

# H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXI-20

*A Teaching Roundtable*

## Teaching the American Empire Debate

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*What is at Stake in Teaching the “American Empire” Debate?*

In the last meeting of my advanced undergraduate seminar “Empires and Imperialism,” we debate whether the contemporary United States is an empire. For some of my students, the answer is obviously ‘no.’ While the United States does administer a number of overseas territories, it does not possess a vast network of colonies that are painted red on the map, nor does it have a dedicated colonial office. For other students, however, the answer is obviously ‘yes.’ The United States routinely uses its vast military and economic power to limit the sovereignty of other states, and many of the liberal justifications for American intervention abroad echo earlier notions of a civilizing mission. Getting students who hold these diametrically opposed positions to listen to one another can be difficult. The challenge goes beyond simply unpacking an ambiguous social science concept. The term empire comes attached with considerable and justifiable normative weight, so the stakes of how we answer the question can seem particularly significant.

All of the contributors to this roundtable acknowledge these complications, yet they argue that teaching the American Empire debate nevertheless remains a worthwhile—if not essential—endeavor. Indeed, encouraging students to grapple with the question offers numerous pedagogical opportunities. It provides, as Richard Maass observes in his contribution, “abundant flint to spark students’ interest in learning more about international politics.” In particular, the contributors to this roundtable emphasize at least five related advantages of orienting discussion of contemporary American foreign policy around the concept of empire.

First, it can help students grapple with the challenge of defining and applying social science concepts. Not only are there multiple competing definitions of ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’ in the literature, the meaning of these concepts has evolved and changed over time. As deRaismes Combes explains in her contribution, pushing students to generate their own definitions of empire, and related terms such as imperialism or colonialism, provides an opportunity for them to “deconstruct those definitions and situate them in a broad historical landscape.” Moreover, many of the concepts we use to define empire are themselves contested: what is power, control, sovereignty, or authority? Once we have a working definition of empire, how do we differentiate it from related concepts such as hegemony or unipolarity? How can we distinguish between different kinds of empires: formal versus informal empires, overseas versus territorial empires, and so on. As Maass notes, “the debate opens a veritable ocean of conceptual ambiguity for students to practice navigating.”

Second, it can provide opportunities for students to engage with and rethink their assumptions about American (and global) history. Rather than narrate history in terms of the choices of states, it encourages students to think about the central role empires have played in global politics, as well as how imperial practices are intimately connected to state formation itself. “Teaching the U.S. as an imperial power,” Kelly Bauer points out in her contribution, “ensures that a fuller range of actors...are written into their consideration of global politics.” It encourages students to consider the diversity of indigenous modes of pre-colonial political organization. It pushes them to grapple with the multifaceted character of imperialism, fueled not just by political agents, but also settlers, businessmen, explorers, and missionaries. Examining how the United States has used “the tools of empire” in the past, Bauer argues, exposes the “inconsistencies between imagined and constructed realities of the U.S. state, nation, and empire.” It helps connect students to a more unfamiliar and challenging account of the imperial origins of the current American-led liberal international order.

Third, it can encourage students to think about the power of ideas in international politics in general and American foreign relations in particular. As Edward Said’s seminal body of work has emphasized, imperialism is not simply a material practice, but an ideology and culture as well.<sup>1</sup> Yet many students assume that the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978); Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

founding principles of the United States are inherently anti-imperial. Teaching the American empire debate provides opportunities for students to think about the extent to which liberalism, republicanism, democracy, Protestantism, or other core American values might be compatible with—or even the primary impulse behind—imperial behavior. In their contribution, Matt Cantirino, Jon Askonas, and Justin Litke describe how they encourage students to think of empire not as an aberration, but as “a recurring possibility or project for the United States.” This pedagogical choice allows them to explore how “different American leaders, thinkers, and activists have variously advanced or attacked [the idea of empire] throughout history.” Foregrounding the question of American empire provides opportunities for students to interrogate the origin and evolution of competing ideas of American exceptionalism.

Fourth, it can prompt students to reflect on their own positions and privileges. As Maass observes, it is impossible to disentangle the question of American empire from the “web of normative, ideological, and identity-based concerns in which it is embedded.” International students or students who come from marginalized groups may have much different perceptions of the power and purpose of the American state than some of their classmates. Teaching the American empire debate, Bauer notes, can be “one of the most effective means of challenging and training students to build relationships and dialogue with people who experience U.S. as an imperial power.” It can help students contemplate “what it is like to be on the receiving end of American ‘hospitality,’” as Combes quips. If one of the core features of empires is that they “maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people,”<sup>2</sup> discussing whether the United States is an empire can push students to consider how categories of gender, race, and religion have shaped—and continue to shape—American foreign policy.

Fifth, it can highlight to students the power of historical memory and political rhetoric. The claim that the United States is an empire is not simply an analytical one, it is also a political one, and commentators on both the left and the right have invoked the idea of an American empire to promote their favored policies. Cantirino, Askonas, and Litke stress that “concerns about American empire aren’t just for the Left,” but can also be found in classical liberal and libertarian critiques of American foreign policy. More recently, as Combes alludes, pundits have drawn favorable comparisons between historical practices of imperial policing and American policies in the “war on terror.”<sup>3</sup> More broadly, the American empire debate is taking place at the same time as efforts to decolonize higher education and amidst growing imperial nostalgia in countries such as Britain and France. Competing representations of empire can be found in museums, documentary series, popular histories, and also popular culture. By examining who invokes imperial metaphors, and how and when these appeals resonate with different audiences, students can explore the role that narratives of the past play in contemporary policy debates.

In short, teaching the American empire debate can be challenging, but immensely rewarding. It can be used to get students to define difficult social science concepts, to rethink their assumptions about history and which actors matter in international politics, to unpack competing American political traditions, to explore issues of identity and difference in American foreign policy, and to examine the political power of memory and metaphor. By the end of my “Empires and Imperialism” class, students may not have reached a final verdict on whether the United States is or is not an empire. Yet my hope is that they have developed an appreciation for the profound and pervasive legacies of empires and of imperial modes of thinking. The fact that the American empire debate has been such a consistent and reoccurring feature of discussions about American power is itself suggestive. Policymakers in Washington often claim to be opponents of empire, while talking

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent example, see Max Boot “Why Winning and Losing are Irrelevant in Syria and Afghanistan,” *The Washington Post*, 30 January 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/the-us-cant-win-the-wars-in-afghanistan-and-syria-but-we-can-lose-them/2019/01/30/e440c54e-23ea-11e9-90cd-dedb0c92dc17\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/the-us-cant-win-the-wars-in-afghanistan-and-syria-but-we-can-lose-them/2019/01/30/e440c54e-23ea-11e9-90cd-dedb0c92dc17_story.html).

and behaving in ways that are strikingly imperial. At a minimum, debating whether the United States is an empire forces students to confront this tension that lies at the heart of American foreign policy.

**Participants:**

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Should political scientists teach courses that consider the United States as an imperial power? My response is motivated by my first days studying abroad in Buenos Aires, and the number of times students have repeated similar stories to me. It was 2007, and President George W. Bush, who had arrived to Argentina for trade negotiations, was met by the demands of former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez of ‘gringo go home’ and by protesters setting the local McDonalds restaurants on fire. The study abroad program warned us to avoid the protests and refrain from drawing attention to our citizenship. Today, my students find themselves in similar situations. One was greeted with the question ‘So you’re a US imperialist then’ from a classmate. Another noted that encountering ‘the idea that [the United States is] sort of this solid rock on which global democracy and economic power rests leaves me feeling kind of uncomfortable.’ Daniel Immerwahr similarly asserts in *How to Hide an Empire* that “Empire might be hard to make out from the mainland, but from the sites of colonial rule themselves, it’s impossible to miss.”<sup>4</sup>

Here, I assert that political science educators need to teach the U.S. as an example of empire as one of the most effective means of challenging and training students to build relationships and dialogue with people who experience the United States as an imperial power. I come to this debate as a comparativist who teaches mostly about the governance of identity politics at a small, predominantly white liberal arts university in the Midwest. Accordingly, this argument is motivated less by my formal training on the extent to which conversations about empire apply to U.S. foreign policy, and more by my conversations with people and communities who have experienced or do experience the foreign and/or domestic policies of the U.S. as imperial ones. As an international politics educator, I am accountable for preparing students to hear and engage with individuals and communities, both within and outside of U.S. borders, who experience past and/or present U.S. actions in the imperial sense. Doing this work demands that international politics educators decenter classroom conversations from ontological and epistemological understandings of the United States as an empire in academic and policy conversations, and instead equip students to understand their own positionalities and to better engage with those who experience U.S. imperialism. Below, I outline how teaching empire in conversation with teaching U.S. past and present policy offers students key analytical tools that equip them to listen to, learn from, and engage with arguments they may hear in their current and future communities.

First, teaching empire trains students to diversify their understandings of the actors in international politics. The field traditionally collapses international politics into analyses of the individual, state, and systemic levels of analysis; teaching empire usefully complicates this portrait. How does empire fit into these levels of analysis? Non-sovereign spaces? Communities with degrees of sovereignty but not statehood? Teaching imperialism opens conversations about contestation over the relative power and influence of a broader range of the actors in international politics. Scholars have made similar arguments about the analytical utility of bringing Native American Studies into deeper conversation with political science (not to mention the ethical responsibility of doing so). Michael Lerma and Dale Turner, for example, highlight how indigenous forms of sovereignty complicate understandings of sovereignty,<sup>5</sup> challenging the field to “unsettle’ its unconscious orientations to concepts such as time, space, property, law, and membership—all of which European settlers leveraged to justify the conquest, control, and cordoning off of Native populations, even while they promoted

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States* (New York: Random House, 2019), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Lerma, *Indigenous Sovereignty in the 21st Century: Knowledge for the Indigenous Spring* (Gainesville: Florida Academic Press, 2014); Dale Antony Turner, *This Is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

egalitarian political structures for themselves and their descendants.”<sup>6</sup> This conceptual shift demands that educators train students to understand that, as David Lake writes, “Although theories are thought to be objective, what goes into those theories and, in turn, their explanatory power is ultimately shaped by subjective, lived experiences. Different individuals with different life stories will develop different intuitions about how the world works, and thus will write different theories to capture those intuitions and, in turn, larger patterns of politics.”<sup>7</sup> Scholars have extensively noted the limitations of a narrow view of international relations, with Barry Buzan and Richard Little most directly critiquing the tendency to “assum[e] that all international systems must have the same features seems to offer possibilities of simplification that can transform the huge scale and nightmarish complexities of world politics into a relatively simple and timeless model. ... The extraordinarily tight interconnection of the elements in this package offer the promise of theoretical simplification that explains in good part why so much of the international relations community has been seduced into wearing the Westphalian straightjacket.”<sup>8</sup> Teaching imperialism invites students into these conversations and ensures that a fuller range of the actors in interactional politics are written into their considerations of global politics.

Second, transitioning away positioning the nation-state as the referent object of political inquiry of international politics allows conversations about the tools of empire to intersect with those about the tools of state and nation-building, and contestation over the use of those tools. Doing so pushes students to reimagine forms of rule and governance. With what tools of governance does the U.S. build state/nation/empire, and what are the consequences of those efforts? They provide a vision, albeit often a challenging vision, of the United States’ imagined self. Many have noted that it is uncomfortable to question whether the U.S. is an empire, perhaps because doing so exposes inconsistencies between imagined and constructed realities of the U.S. as state, nation, and empire. Immerwahr offers that the “country perceives itself to be a republic, not an empire;”<sup>9</sup> Peter Harris argues that “in the American experience, the history of territorial acquisition shows that ideas of race, racism, and imperialism have been of demonstrable salience since the earliest days of the republic—at least when annexing populated territories or territories intended for settlement;”<sup>10</sup> and Taesuh Cha understands U.S. foreign policy “as a tragedy that is related to its fundamental racist/militarist identity based on its own expansionist experiences.”<sup>11</sup> Discussing empire unsettles assumptions about the state and the nation, centers the conversation around how power and coercion constructed those political units, and mandates the consideration of the use of and opposition to current tools of U.S. empire. A few examples from relatively recent U.S. foreign policy actions highlight the insights that could emerge from discussing the convergence of state, nation, and empire building. The use of torture in Guantanamo Bay after 11 September, 2001, was justified as extraterritorial in terms of constitutional and international law, but under the purview

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<sup>6</sup> Nancy D. Wadsworth, “Unsettling Lessons: Teaching Indigenous Politics and Settler Colonialism in Political Science,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47:3 (2014): 692-697, here, 694.

<sup>7</sup> David A. Lake, “White Man’s IR: An Intellectual Confession,” *Perspectives on Politics* 14:4 (2016): 1112-1122, here, 1113.

<sup>8</sup> Barry Buzan and Richard Little, “Why International Relations Has Failed as an Intellectual Project and What to Do About It,” *Millennium* 30:1 (2001): 19-39, here, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Immerwahr, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Harris, “Teaching the Territories in US Foreign Policy: Race and Empire in the American Experience,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50:2 (2017): 506-509, here, 506.

<sup>11</sup> Taesuh Cha, “The Formation of American Exceptional Identities: A Three-Tier Model of the “Standard of Civilization” in US Foreign Policy,” *European Journal of International Relations* 21:4 (2015): 743-767, here, 744.

of the U.S. Commander-in-Chief.<sup>12</sup> The externalization of U.S. migration controls to sending or transit countries was justified by Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly as “Border security requires a layered approach that extends far beyond our shores, throughout the hemisphere.”<sup>13</sup> Similar arguments have been made in discussions of globalization and neoliberalism as tools of empire “rest[ing] on an imperial centre.”<sup>14</sup> Framing these global events and trends as instances of empire offers students access points to new insight into foreign policy, international law, economic policy, sovereignty, and forms of power as they consider political units of analysis not as fixed, but rather as contested and constructed units of analysis that can be made and unmade.

Often in political science, particularly in terms of diversifying and decolonizing the field, conversations about what *content* should be taught dominate, to the exclusion of what pedagogical tools should be used to teach this content. These pedagogical decisions should be motivated by an understanding of students’ relationships with the content, and should carefully present material that draws on both what is familiar and unfamiliar to facilitate their learning.<sup>15</sup> In classrooms at my predominantly white university in the Midwest, my challenge is not to teach how the history of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America structures U.S. opposition in the region, but to transition the class out of those uncomfortable and unfamiliar conversations. Often, students are jarred to learn the history of U.S. involvement in Latin America during the Cold War; teaching this content is necessary but insufficient, and many students struggle to learn how this context structures current politics in the region and the current relations of Latin American states with the United States. To make this transition, I dedicate time to developing students’ noncognitive skills in the classroom, encouraging them to develop resiliency and perseverance through negativity bias that often develops as they learn this uncomfortable history.

This essay is premised on the assumption that political science education should be student-centered and accountable to how students will encounter the course content outside of the classroom. This is especially important when considering how to teach past and present U.S. policy, considering the relevance of the debate to many students’ career paths. Many of the students who enter my classrooms consider work opportunities with the Peace Corps, federally-funded fellowship and scholarship programs such as Fulbright and Boren, the military, and other international opportunities that are funded by the U.S. government. I contacted several alumni who work in these programs to inquire about if and how they encountered debates about U.S. empire. Their resounding response was that representatives of the U.S. government are quickly confronted with arguments about the tools of U.S. empire-making, and their responses will consequentially structure their experiences, relationships, and work. Debates about which past or present U.S. policy conceptually qualifies as ‘imperial’ need to quickly fall to the wayside of a deeper, more contextualized understanding of the significance of this debate in the communities. Each student articulated the necessity of understanding the motivations and objectives of the programs, their position within those programs, and how they continue to come to terms with the extent to which they can do good in the world within those

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Rasul v. Bush, 124 S. Ct. 2686 (2004), Hamdi v Rumsfeld, 542 U.S. 507 (2004), Boumediene v Bush, 553 U.S. 723(2008).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Nancy Hiemstra, “Pushing the Us-Mexico Border South: United States’ Immigration Policing Throughout the Americas,” *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies* 5:1-2 (2019): 44-63, here, 45. See also Cecilia Menjivar, “Immigration Law Beyond Borders: Externalizing and Internalizing Border Controls in an Era of Securitization,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 10 (2014).

<sup>14</sup> Bryan Mabee, “Discourses of Empire: The Us ‘Empire’, Globalisation and International Relations,” *Third World Quarterly* 25:8 (2004): 1359-1378, here, 1360.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly Bauer and Kelly Clancy, “Teaching Race and Social Justice at a Predominantly White Institution,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 14:1 (2018); Kelly Clancy and Kelly Bauer, “Reconceptualizing Diversity and Difference: Teaching Us and Comparative Politics in Conversation,” *Newsletter of the Organized Section in Comparative Politics of the American Political Science Association* 29:1 (2019).

programs. One alumna reflected on the variation in how her colleagues abroad think about their own responsibilities to their students, writing that “Some would rather teach about pumpkin pie and baseball, while others dive a little deeper. I have used teaching about holidays like Thanksgiving to challenge students’ understanding of colonialism and its lasting influence.” Another asked current and future participants of the program, “Do you understand how intricate your position is? Do you understand the undeserved position of power that you hold in these countries? And if you do, how do you use it?” Students should be prepared to engage with how perceptions of the U.S. structure the ways in which they engage with the community in which they live and work, and the ways in which that community will engage with them. If we, as political science educators, teach students to be engaged global citizens, we can only hope that the future representatives of these organizations have considered their own roles and degrees of complicity in work that can be perceived as tools of the U.S. empire.

As international politics educators, we must hold ourselves accountable to the students who will be engaging in conversations with those who experience U.S. policy. Teaching the U.S. empire debate in the classroom opens the conversation by broadening and deepening their understandings of international politics; one alumna wrote that for political scientists, “that should be an innate train of thought.”

Much of the debate about whether America is an empire is tied to questions of global justice, European colonialism and imperialism, and patterns of hierarchy or domination in international relations. Since at least the rise of the Wisconsin School<sup>16</sup> and revisionist histories of American foreign policy,<sup>17</sup> scholars have studied when and why American rhetorical gestures towards democratic politics or civil rights are subordinated to economic concerns, elite interests, and *realpolitik*. If students have encountered the American Empire debate before, it is likely in the context of expressions of this historiography, either in history textbooks or in popularizations like Howard Zinn's bestselling *A People's History of the United States*.<sup>18</sup>

In our team-taught course, "Empire or Republic? Ideas and Practice in U.S. Foreign Policy," we take a different approach, focusing on the debate about the relationship between republican government and expansive foreign policy that forms a consistent thread of American political thought from the colonial period to the present day. Rather than offering a critique of American foreign policy, we use primary sources to examine the debate about empire *within* American foreign policy. A mélange of Biblical symbolism, Enlightenment philosophy, Renaissance republican theory, eighteenth-century geopolitics, and folk history sparked an ongoing and vigorous debate about whether the United States might, should, or should not attain greatness through territorial and political conquest and economic, demographic, military, and political power. Empire is re-framed as a recurring possibility or project for the United States, one which different American leaders, thinkers, and activists have variously advanced or attacked throughout history.

The relationship between 'empire' and 'republicanism' is a long and complicated one in America. One of the most consistent fears —though one that has been voiced by differing figures in diverse ways—is the fear of empire, especially as it was manifest in the classical world. After all, as citizens of thirteen far flung colonies of an enormous empire, Americans were aware that in such extended political forms "seas roll, and months pass"<sup>19</sup> in communicating decisions between the imperial center and its subjects, rendering citizenship and self-government difficult. What Americans tried to create in place of empire has been described, in one interpretation, as "a Country without a Court,"<sup>20</sup> a land of honest and virtuous provincials without the kind of centralized power or intrigues and ambitions that marked the Old World. The time of the American Revolution and after, political historian J.G.A. Pocock has noted, was a moment at which polemicists constantly mined "the classical vocabulary, at which to utter warnings against the fate of Rome, [which had been] transformed from a republic to a despotism by the conquest of an empire whose wealth corrupted the citizenry and could only be distributed by a Caesar."<sup>21</sup> Later actors from the Anti-Imperialist League to

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<sup>16</sup> Representative works of this school include William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1959); Walter LaFeber, *Creation of the American Empire: U.S. Diplomatic History* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973); and, more recently and more qualifiedly, Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Here the most popular text might be Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper, 1990). A much earlier entry into the canon of both these schools of thought would be Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1913).

<sup>18</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Edmund Burke, "On Moving His Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies," in *Select Works of Edmund Burke, vol. 1* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 242.

<sup>20</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton Classics, 2016), 509.

<sup>21</sup> Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 510.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower to Hannah Arendt<sup>22</sup> echoed the notion that imperial expansionism posed a grave threat to republican institutions and the practice of self-government.

Yet this school of republican thought forms only one corner of the American experience, and although some of its exponents attained high station—as with President George Washington and his Farewell Address—it has not always been the most influential one. Additionally, it might be asked how honest or representative such rhetoric is. Some colonial Americans, like Ezra Stiles, foresaw an interconnected world led by the United States.<sup>23</sup> In one of the less-frequently read *Federalist Papers*, founding father Alexander Hamilton eagerly anticipated that at one point the balance of power between Europe and America would be inverted.<sup>24</sup> Were Americans (or at least some of them) hoping through independence to craft an empire of their own?

Two further elements are important but deeply ambiguous: the role and precise meaning of the term ‘democracy;’ and religious rhetoric and the potentially expansionist missionary impulse. The word ‘democracy’ was shunned by the framers of the Constitution even as it was practiced intensely at the local level. Yet the term can mean just about anything, from mere voting procedures to an entire set of social and cultural beliefs encompassing such doctrines as human rights, the rule of law, and a strong notion of equality. Even in its strictly procedural meaning, though, democracy may be at odds with republicanism if a majority of voters set themselves against the rights of a minority. In its psychological and anthropological assumptions, it may tend either toward compatibility with a republican form (by encouraging representation and participation) or toward a personal and collective expansiveness that sets the stage for imperialism (the course highlights what we called the ‘Jeffersonian paradox,’ i.e. that increasing democratization in the nineteenth century was linked to territorial expansionism and the conquest of the frontier.)

Religion, too, stands in a complex and ambiguous relationship to the central question of the course, and is one that particularly animated some of our students at the Catholic University. The career of the ‘city on a hill’ image, which originates in the Sermon on the Mount as an admonition to Christians to model moral integrity, goes from a stern warning to a fledgling colony by the Puritan leader John Winthrop to a ‘shining city’—a universal model for all nations—in its Cold War usage by Ronald Reagan. Whether the better Biblical analogy for the American nation is to be found in the Exodus experience or in the universalism and proselytism of the New Testament constitutes the central conflict over empire. After all, American missionaries, too, played a major role in advancing ‘the march of the flag.’

These two elements—democracy and the role of religion in American history—have not infrequently come together to form a kind of civic religion of democracy, expressed in texts as elevated as the poems of Walt Whitman (“I chant the new empire grander than any before, as in a vision it comes to me”),<sup>25</sup> or as early as in Timothy Dwight’s poetry. Dwight, a Connecticut clergyman, wrote an epic poem about the peopling of the New World entitled *The Conquest of Canaan*: “to found an empire, and to rule a world.”<sup>26</sup> Many Americans

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<sup>22</sup> Her argument about republicanism and the need for a common location of public action is especially pronounced in an early chapter of *The Human Condition*. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 22-78. See also the essay, “The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 260-274.

<sup>23</sup> Ezra Stiles, “The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor,” in Andrew J. Bacevich, ed., *Ideas and American Foreign Policy: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 15-20.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 11, in George W. Carey and James McClellan, eds., *The Federalist Papers* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 49-54.

<sup>25</sup> Walt Whitman, “A Broadway Pageant,” in *Ideas and American Foreign Policy: A Reader*, ed. Andrew J. Bacevich (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 65-66.

<sup>26</sup> Timothy Dwight, *The Conquest of Canaan: A Poem in Eleven Books* (Hartford: Elisha Babcock, 1785), 21.

were possessed by a sense of destiny, a sense that the New World had not been discovered by accident, that colonists had not traveled there for merely some small purpose, or simply to leave their old lives behind. Yes, an “empire shall rise,” Dwight promises, but it is to be a new kind of empire, one based on “freedom” and shorn of the “slaughter” of the Old World, with its cities in flames, which is passing away. In this competing vision, America will be, indeed, “the last” and “the noblest” empire of all time. History itself is reaching a climax, an apocalypse, in the United States’ national experience.

These citations—to the Bible, to poetry high and low, and to rhetoric—illustrate our distinctive approach to the course. Although not the ignoring economic, geographic, and technological changes that drove American imperial ambition, we pay special attention to what might be called the social imaginary (as expressed in the work of Charles Taylor)<sup>27</sup> or the changes to Americans’ self-understanding behind these policy changes.<sup>28</sup> It is our contention that a focus on political ‘debate’ as such often fails to capture the deeper vision that animates sides in a dispute like this one; any attempt to understand how and why Americans did the things they did, feared or treasured the things they did, or how and why changes in what was ‘thinkable’ came to pass must take account of a wider animating vision. Just as we cannot hermetically seal off the practice of politics among nations from the practice of politics within nations, regions, and communities, we cannot completely separate politics from other fields of human activity, and so our course on American foreign policy history ends up with a very varied syllabus indeed, with selections of poetry and fiction alongside speeches and policy documents.

Our use of primary sources emphasizes the dynamism and endurance of concerns about American empire. Rather than presenting empire as being either a congenital defect in a racist patriarchal political system or a foreign infection that emerged at discrete inflection points (1848, 1898, 1945, etc.), our course focuses on tracking the ongoing debate over time, so that students are encouraged to critically engage with and form their own synthetic accounts of American history. For example, rather than simply looking at President Andrew Jackson’s expulsion of Native Americans as an imperial act, we read his 1830 statement to Congress on Indian Removal<sup>29</sup> alongside a critical broadside by proto-abolitionist and Christian minister Jeremiah Everts,<sup>30</sup> and Cherokee Chief John Ross’s 1836 letter to Congress.<sup>31</sup> This juxtaposition lays bare the hollowness of Jackson’s justification and its racism and hypocrisy, but also reveals other complexities: Ross’s appeals to American ideals and Western laws and diplomatic norms alongside his evident rage and sorrow, Everts’s work organizing one of the political, philosophical, and even religious coalitional counterweights that have often emerged to American imperialism (though not to consistent effect).

There are some limitations of this approach. By focusing on the American conversations, a comparative perspective is mostly left implicit, except where writers explicitly contrast their views with those of other (mostly European) imperial orders. We dodge theoretical or conceptual questions about the nature of empire by focusing on how American thinkers have understood the term. While we include some material on contemporary foreign policy and recent history, we under-examine scholarship on American empire that focuses on existing structures, practices, power networks, economic-military infrastructure, and coercive international ordering: the imperial management that goes on mostly behind the scenes and without

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> An approach broadly influenced by Eric Voegelin. See Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Jackson, “On Indian Removal” in *Ideas and American Foreign Policy: A Reader*, ed. Andrew J. Bacevich (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 40-41.

<sup>30</sup> William Penn [Jeremiah Everts], “Present Crisis in the Condition of the American Indians,” in Bacevich, 41-42.

<sup>31</sup> John Ross, “Letter to Congress,” in Bacevich, 42-43.

rhetorical emphasis. But such downsides allow us to maintain a cohesive focus on American political thinking while retaining students' interest.

Our assignments, too, are designed to provoke thoughtful, serious, and explicit engagement with the questions of American empire. In the first writing assignment, a 'foreign policy autobiography,' each student details the elements of his or her own thinking about American foreign policy and the source of order in geopolitics. We received a number of interesting responses—from accounts of personal relationships with immigrants and diplomats to the psychological and emotional impact of major world events—and were able to use these responses in crafting relevant seminar discussion questions for the rest of the semester. We continued the focus on fresh, critical, thoughtful consideration by requiring several 'reflection' papers on a given day's assigned readings. The focus of those readings flowed from the historical and theoretical (e.g. from the *Federalist* or the works of early colonists) to the practical (with readings concerning the various ways wars have been funded or American military bases have been located around the globe). Throughout the term, we were able to leverage the new Center for the Study of Statesmanship at Catholic University to bring numerous guest lecturers to campus. In our discussions, we returned time and again to the integration of the theoretical and the practical; we invited the students to consider the philosophical anthropology implied within some concrete foreign policy action or to speculate about the particular policy that might be necessary given a certain principle or doctrine.

Our approach to the American empire debate is designed to appeal to and intrigue the broadest possible spectrum of students. Left critiques of American empire or concerns about American interventionism rooted in classical liberal or libertarian perspectives or concerns about cost have limited traction with many of our students. In line with public polling,<sup>32</sup> foreign policy autobiographies revealed that most students see the United States as a good, if flawed, actor in international relations, and want the United States to exercise global leadership (and bear significant costs) to protect democracy or human rights, though opinions diverge about how.<sup>33</sup> As one should expect in an age of growing polarization, once students identify the American empire debate with one or another political ideology or position, they tend to evaluate it on that basis. Our primary-source approach makes the critique of American empire more nuanced and powerful for those students who already buy the revisionist framing. But for students who are skeptical of or uncomfortable with such a broad-based criticism of American politics going back to the Founding, studying what John Quincy Adams, George Washington, or Dwight D. Eisenhower said on the topic shows them that concerns about American empire are not just for the Left. We hope this framing of the American empire debate contributes to a more dynamic, historical, and humble approach to American foreign policy.

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<sup>32</sup> Mark Hannah, *Worlds Apart: U.S. Foreign Policy and American Public Opinion* (Eurasia Group Foundation, 2019).

<sup>33</sup> Hannah, *Worlds Apart*, 17. In line with the findings of this report about the general public's views, the "Independent America" model also seemed more popular with our students than the expert-favored "Indispensable America" view.

*How to Teach the American Empire Debate*

Imperialism has a bum rap, and rightly so. After all, invading, ‘pacifying,’ and colonizing a foreign population in the name of civilization (and profit) does not rank highly on history’s ‘that was a good idea’ index. A brief look at the ongoing unrest in former colonies around the world bears this out. Thank goodness the United States was never an imperial power! At least, this is often what my undergraduate students seem to think before taking my class.

Of course, the U.S. *was* an imperial power. Even as President Woodrow Wilson advocated for self-determination around the world, his government continued to rule over the Philippines, which the U.S. had taken from Spain after the Spanish-American War of 1898. Not to mention the U.S. protectorates dotting the Pacific Ocean, or the treatment of the Native Americans since settlers first arrived on the continent. Interestingly, these pesky facts rarely seem to breach the exceptionalist narrative of the shining city upon a hill that sets an example of freedom and democracy for all others to admire and emulate.

But is the United States *still* an empire? Contemporary debates about American neo-imperialism range between enthusiastic endorsement to vehement condemnation and often devolve into superficial tropes and stereotypes of American patriotism or American hubris, neither of which is particularly conducive to good teaching. Moreover, the debate too often remains tied to the latter-twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This does political scientists an extreme disservice, since any understanding of what a contemporary empire looks like invariably draws from a vast history of empires, perhaps especially from the colonial era of the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. Still, the debate touches on so many important elements of world politics that it can be a valuable tool to bring to the classroom. How then to advance a discussion on empire and U.S. foreign policy that does not simply degenerate into partisan polemics and platitudes? Perhaps harder still, how then to convince students that there isn’t a single answer to big questions like this?

Drawing on history, IR postcolonial theory, and a bit of poststructuralism for good measure, I require that my students interrogate the question itself. To begin, I ask them to provide definitions of ‘empire’. This is harder than it seems, particularly after I add ‘imperialism’ and ‘colonialism’ to the list. We then deconstruct those definitions and situate them in a broad historical landscape to notice any shifts in meaning or use. The semantic exercise usually reveals certain shared (mis)perceptions of history. I am always a bit surprised to find that my undergraduates have a very limited understanding of European imperialism, save for clichés like ‘the White Man’s Burden’ and romanticized depictions of ‘the Orient’ in movies like those in the *Indiana Jones* franchise. But then I remember that my students were not even born (or barely) in 2001. This is a demographic for whom the Vietnam War or even the Cold War seems like ancient history. Therefore, I ask them, armed with their laptops and smartphones, to give me examples of historical empires and to pinpoint what made them such. Divided into groups, they dig deeper. For instance, did the Roman, Byzantine, or Mogul empires differ from the British empire of the nineteenth century? Were the geopolitical contexts different, and does it matter? In other words, *why* were they empires?

Once we settle on a range of characteristics that are common to empire and acknowledge any temporal shifts in meaning, we turn back to the matter at hand, which is U.S. foreign policy. In preparation, my first salvo is to assign readings written by historians. The two I gravitate towards are by Daniel Immerwahr and Paul Kramer. Both give a broad historical overview of U.S. imperialism while still addressing current world affairs.<sup>34</sup> Both make the point that popular U.S. history—at least its mythos—has erased much of that past from colloquial knowledge, which has been occluded by the rhetoric of ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of

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<sup>34</sup> Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019); Paul A. Kramer, “How Not to Write the History of U.S. Empire,” *Diplomatic History* 42:5 (2018): 911-931.

happiness.’ This is often jarring to my students because American exceptionalism is a comfy place to inhabit; the world outside its lens seems a bit cold, scary, and uninviting. And yet here I am taking them on a (forced) field trip to inhospitable territory. Not to disorient them completely, I also assign several think-pieces from IR scholars, pundits, or policymakers that specifically address the present role of the U.S. in the world. Depending on what is happening globally at that moment, I try to anchor these shorter pieces to a specific policy or set of policies. This might be the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), drone warfare, the China trade war, or more recently the attempt to increase the costs to foreign governments for housing U.S. bases on their territory.

Once we are treading the uncomfortable waters of (potential) U.S. un-exceptionalism, we dive deep into the past 30 years, using the readings as a floatation device. I ask my students how, since the end of the Cold War, has the U.S. engaged with the rest of the world? What does its global footprint look like? I begin with examples of humanitarian intervention in the 1990s and address the seeming shift of focus away from great power politics towards human rights and international law. I ask my students if this could be a form of empire, hoping to tease out of them the role of norms and the spread of ideas. Americans are inculcated early on to believe that each individual is ‘endowed with certain inalienable rights,’ that these rights are universal both in terms of applicability and desire; namely, that human rights apply to everyone and they are sought and wanted by everyone. But what if that is not true? We pick apart the Western philosophic origins of human rights and humanitarian law, particularly the 2005 ‘Responsibility to Protect’ doctrine, and trace this back to the colonial era, if not earlier. I suggest that a similar conversation could easily take place around the spread of capitalist economic practices and ideals.

Maybe it is unorthodox to focus first on the 1990s. So often the debate over contemporary American imperialism jumps straight to 2001 or 2003. However, state intervention as a ‘legitimate’ endeavor—collective or otherwise—took on a new meaning after the Soviet Union fell, and that meaning is still filtered through any conceptualization of ‘appropriate’ U.S. foreign policy, particularly in what used to be called the Second or Third Worlds. No longer used primarily as a mechanism to contain the Soviets, interventions became more about ‘what is appropriate’ behavior. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s usurpation of Kuwait in August 1990? It was judged to be inappropriate because it conflicted with the norm of national sovereignty. Ignoring drought and starvation in Ethiopia? That was judged inappropriate because it conflicted with our image/desire to be the good guys. And the misses or failures in Rwanda, Srebrenica, etc., perhaps illustrated or reinforced even more a belief that the U.S. and the post-Second World War liberal world order *should* be safeguarding the planet for democracy, *should* be helping the helpless, *should* be preventing the ‘less civilized’ from murdering one another in barbaric ways. Of course, national interests still played a prominent role, and it is that very interaction between *realpolitik* and this new notion of U.S. identity that was born from being the sole remaining superpower that forms the nucleus of the debate on contemporary empire.

When I get to the ‘War on Terror,’ most students are eager to point out that Iraq, post-Saddam, shares a number of similarities with the colonialism of yore. Once again, I ask them to tease this out. To help them, I assign two relatively recent position pieces on the debate itself.<sup>35</sup> To reiterate, the point is not to provide answers but to ask more questions: why do some argue that the United States is an empire and some argue that it is not? Does each side of the debate understand ‘empire’ in the same way? Whither American exceptionalism in this tale? At the heart of the debate lies the difference between hegemony and imperialism; influence and control. Returning to the brief survey of world history and the students’ definition(s) of empire, we attempt to parse out what these differences might look like. For instance, how does the civilizing mission of yore compare to present-day nation-building? Could Britain or France or Rome or Constantinople dictate how its colonies were run? Could the U.S. in Afghanistan or Iraq? Returning to the realm of ideas, does the notion of ‘McWorld’ reflect a certain cultural imperialism?

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<sup>35</sup> I most recently used: Tyrone Groh and James Lockhart, “Is America an Empire?” *War on the Rocks*, 27 August 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/08/is-america-an-empire/> and David C. Hendrickson, “Is America an Empire?” *The National Interest*, 17 October 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/america-empire-22768>.

Of course, given that I teach at an American university, most of the discussion tacitly centers on an American—or at least Western—perspective. Therefore finally, and perhaps most importantly, I ask what is it like to be on the receiving end of American ‘hospitality’? Does the U.S. look or feel like an empire from the Other’s perspective? Here, as illustration, we discuss America’s use of drones around the world for the primary purpose of gathering intelligence, but also for kinetic strikes. What gives the U.S. the right to do so? What about state sovereignty? What about privacy rights? I push my class to think beyond the structural level to that of the individuals involved. Does it matter if more and more of the people living under this threat change their minds about the U.S. and see it as the enemy? Isn’t this what happened with al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden?

None of the questions posed in class has a clear answer. Ultimately, however, I teach the debate not so that my students will arrive at a decision on which side is ‘right’; rather I ask that they learn how to critically pursue their own informed answer. In the end, all the questions we asked, all the distinctions, comparison, and analysis of terms, eras, wars, and norms, are the real lesson—active and critical learning. In the era of ‘fake news,’ this has become all the more essential to successful pedagogy.

Teaching the American Empire debate to undergraduates offers rich opportunities to develop their understanding of international relations (IR) and U.S. foreign policy while also challenging them to reach higher levels of critical thinking and self-reflection. At the same time, this debate raises normative questions and identity-based concerns that may be challenging for instructors to navigate toward a positive pedagogical outcome. In what follows, I explore some of the pedagogical opportunities offered by this debate, beginning with its overt subject matter and moving towards its more sensitive implications.

The American Empire debate concerns a subject of no less scope or significance than what the U.S. role in the world is and should be.<sup>36</sup> Few areas of study directly engage so many core IR concepts, drawing on such a broad swath of history, and apply them to questions as central to current policymaking. The debate not only breathes concepts like anarchy, sovereignty, and power; it weaves together the too-frequently-segregated subfields of security studies, political economy, and international law. It features phenomena like the War on Terror, NATO, the United Nations, and NAFTA that are recognizable to even the least-experienced first-year students, and it directly invokes the histories of U.S. foreign policy, great power politics, and the modern international order as well as American political development and the course of empires abroad. In other words, there is something for everyone in this debate—abundant flint to spark students' interest in learning more about international politics.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the debate speaks directly to the future of U.S. foreign policy, spanning the ideological spectrum from neoconservatives to liberal internationalists (as well as critics of both), and it allows students to constructively develop their emerging perspectives on world politics by engaging in current policy debates.<sup>38</sup>

Beyond its historical and policy-relevant content, the American Empire debate offers excellent opportunities for students to develop the critical thinking skills that are central to a strong liberal arts education. The debate frequently lends itself to blurred concepts and hot takes offering easy answers to caricatured questions—obstacles to productive policy debate that, if handled well in the classroom, can help breed a gnawing urge to explore the complex issues that lie beneath. In an era of viral clickbait headlines and news consumption via social media, cultivating the instinct to dig deeper is a crucial objective of higher education.

A good place to begin is the debate's apparent central question: Is the United States an empire? Students are likely to offer a range of responses to this question, including some 'no' answers rooted in appeals to U.S. anti-

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<sup>36</sup> For a sampling of recent entries, see Victor Bulmer-Thomas, *Empire in Retreat: The Past, Present, and Future of the United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); A. G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Adam Burns, *American Imperialism: The Territorial Expansion of the United States, 1783-2013* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); Richard H. Immerman, *Empire for Liberty: A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008); Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004); Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the difficulty of course readings can be easily scaled from introductory to advanced levels, including everything from the history books in the previous note to academic journal articles to op-eds such as Robert Kagan, "The Benevolent Empire," *Foreign Policy* (1998): 24-35; Jack Snyder, "Imperial Temptations," *National Interest* 71 (2003): 29-40; Stanley Kurtz, "Democratic Imperialism: A Blueprint," *Policy Review* 118 (2003); G. John Ikenberry, "Liberalism and Empire: Logics of Order in the American Unipolar Age," *Review of International Studies* 30 (2004): 609-630.

<sup>38</sup> One popular pair of readings for undergraduates on the related foreign policy debate juxtaposes Barry R. Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 92 (2013): 116-129; Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement," *Foreign Affairs* 92 (2013): 130-142.

imperialist ideology and democratic institutions, which can serve as a springboard for an initial discussion aimed at clarifying what exactly an empire is (and highlighting the importance of clear conceptualization for productive debate). Michael Doyle's definition that empires maintain "foreign control over effective sovereignty" offers a useful foundation—formal empires exercise sovereignty over territory separate from and subordinate to their core political institutions.<sup>39</sup> Given this definition, yes, of course the United States is an empire: it controls 'unincorporated' territories including Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands (not to mention the District of Columbia and Native American reservations), none of which are federal states.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the United States has never not been an empire—it acquired the vast area between the original states and the Mississippi River from Britain at the end of the Revolutionary War, well before those thirteen independent states joined together under the U.S. Constitution to form one federal republic, and it has exercised sovereignty over a changing assortment of non-state territories ever since.

This is only the start of the conversation. The American Empire debate concerns not whether Puerto Rico is secretly already a state but rather the extent to which U.S. foreign policy around the world involves and should involve informal imperialism—hierarchical control without the trappings of Westphalian sovereignty. Scholars have focused on its military, economic, and other dimensions, as well as whether such imperialism is better or worse for U.S. interests and for the world than the alternatives.<sup>41</sup> In so doing, the debate opens a veritable ocean of conceptual ambiguity for students to navigate. In what ways can one state meaningfully control portions of another's sovereignty while preserving its domestic political freedom? What forms of influence and what extents of control warrant the name 'imperialism'—and with it, direct comparison to previous European and other empires?

Opportunities abound for in-class debate. Where do alliances (e.g. NATO), trade diplomacy (e.g., pressuring Canada and Mexico to renegotiate NAFTA), security hierarchies (e.g., the U.S.-Panama relationship), humanitarian interventions (e.g., the 2011 Libya intervention), international organizations (e.g., International Monetary Fund loan conditionality), military deployments (e.g., U.S. troops stationed in South Korea), and regime change operations (e.g., the 2003 invasion of Iraq) fit into this discussion? Does it make a difference whether an asymmetric relationship came about through forcible domination (e.g., Native American tribes) or as a partnership with willing clients (e.g., NATO membership for the Baltic states)? Does it matter how much dissent the 'imperial' state allows (e.g., the French veto threat preventing UN Security Council authorization for the 2003 invasion of Iraq)?

One insight sure to emerge from any sustained discussion of these questions is the key thesis that launched the American Empire debate: the United States is not uniquely innocent, altruistic, or isolationist. In the 1950s and 1960s, historians including William Appleman Williams and Walter LaFeber argued that U.S. foreign policy was characterized by relentless expansionism aimed at securing wealth and markets abroad.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 35.

<sup>40</sup> Christina D. Burnett and Burke Marshall, eds., *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Gary Lawson and Guy Seidman, *The Constitution of Empire: Territorial Expansion and American Legal History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Charles R. Venator-Santiago, *Puerto Rico and the Origins of US Global Empire: The Disembodied Shade* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Sam Erman, *Almost Citizens: Puerto Rico, the U.S. Constitution, and Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> Daniel H. Nexon and Thomas Wright, "What's at Stake in the American Empire Debate," *American Political Science Review* 101:2 (2007), 253-271; David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Paul K. MacDonald, "Those Who Forget Historiography Are Doomed to Republish It: Empire, Imperialism, and Contemporary Debates about American Power," *Review of International Studies* 35:1 (2009): 45-67.

<sup>42</sup> William A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1959); Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963); Charles S. Campbell, *The Transformation of American Foreign Relations, 1865-1900* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Lloyd C. Gardner, Walter F. LaFeber, and Thomas J. McCormick, *Creation of the American Empire*, vol. 1 (Chicago:

After 9/11, a new generation revived the notion of an American Empire in the context of unipolarity and the controversial security policies associated with the War on Terror.<sup>43</sup> Spanning decades, this literature has made a valuable contribution in emphasizing that the United States has been embedded in global relationships and the pursuit of power throughout its history.<sup>44</sup> Yet as with the acknowledgement that the United States is a formal empire, the recognition that U.S. expansionism is long-standing and multifaceted is unlikely to satisfy students and sure to provoke further discussion.

As I note in *The Picky Eagle: How Democracy and Xenophobia Limited U.S. Territorial Expansion*, the American Empire literature tends to prioritize continuity at the expense of change in its interpretation of U.S. history.<sup>45</sup> One common practice has been to identify an early “territorial” empire followed by a “commercial” empire and eventually “global” or “semiglobal” empire, and students can debate the merits or demerits of analogizing across policy goals like territorial conquest, trade agreements, and transnational counterterrorism.<sup>46</sup> A clean-cut division of U.S. history into distinct phases of ‘empire’ also implies a chronological switch from territorial to commercial expansion that defies the historical record: U.S. leaders consistently sought to expand economic opportunities and protect access to export markets (such concerns drove President Thomas Jefferson’s pursuit of Louisiana and Florida, for example), and they treated opportunities for territorial expansion on a case-by-case basis, rejecting even profitable opportunities where they threatened prohibitive domestic political or normative costs.<sup>47</sup> Prompting students to think carefully about these subjects can help underscore the fact that digging deeper into broad generalizations is both useful and a normal thing to do if you want to understand the world.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for instructors teaching the American Empire debate concerns neither its substantive content nor its conceptual ambiguity but the web of normative, ideological, and identity-based concerns in which it is embedded. How should we best teach a subject that students from international backgrounds are likely to perceive very differently from domestic students, especially given that any policy prescription carries implications not only for U.S. interests but also for the sovereignty and self-determination of other states? How should we best facilitate productive discussion of subjects that are inherently linked to deeply-held identities, making sure that we engage and do not alienate students who have lived in postcolonial countries or who cherish American anti-imperial ideology? How should we respond to students who may instinctively wish to minimize the darker elements of U.S. foreign policy history or reject out of hand the possibility of empire producing any positive outcomes?

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Rand McNally, 1973); Ernest N. Paolino, *The Foundations of the American Empire: William Henry Seward and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973); William A. Williams, *The Roots of the Modern American Empire: A Study of the Growth and Shaping of Social Consciousness in a Marketplace Society* (New York: Random House, 1969); R. W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960).

<sup>43</sup> Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000); Bacevich, *American Empire*; Ferguson, *Colossus*; Christopher Layne and Bradley A. Thayer, *American Empire: A Debate* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Nugent, *Habits of Empire*; Immerman, *Empire for Liberty*.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Ian Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective Since 1789* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), ch. 10; Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), ch. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Richard W. Maass, *The Picky Eagle: How Democracy and Xenophobia Limited U.S. Territorial Expansion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

<sup>46</sup> E.g., Bulmer-Thomas, *Empire in Retreat*; Nugent, *Habits of Empire*.

<sup>47</sup> Maass, *The Picky Eagle*; cf. Richard W. Maass, “Difficulty to Relinquish Territory Which Had Been Conquered’: Expansionism and the War of 1812,” *Diplomatic History* 39:1 (2015), 70-97.

These and related questions may not have easy answers, and they deserve instructors' careful reflection. One thing that seems clear, though, is that neither history nor foreign policy should be whitewashed. Sterilizing class discussion by avoiding the roles of race, religion, etc., when discussing U.S. foreign policy history leads to false inferences and antagonizes students who know better. Xenophobia rooted largely in race and religion powerfully shaped the course of U.S. territorial expansion, for example, as U.S. leaders declined to annex peoples they saw as unfit for U.S. citizenship and used federal land policies to engineer the racial composition of prospective states.<sup>48</sup> What initially made the American Empire different from most others was that all of the territories it acquired were eventually expected to enter the Union as states, but that practice ended after the 1898 acquisitions of the Philippines and Puerto Rico, which the Supreme Court declared to be "belonging to the United States, but not a part of the United States."<sup>49</sup> Both race and religion continue to play a major role in U.S. domestic politics, and U.S. foreign policy is often cast as a "crusade" fueled in part by a "liberal creed."<sup>50</sup> Attempting to debate the American Empire solely in military or economic terms while sidestepping ideology and identities is likely to set off the same warning bells in the minds of sharp students as the oversimplifications discussed above.

Openly engaging the normative consequences of the American Empire in the classroom offers instructors the opportunity to honestly confront the dark parts of its past and present, challenge students to consider how their own identities shape their initial reactions to the subject, and help them wield insights from modern international relations scholarship to reasonably predict the consequences of potential policy prescriptions. It may be useful for students in groups to evaluate the costs and benefits of individual aspects of American Empire such as specific policies or interventions, and then to consider how they interact with each other to produce compounding effects and agonizing tradeoffs.<sup>51</sup> In this way, the American Empire debate can help the leaders of tomorrow appreciate the difficult choices facing policymakers and to consider how they would weigh those choices for themselves.

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<sup>48</sup> Maass, *The Picky Eagle*; Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Eric T.L. Love, *Race Over Empire: Racism & U.S. Imperialism, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism and Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963).

<sup>49</sup> *Downes v. Bidwell*, 182 U.S. 287, 341-342 (1901). Integrating pieces of its empire did not make the United States unique, though. For example, France integrated its Algerian colony, labeling it as "French in the same way as Normandy, Brittany or the Savoy." Martin Evans, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19.

<sup>50</sup> Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Walter L. Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 13; cf. Michael C. Desch, "America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Security* 32:3 (2007/08): 7-43.

<sup>51</sup> Richard W. Maass, Carla Norrlof, and Daniel W. Drezner, "Correspondence: The Profitability of Primacy," *International Security* 38:4 (2014): 188-205.