If you Google on “Empire” and the “United States,” you get 36,600,000 hits. If you add “Imperial” to the search, you only receive 6,110,000 hits. So the study of empire has significantly revived since 2001 with respect to new courses, new books, opinion pieces in the news, and public interest. Charles Maier’s Among Empires is one of a number of recent studies that explore, with some degree of comparative studies, the empire theme both historic empires in a global context and the current debate about the United States and its role as colossus, hegemon, superpower, or world’s largest debtor.

Studies of the United States as an emerging empire are not a 21st century Google phenomena. In the first graduate reading class with Bradford Perkins at the University of Michigan in 1965 one of the first books on a most extensive reading list was Richard W. Van Alstyne’s The Rising American Empire (1960) which discussed the emergence of a conception of American empire out of the 18th century European imperial struggle for dominance. Van Alstyne explored its development through continental expansion and into insular imperialism in the Caribbean and Pacific. William A. Williams certainly introduced his many influential students to the American empire long before he published Empire as a Way of Life: An Essay on the Causes and Character of America’s Present Predicament along with a Few Thoughts about an Alternative (1980). Later in Perkins’ course we explored Walter LaFeber’s The New Empire and Thomas McCormick’s China Market: America’s Quest for Informal Empire, 1893-1901 (1967).

Mary Ann Heiss provided a stimulating review of the evolution of American thoughts on the imperial idea in her 2002 Bernath Lecture. Professor Heiss carefully reviews the literature and explores how national interest, mission, and principle either come together and reinforce each other or clash in different periods from the 1780s to the Cold War. In the 20th century Heiss emphasizes an increasing priority to the importance of national interest over anti-imperialism and a sense of mission to promote democracy and private enterprise.

What is an empire? What do empires do? How have empires evolved over time? What policies does an empire produce on the home front? Has the United States taken on the characteristics of an empire? These are all central questions that Charles Maier explores in his extended essay. Part one on “Recurring Structures” applies a comparative approach to empires across time and space. Maier’s

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familiarity with the literature on empires and ability to make synthetic comparisons of five or six empires around the globe is very stimulating and will take U.S. specialists out of familiar turf. In the second part, “America’s Turn,” Maier focuses on 20th century United States with emphasis on the Cold War period extending into the 21st century. This is more familiar ground, particularly with respect to Cold War developments in Europe. Yet Maier has suggestive concepts and brings a degree of refreshing clarity to the process in which the United States has become both global superpower and global super debtor.

The commentators have raised a number of important questions and issues about Maier’s study that certainly merit further discussion:

1.) In part one, does Maier identify and explore the most distinguishing features of an empire in his emphasis on an empire as a process and institutional arrangement, the importance of the role of frontiers and the use of military force, the cooperation between imperial and subordinate elites on the frontiers and client states, and the impact of the empire on the political and institutional life at home?

2.) In part two, Maier emphasizes two foundations of American hegemony and possible empire status: an empire of production—"Fordism"—that rose to dominance in WWII and the Cold War with industrial manufacturing, nuclear weapons, and growth-oriented economic policies; and an empire of consumption emerging in the 1960s based on subsidized agricultural exports, the export of manufacturing, technology and American culture, and the purchase of American debt by global investors and exporters to the American market. Several commentators question the chronological separation of the two foundations and some of Maier’s emphasis and omissions.

3.) U.S. military power, both conventional and nuclear, during the Cold War and into the 21st century is certainly critical to America’s imperial activities from John Gaddis’ empire by invitation in Europe to the expansion of strategic outposts around the globe and into new areas in the Near East after September 11th, 2001. Maier explores the role of force in part one and considers whether or not there is a uniquely violent aspect to imperial rule. He notes that empires bring peace and pacification to the interior but also violence on the frontiers and enhanced violence when empires struggle to survive and in the aftermath of their departure. Do American imperial activities fit this model from continental expansion with respect to Indians, insular outposts in Cuba and the Philippines, hegemony and client regimes in the Caribbean, and most recently, the current interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq?

4.) Professor Maier explores the relationship of empire to domestic institutions such as the impact on American democracy with an erosion, similar to the changes in the Roman Republic to Augustus’ Empire, with respect to the significance of elections, the independence of the legislature, the rights of citizens. Is President Bush’s determination to pursue the “War on Terror” with new executive actions and some retrospective Congressional legislation a confirmation of Maier’s concerns and a thermometer-like measure of how America has expanded its imperial behavior?

5.) Is the United States now or has it even been an empire? The commentators are unhappy that Maier has resisted a definitive stance on this issue, noting that America has many but not all the traits of an empire, and although currently moving down the empire trial, America still retains at least memories of its anti-imperial origins and historic commitment to self-determination. Unlike Niall Ferguson who, in Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire, wants the U.S. to wake up and recognize its destiny and
responsibilities as an empire, Maier retains significant concerns about the current direction of the American hegemon. Since independence American leaders have, as Mary Ann Heiss and many others have pointed out, sought expansion in all of its various forms including territorial to fulfill Thomas Jefferson’s “empire of liberty.” At the same time Americans have repeatedly advanced anti-imperial rhetoric, rejected European-style colonization, and advanced self-determination against the Soviet empire and Islamic fundamentalism. At several points Maier suggests that the United States is a new kind of post-territorial empire yet at this date Congress has approved but not funded a new “Hadrian” or “Great Wall” along the southern border with Mexico.

Participants:


**Andrew J. Bacevich** is professor of history and international relations at Boston University. A graduate of the U. S. Military Academy, he received his Ph. D. in American Diplomatic History from Princeton University. Before joining the faculty of Boston University in 1998, he taught at West Point and at Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Bacevich is the author most recently of *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (2005). His previous books include American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U. S. Diplomacy (2002) and The Imperial Tense: Problems and Prospects of American Empire (2003). In 2004, Dr. Bacevich was a Berlin Prize Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin.

**Michael Hunt** is the Everett H. Emerson Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and past president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. After taking his undergraduate degree from Georgetown University, he did his graduate work in the history department at Yale. He took his Ph.D. in 1971. He taught at Yale and Colgate before moving to North Carolina in 1980. Professor Hunt writes and teaches in the general field of international history. His special teaching and research interests are in U.S. foreign relations, the Cold War in Asia, the Vietnam War, and the post-1945 world. His early work, focusing on nineteenth and twentieth century Chinese-American relations, includes two prize-winning books, Frontier Defense and the Open Door (Yale University Press, 1973) and The Making of a Special Relationship (Columbia University Press, 1983; Chinese

His long-term concern with U.S. foreign relations is reflected in several broad interpretive, historiographical, and methodological works, notably *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Yale, 1987); “The Long Crisis in U.S. Diplomatic History,” *Diplomatic History* 16 (Winter 1992); and *Crises in U.S. Foreign Policy: An International History Reader* (Yale, 1996). He has also cultivated an interest in modern East Asia, resulting in *The Genesis of Chinese Communist Foreign Policy* (Columbia, 1996), based on new sources, and *Lyndon Johnson’s War: America’s Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968* (Hill and Wang, 1996), a slim synthesis. His recent interest in contemporary global history has led to *The World Transformed: 1945 to the Present* (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003) and a companion reader as well as a history of U.S. foreign relations set in a global framework (*The American Ascendancy,* due out in spring 2007). He has also been collaborating with Steven I. Levine on an account of America’s wars in Asia.


Professor Nelson made a very significant contribution to the field of public history starting in the 1970s on the Public Documents Commission and continuing with the Congressional Research Service, the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, and the Society for History in the Federal Government. She has been a member of the State Department Historical Advisory Committee and received a presidential appointment to the John F. Kennedy Records Review Board. She is currently a member of the Council of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. Professor Nelson is currently preparing a book on the influence of the national security process on foreign policy in the first three decades of the Cold War.

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