power to create an unequal relationship between a state and its territories.

According to this definition, the United States clearly had an empire in its overseas possessions, which were not incorporated into the union as equal states but ruled as subordinate colonies. Furthermore, Immerwahr rightly notes that the American empire still exists in the sense that four million American "nationals" still live under U.S. control but lack equal representation, a situation that still leads to serious neglect in places like Puerto Rico.

The second big payoff of treating empire as a territorial concept is that it illuminates the consequences of unaccountable and arbitrary imperial rule. Immerwahr shows how the colonies became zones of experimentation for public health, architecture, business, and other ventures because colonial populations lacked the full rights of citizens. For instance, American doctors and pharmaceutical companies used Puerto Rico for birth control research and voluntary sterilization programs in ways that would not be permitted on the mainland. Architects like Daniel Burnham, most famous for his role in designing the White City in Chicago, had tremendous leeway in Manila to clear out slums, re-route streets, and construct a modern city. The concentration of power required to complete this project would have been unthinkable in Chicago, but Immerwahr shows that the secondary status of the colonies made them vulnerable to this kind of treatment.

The hidden links between the contiguous lower-48 and the Greater United States shed new light on major questions of U.S. history. Race, for instance, emerges in this story not just as an organizing principle of domestic society but a rubric for which territories could become states and which remained under imperial control. Scholars rarely consider the admission to statehood of Alaska and Hawaii as victories for civil rights and racial inclusion, but they should, because for the first time in U.S. history whiteness did not define eligibility for statehood.

Nevertheless, Immerwahr's portrayal of U.S. power projection strategies since World War II remains stuck in the habit of many contemporary historians of folding too much of U.S. foreign relations into the framework of empire and overemphasizing the coercive and material bases of U.S. power. This practice inflates the definition of empire so much that it undermines the term's usefulness. In the book's second section, Immerwahr asks why the United States at the height of its power did not annex territory and instead granted independence to its largest colony, the Philippines. His core argument is that power in the postwar world no longer hinged on control of territory but rather on economic influence, technology, and globalization. Advances in the production of synthetics like plastic and artificial rubber made control of natural resources abroad less important. Meanwhile, innovations in transportation and communication made global trade easier, more efficient, and more profitable, obviating the need for conquest.

Borrowing the term "pointillist empire" from historian Bill Rankin, Immerwahr shows how the United States built a network of bases, airstrips, and communications stations that allowed the projection of power into key areas of the world. Immerwahr concludes that the changing nature of power, and the U.S. position at the center of the global economy, allowed the United States to reap the benefits of empire without holding vast territories. U.S. anti-imperialism, institution-

building, and changing global norms beyond the global south's anti-colonialism play almost no role in this section of the book.

This is a useful but incomplete interpretation of the U.S. global presence since 1945. Emphasizing the coercive and imperial rather than the cooperative and ideological in U.S. foreign relations is a common feature of contemporary diplomatic history. This bias likely results from a sense among many diplomatic historians that they are responsible for testing the claims of America's leadership against the historical record and challenging official assertions of virtue and exceptionalism. No recent American leader has embraced or even countenanced the idea that the United States could act as an empire, so it is vital for historians to question this denial and explore imperial aspects of U.S. history.

However, this stress on the coercive prevents historians from seeing how certain ideas and institutions came to undergird international politics, enabling the United States to establish a global presence and exercise power in ways that other states found legitimate and beneficial. Notably, Ashford questions Immerwahr's definition of empire, but even her critique takes as a given the premise that America's role in the world has been primarily coercive and militaristic, mainly asking whether that role should be classified as empire or something else.

G. John Ikenberry argues that the liberal international system that the United States helped forge after World War II is "hierarchical" but not imperial. Ikenberry defines hierarchy as "rule and regime-based order created by a leading state" in which the predominance of U.S. power protects the system and provides public goods but does not abrogate the sovereignty of the constituent states. The terms of interaction are not dictated by the most powerful state, as in an empire, but are negotiated and "mutually agreeable" among the parties. States in this system, especially in the North Atlantic zone, are economically and politically integrated through institutions like NATO and the OECD, and they share a sense of community and common values.

Realist and leftist scholars have challenged the idea that this liberal international system is much more than gloss on a rapacious American quest for global hegemony and market dominance. They have highlighted the repeated American willingness to flex its power outside of these rules and institutions, whether politically, militarily, or otherwise. Immerwahr's portrayal of post-World War II U.S. foreign relations echoes these claims by treating raw power and resources as the primary currency of international politics while downplaying America's role in shifting global norms and ideas.

But the changes in norms and ideas clearly mattered in terms of delegitimizing the idea of empire in the second half of the 20th century. Immerwahr mentions the rise of anti-colonial nationalism as one such idea. However, he omits the contempt that many Americans, notably Franklin Delano Roosevelt, held not just for the Nazi and Soviet empires but those of the British and French. Roosevelt criticized his wartime allies' imperial rule, pledged that the United States would oppose any plan to restore French and British colonies in Japanese possession, and argued that the closed imperial trade zones should be opened up after the war. Omitting this history creates the misleading impression that American leaders wanted empire to remain a major form of international political organization in the postwar era.

In fact, leaders like Roosevelt and Harry Truman integrated principles that *corroded* empire, including human rights, state sovereignty, and self-determination, into key declarations and institutions like the Atlantic Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the U.N.

Charter. As historian Elizabeth Borgwardt has shown, anti-colonial nationalists seized on these principles to discredit imperial rule, just as they had done with Woodrow Wilson's advocacy of self-determination a few decades earlier. The United States was certainly willing to work with European empires in places like Indochina for Cold War purposes, but this support was enacted in spite of a general American disdain for imperialism.

Historian Elizabeth Cobbs-Hoffman proposes the term "umpire" as a more accurate description of the U.S. global role beyond the immediate territorial empire. The metaphor is not perfect, as the United States is both a player and an umpire in world politics, but she does show an "umpierial" function in that the United States can "compel acquiescence as necessary with rules that had earned broad legitimacy." She emphasizes the U.S. role as a guarantor of free trade, an advocate for the non-violent arbitration of disputes, and the leader of a more transparent, rules-based international system. Geir Lundestad similarly stresses the consensual aspects of U.S. power through the term "empire of invitation," referring to the fact that in places like Western Europe the United States was welcomed as a guarantor of security against the Soviet Union and possible German revanchism.

After all, the term "empire" may not make sense when relatively weak states can ask the world's most powerful state to vacate these bases and the United States complies, as happened in France in the mid-1960s, the Philippines in 1992, and Saudi Arabia in 2003. These departures suggest a consensual basis to much of U.S. grand strategy, even though the presence of U.S. forces around the world remains controversial. This point does not invalidate Immerwahr's thesis so much as it shows the limits of its explanatory scope. He explains the U.S. rejection of empire mainly through technological change and anti-colonial nationalism, but the negotiated, consensual nature of much of U.S. global power since 1945 also played a role.

Overemphasizing the term "empire" risks eroding its value as an analytical tool and overshadowing the many consensual, rules-based aspects of U.S. foreign relations. Terms like umpire can be used for aspects of U.S. foreign relations like the provision of security to key regions in the world, the maintenance of institutions, and balancing against revisionist powers. Nonetheless, even though he stretches the definition of empire in some cases, Immerwahr appropriately centers our understanding of the concept on the more formal political control of subordinate territories. Direct control of territory, as Immerwahr extensively documents, is important because it enables and facilitates human rights abuses by the imperial power. Such abuses are harder to commit in territories where the home nation retains sovereignty and can negotiate the terms of the U.S. presence.

This is a critical distinction that excellent recent scholarship on the political geography of human rights abuses has documented: Atrocities are most effectively facilitated when powerful states destroy existing political institutions, define subject populations, and create zones of legal unaccountability. By adopting a narrower, more territorial understanding of empire, historians can develop a more useful theoretical grounding for the study of the crimes of empire. Immerwahr's story, with its fascinating story about territorial empire, gets historians halfway to that goal.