

Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006)

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: Andrew J. Bacevich, Michael H. Hunt, Anna K. Nelson

Author's Response, Charles S. Maier, Harvard University

Of course, I must thank the three readers of *Among Empires* for their laborious evaluations of my historical essay and the editor of the Roundtable for organizing this forum. I also have to express my disappointment that what I was attempting to write has not seemed more useful to the two professional historians of American foreign policy. Anna Nelson, a meticulous historian of American diplomacy, has done me the honor of closely following my argumentation although either she read hastily or I wrote carelessly at a few junctures. Rather than a particularly American search for new frontiers leading to years of violence, I tried to suggest, it is the inherent difficulty of stabilizing any distant border that produces violence. Neither did I cite General MacArthur because he served an authoritarian leader, but because he represented one of many cases where generals at the frontier seek to intervene at the center and create a new political status quo far more responsive to military expansionism and military authority at home. Fortunately, in fact, MacArthur served a civilian leader who quashed his challenge to the ground rules of American democracy.

Professor Nelson, along with the other commentators, stresses the disconnect between the second part of the book, with its focus on the United States, and the comparative chapters in the first part. In light of this reaction, which other readers have also shared, I clearly failed to spell out connections I thought inhered implicitly in my organization. The second half, focusing on America's imperial career since 1945, illustrates the general trends cited in the first half: the tendencies toward violence and inequality and the dynamic of the imperial frontier. Economic theories of imperialism, cited in Chapter One, were intended to prepare for the arguments of Chapters Five and Six; the discussion of frontiers in Chapter Two was meant to return as an organizing theme of Chapter Four which views the Cold War in terms of its contest over boundaries. But to judge from the fact that Professor Nelson has followed my arguments so carefully, I evidently did not make these connections clear enough to others.

I find Michael Hunt's critique frankly more puzzling. He believes the book "disappointing," "fuzzy," "Is empire exclusively territorial, or does it also involve the exercise of significant power transcending territorial limits...?" Well, this is precisely the question I address in the section on "Post-territorial Empire?" in Chapter Six (pp. 277-84) and suggest that while many aspects of American dominance can be ascribed to post-territorial assets (just as the British empire rested in part on its far-flung economic influence and prestige), a stubborn residue of territorial claims clings even to contemporary imperial politics. It is true that I focus on the second half of the twentieth-century and not the earlier achievement of continental dominance, but my

focus, after all, is on the United States as a dominant world power. Hunt cites different forms and expressions of U.S. imperial control; I acknowledge a similar range and try to place them in a comparative context (pp. 66-68). He laments my not sticking to a definition of empire, but which I thought I had placed front and center: "Empire does not mean just the accumulation of lands abroad by conquest....Empire is a form of political organization in which the social elements that rule in the dominant state – the 'mother country' or the 'metropole' – create a network of allied elites in regions abroad who accept subordination in international affairs in return for the security of their position in their own administrative unit (the 'colony' or in spatial terms, 'the periphery')" (p.7, and cf. p. 33). As for empire's impact on societal development (which is one of the topics that Hunt charges fails to receive "crisp, systematic development") I do not understand how any reader could not follow an argument that empires rested on a network of elites and made societies more elitist than they were earlier (see pp.7, 34) . "Maier," writes Hunt, "does not pause to consider a key comparative point: what other empire had found its calling with such speed and imposed its grip over such a broad expanse in such a short time?" Well, let's start early -- how about the Macedonian/Hellenistic empire? Napoleon, Hitler – of course there is no shortage of rapid rise. How did nuclear weapons, Hunt asks, help create U.S. dominance? Again, see pages 151-54, which treats the relationship between unusable nuclear weapons, which established the potential for ascendancy, and the need to rely on "non-ultimate" weapons for military enforcement.

As for the distinction between an empire of production and my notion of an empire of consumption, I do not claim, as Hunt implies, that the former precluded America's development as a consumer society. Rather, U.S. power was built on its extraordinary productive capacity, which is precisely what helped the United States and countries abroad defeat wartime adversaries and develop as consumer societies. But since the 1970s, our country's international leadership has entailed a different political economy, analyzing which is precisely the point of Chapter Six (whose argument seems, alas, to have little interest for Professors Nelson and Hunt, but which Andrew Bacevich pithily summarizes). Now, the U.S. has, in effect, negotiated an international bargain whereby we depend on the leading Asian nations' willingness to subsidize our massive twin deficits (budgetary and current account) in return for which we transfer to them the industries (and increasingly services) that earlier employed our own citizens. In general, I see American ascendancy in the twentieth century constructed as much through economic and financial transactions as through diplomacy, military intervention, and cultural influence.

Finally, I do not see how Michael Hunt can claim I don't distinguish between empire and hegemony, when on pages 62-64 I address precisely this question, originally raised by Paul Schroeder. An empire is distinguished from mere hegemony in that an empire uses force to punish defection. To judge from his footnote 7, Hunt will presumably use hegemony in a more encompassing way. Fine. My own distinction, of course, certainly can be contested – but it is articulated.

Michael Hunt would presumably retort that my allusive writing precludes these points from clearly emerging. In this respect we obviously have different criteria for historical style. I regret that an occasional paragraph of two pages overstretches his manual of rhetoric. I had hoped that the "lessons from Tacitus" which begin a chapter on violence might be understood to represent a classic description of imperial terror. I have to confess to loathing PowerPoint prose,

and sought to invite the reader to a rumination on history from which she or he might emerge with a heightened sensitivity to comparison and analogy. Admittedly, citing the damage to the vase of Uruk – a sad material casualty of the American drive to Baghdad, whose citation in my essay Hunt finds so inexplicable -- served as a riff to introduce the extraordinary three millennia of imperial contention in Mesopotamia, where American reservists have followed in a long line of soldiers consumed for their rulers' ambitions.

There is no scope here to defend myself against every cavil. All I can do is invite the reader to read the book and see if it is really so missed an opportunity as Hunt charges. I frankly do not know of many efforts to contextualize the extraordinary career of American international ascendancy against a background of global (and *pace* Hunt) comparative history. Of course, it is not my call to judge whether I have succeeded, but I do invite readers to see if I have failed so clamorously.

Finally, let me respond briefly to Andrew J. Bacevich, who remains a major and thoughtful participant in the recent debates on American empire. He finds me “dodgy” in addressing my own questions about the implications of American empire (or even imperial tendencies). Fair enough, although I thought the questions on page 12 tended to answer themselves. Let me say that like Bacevich, I admired much about the empire of production (including in fact its willingness to work genuinely in a multilateral context that did not grasp for domination); and I deplore many aspects of our recent policies, which I believe have sanctioned arrogance abroad and plutocracy, corruption, and inequity at home. I do not like what we have allowed to happen to our institutions. I cited at the end (pp. 293-295) what some could claim were the virtues of empire primarily to show why it might claim a constituency even in the United States.

Still, I accept Andrew Bacevich's impatience with my ambivalence. The problem I find is that the politics I grew up admiring has slid into the politics I deplore, but I am afraid of the populism and withdrawal from global concerns that I fear may be the result of reversing it. Let me be honest if not decisive: I have long been politically a child of the international activism and executive vigor that has, I believe, run dangerously out of control at home and abroad. Still, I would prefer course correction to dismantling, whereas other critics will believe that only a more radical disavowal of Wilsonian proclivities can reverse the degeneration. Our historical judgments, no matter how remote or contemporary the era under study, will always reflect a political stance. It seems to me we have three partial remedies as historians. First, to understand our own values, which are often self-contradictory. Second, to explain the underlying mechanisms of domestic and international inequality and power, even when they seem broadly accepted, indeed celebrated. And, third -- the complementary strategy -- to listen attentively for all the voices in play, even those stigmatized as insignificant or snuffed out namelessly by violence, whether our own or our friends'. Every empire is built on that mix of acceptance and repression and we need to understand the sources of both.

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