

# H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

## Review Essay 98

Sean A. Mirski, *We May Dominate the World: Ambition, Anxiety, and the Rise of the American Colossus*. New York: Public Affairs, 2023. ISBN: 978-1541758438 (hardback \$35.00).

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14 May 2024 | PDF: <http://issforum.org/to/RE98> | Website: [rjissf.org](http://rjissf.org) | Twitter: [@HDiplo](https://twitter.com/HDiplo)

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US Marine Corps Major General Smedley Butler is one of many colorful characters to make a cameo in Sean Mirski's *We May Dominate the World: Ambition, Anxiety, and the Rise of the American Colossus*. Butler is the “Where’s Waldo” of the historical record of early twentieth century US interventions. He first pops up in Cuba in 1898, and then in China during the Boxer rebellion, Panama during its secession crisis, followed by appearances in Nicaragua, Haiti, and Mexico during the high tide of “dollar diplomacy.”<sup>1</sup>

As one mission inexorably led to the next, Butler became increasingly cynical. US actions, he concluded, sought to advance the goals of private actors, not the national interest. Upon his retirement from active service in the 1930s, Butler emerged as a leading critic of US interventionism. He gave popular lectures that excoriated US foreign policy. His summary statement often appears in critical studies of US empire: “I spent 33 years and four months in active military service and during that period I spent most of my time as a high class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer; a gangster for capitalism...I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street.”<sup>2</sup> Butler’s *War is a Racket* extended this critique to US involvement in the Great War, thus buffeting the sails of the anti-war and anti-interventionist politics of the 1930s. “We must take the profit out of war,” Butler concluded, “We must limit our military to home defense purposes.”<sup>3</sup>

The end of this review returns to Butler, whose biography can point to a conclusion that differs from that advanced by Sean Mirski in his engaging and readable new book. This reviewer found Mirski’s old-fashioned study refreshing. Here we have an unapologetic narrative diplomatic history. Interesting figures such as Butler appear throughout the pages, giving the formulation and execution of US policy a human face. Rather than zooming in on a particular episode, period, or place, Mirski’s book provides a panoptic perspective of US foreign policy and interventionism, with the focus placed on Central America and the Caribbean, over the course of nearly a century, from the Civil War to the dawn of the Cold War.

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<sup>1</sup> On dollar diplomacy, see Emily S. Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900–1930* (Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Butler quoted in Thomas C. Wright and Robert L. Smale, *Latin America Since Independence: Two Centuries of Continuity and Change* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022), 153.

<sup>3</sup> Smedley Butler, *War is a Racket* (New York: Round Table Press, 1935).

The story that emerges defies easy categorization, which is less a criticism than a commendation: Mirski's at times disjointed narrative reflects the messiness of the historical record of US interventionism itself. Mirski is critical of historians who advance a particular line of argument to explain US interventionism (327-349).<sup>4</sup> *We May Dominate the World* instead offers a narrative approach that shows how one crisis merged seamlessly into the next, shaping subsequent outcomes in the process. US policymakers became trapped in a cycle of intervention that was fueled by evidence of regional disorder and imagined nightmare scenarios of European intervention.

Mirski identifies pivotal moments that established, and then intensified, this cycle. The French intervention in the Mexican civil war, which occurred during the US Civil War, opens the story. It was this oft-neglected episode that Mirski attributes with the beginning of a new era in US foreign policy, one in which US officials concluded that "for the sake of its own security, the United States needed to help stabilize and strengthen its neighbors" (40). In contrast, Mirski views the 1904 Roosevelt Corollary of President Theodore Roosevelt to the Monroe Doctrine, which announced that the United States would preemptively intervene in the internal affairs of unstable neighboring countries in order to ward off the possibility of European intervention, as less of a change in policy than a continuation.<sup>5</sup> Mirski contends that President Franklin Roosevelt only invoked his corollary once (in justification of the US intervention in Santo Domingo), and that its logic was premised on the security thinking that had been developing throughout the preceding half century (176-182).

The later turning point that Mirski emphasizes comes in the book's discussion of the President Howard Taft administration, which "froze the Roosevelt Corollary into place as a formal and comprehensive policy. Every intervention became linked, and failure anywhere began to mean failure everywhere" (280). Taft's strategically consistent, but fundamentally flawed, policy set the stage for the high tide of US interventionism during the administration of President Woodrow Wilson. That Taft was a Republican and Wilson a Democrat demonstrates that the interventionist logic of the era crossed party lines. Indeed, Mirski posits an interesting point on this score: partisanship led critics of one administration to critique the execution of interventionism, rather than its logic. "Only after both political parties made the same mistakes was a new, bipartisan consensus possible" (281). By the early 1930s, under the banner of Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, the United States called the Marines back from the Caribbean and Central America.<sup>6</sup> Instead of unilateral force, the United States sought to achieve its objectives through multilateral diplomacy and engagement.

Mirski's study excels as an examination of US policymaking. The book is at its best when it chronicles the statesmen who made decisions while under duress, with incomplete information, and sincerely believing that what we now know was highly unlikely—European intervention in the region—was a distinct possibility. Mirski shows, in case after case, that US policymakers chose intervention knowing that it brought with it great risks and uncertain benefits. In this telling, the interventionism of the era was an exercise in choosing the least bad diplomatic option, with statesmen reaching the conclusion that deploying the Marines was the lesser evil to accepting instability and possible European intervention. The upshot of this logic, of course, was an imperialist path dependence, a self-reinforcing dynamic in which one US intervention led to the next. So, too, did US meddling worsen the problem of the internal instability of the polities of the circum-Caribbean: domestic factionalism quickly internationalized in the shadow of a meddling Uncle Sam.

Mirski's conclusion takes aim at accounts of US foreign policymaking that focus on structures of culture, economy, and connection. Though Mirski provides informative background descriptions of the countries in

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<sup>4</sup> Works that Mirski is at odds with in his conclusion include Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion 1860-1898* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967); Nancy Mitchell, *The Danger of Dreams: German and American Imperialism in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Serge Ricard, "The Roosevelt Corollary," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36 (2006): 17-26.

<sup>6</sup> Irwin Gellman, *Good Neighbor Diplomacy: United States Policies in Latin America, 1933-1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019).

which the United States intervened, the book's overall focus remains on the US decisionmaking that resulted in intervention. The underlying conditions that gave the countries of the circum-Caribbean their chronic instability—contested postcolonial politics, economic dependence, and rampant availability of small arms—receive little systematic attention.<sup>7</sup> The protracted interventions themselves are of secondary interest in the book.

*We Might Dominate the World* concludes that, by pursuing aggressive and interventionist policies in its sphere of influence during its rise to world power, the United States did what most powers in similar circumstances have done. Mirski draws historical parallels, including to the increasingly assertive China of the twenty-first century, whose assertive foreign policy in its region derives from a similar cocktail of ambition and anxiety.<sup>8</sup> This parallel certainly seems plausible, especially with the caveats and qualifications that Mirski acknowledges (340-347).

My main quibble with this book is that its subtitle leaves readers with the misleading impression that the US interventions in the greater Caribbean, especially in the 1898–1917 period, help to explain “the rise of the American colossus.” In truth, though some interventions secured ports and sea-lanes of strategic importance (especially after the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914), the rising power of the United States had little to do with these ventures. Attempting to control Cuba or Nicaragua or Haiti did not make the United States a great power; it was its massive agrarian *and* industrial base, its astonishing levels of immigration and trade (predominately in the North Atlantic with Europe), its immense natural resources, its diverse cultural forms that attracted foreign attention and collaborators, its highly literate and (mostly) pro-science populace, and its de-centralized and (partially) democratic form of government.<sup>9</sup> The interventions in the Caribbean do not explain these, and other, headline factors in America's global emergence. If anything, the interventions that Mirski chronicles might be said to have stunted the “rise” of the United States.

Here we return to Major General Smedley Butler. The grizzled Marine veteran understood that the interventions in which he took part did not create more stable polities. He learned that intervention did not establish reliable client states and allies that augmented US power. Deploying the Marines did not advance the national economic interest of the United States; as Butler was quick to point out, intervention too often only served the interests of specific private actors. One can go further. The interventions of this period ultimately proved to be unpopular in the United States. They undermined public support for an active foreign policy, not just in the Caribbean, but around the globe.<sup>10</sup> It is significant that despite the old Marine's unquestionable patriotism and anti-fascism. Butler's anti-war writings of the 1930s railed against Latin American interventions and US involvement in European geopolitics.

In other words, the rising isolationism of the 1920s and 1930s was in part a creation of the unpopular and unproductive interventions that Mirski chronicles. The Caribbean quagmires that the United States stumbled into undermined public support for an active foreign policy at the very moment in which it was most required. Having listened to its leadership class cry wolf over phantom German menaces in Latin America for

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<sup>7</sup> For the connection between international forces and internal instability in the Caribbean, see Perry Mars, “Foreign Influence, Political Conflicts and Conflict Resolution the Caribbean,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 32:4 (Nov. 1995), 437-51.

<sup>8</sup> Shirley V. Scott, “China's Nine-Dash Line, International Law, and the Monroe Doctrine Analogy,” *China Information*, 30:3 (November 2016), 275-95.

<sup>9</sup> Jay Sexton, *A Nation Forged by Crisis: A New American History* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), esp. 141-162.

<sup>10</sup> This anti-imperial critique found expression in The Vanguard Press Series (New York) of books that included the following works that took aim at US interventions in the circum-Caribbean: Leland H. Jenks, *Our Cuban Colony: A Study in Sugar* (1928); Melvin M. Knight, *The Americans in Santo Domingo* (1928); Margaret Marsh, *The Bankers in Bolivia: A Study in American Foreign Investment* (1928); Bailey W. Diffie and Justine W. Diffie, *Porto Rico: A Broken Pledge* (1931); and Charles David Kepner, Jr. and Jay Henry Soothill, *The Banana Empire: A Case Study of Economic Imperialism* (1935).

the preceding quarter century, Americans like Butler resolved not to be fooled again, but this time as the very real threat of Nazi fascism gathered steam.

Viewed from this vantage, the present-day parallel to draw is not China, but the retrenching United States. Like the Caribbean interventions and occupations of the early twentieth century, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan one hundred years later zapped popular support for active foreign policies. The legacy of those actions can be seen on both ends of today's fractured domestic political spectrum: as supporters of former President Donald Trump rail against what they understand as "globalism," increasing proportions of Democrat voters equate traditional US foreign policy with discredited forms of imperialism.<sup>11</sup> US misadventures in the Middle East have soured the voting public on proactive foreign policies and sustained global engagement, even as real threats—a revanchist Russia and, above all, an assertive China—emerge on the horizon. Here is to hoping that this trend is reversed today, as it was in the run-up to Pearl Harbor nearly a century ago.

**Jay Sexton** is Rich and Nancy Kinder Chair of Constitutional Democracy, Professor of History, and Director of the Kinder Institute at the University of Missouri. His work includes *A Nation Forged by Crisis: A New American History* (Basic Books, 2018), *Debtor Diplomacy: Finance and American Foreign Relations in the Civil War Era, 1837–1873* (Oxford University Press, 2005) and *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Hill and Wang, 2011). He also has published four major collaborative projects: *The Global Lincoln* (co-edited with Richard Carwardine, Oxford University Press, 2011), *Empire's Twin: US Anti-Imperialism from the Founding to the Age of Terrorism* (co-edited with Ian Tyrrell, Cornell University Press, 2015), *Crossing Empires: Taking US History into Transimperial Terrain* (co-edited with Kristin Hoganson, Duke University Press, 2020); and, also co-edited with Kristin Hoganson, *The Cambridge History of America in the World: Vol. 2, 1820–1900* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Jan Dutkiewicz and Dominik Stecula, "Why America's Far Right and Far Left Have Aligned Against Helping Ukraine" *Foreign Policy*, 4 July 2022.