THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF AMERICAN FOREIGN RELATIONS, VOLUME I

Dimensions of the Early American Empire, 1754–1865

Since their first publication, the four volumes of *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations* have served as the definitive source for the topic, from the colonial period to the Cold War. This entirely new first volume narrates the British North American colonists' preexisting desire for expansion, security, and prosperity and argues that these desires are both the essence of American foreign relations and the root cause for the creation of the United States. Expansionism required the colonists to unite politically, because individual colonies could not dominate North America by themselves. Although ingrained localist sentiments persisted, a strong, durable union was required for mutual success, and thus American nationalism was founded on the idea of allegiance to the Union. Continued tension between the desire for expansion and the fragility of the Union eventually resulted in the Union's collapse and the Civil War.

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The New Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations

Warren I. Cohen, Editor

Volume 1: Dimensions of the Early American Empire, 1754–1865
– William Earl Weeks

Volume 2: The American Search for Opportunity, 1865–1913
– Walter LaFeber

Volume 3: The Globalizing of America, 1913–1945
– Akira Iriye

Volume 4: The Challenge to American Primacy, 1945 to the Present
– Warren I. Cohen

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Dimensions of the Early American Empire, 1754–1865

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This book is dedicated to three inspirational teachers:
to Professor Earl Pomeroy and to the memories of
Professors H. Stuart Hughes and Armin Rappaport

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GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

My goal for *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*, published in 1993, was to make the finest scholarship and the best writing in the historical profession available to the general reader. The response of readers and reviewers was gratifying. Then, as now, I had no ideological or methodological agenda. I wanted some of the leading students of diplomatic history, regardless of approach, to join me, and I was delighted to have my invitations accepted by the first three to whom I turned.

When I conceived of the project nearly thirty years ago, I had no idea that the Cold War would end suddenly, that the volumes would conclude with a final epoch as well defined as the first three. The collapse of the Soviet Empire, just as I finished writing Volume 4, astonished me, but allowed for a sense of completion those volumes would have lacked under any other circumstances.

Twenty years have passed since the publication of those volumes. Most obviously, additional chapters were needed to bring the story to the present. In addition, we were aware of the need to incorporate new scholarship, fresh insights into the works. *The New Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations* offers our most recent thoughts.

The first volume of the 1993 series was written by Bradford Perkins, then the preeminent historian of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century American diplomacy and doyen of active diplomatic historians. Brad's death necessitated a search for a successor to write the initial volume of *The New Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*. With the concurrence of my colleagues Akira Iriye and Walter LaFeber, I chose William Earl Weeks as this generation's finest student of early American diplomacy.

Weeks has written persuasively, sometimes provocatively, on a broad range of subjects, focused primarily on American expansion. Like Perkins, he stresses the building of an empire and sees a pattern of imperial behavior that existed before the creation of an independent United States. He sees men such as Ben Franklin promoting a vision of a great nation, an empire of freedom that would stretch across the continent. Again, like Perkins, he notes the persistent effort of presidents to dominate policy, contrary to the intent of the participants in the Constitutional Convention. In particular, Weeks raises the stature of James Monroe, portraying him as the first "hidden hand" president, foreshadowing methods Dwight Eisenhower perfected more than a century later. He is equally impressed with the audacity of James Polk as he contributed mightily to the nation's self-declared expansionist mission. He describes how Polk's role in acquiring an empire on the Pacific provided an enormous stimulus to continental expansion. Weeks argues that the concept of Manifest Destiny was applicable to the entire forty years' period preceding the Civil War. He demonstrates that American leaders did not hesitate to eliminate all obstacles to the creation of the early American Empire. He details their brutal treatment of Native Americans as the nation satisfied its lust for land on which various tribes had lived for hundreds of years. And finally, he takes a fresh look at the issue of slavery as a cause of the Civil War.

Walter LaFeber, author of the second volume, is one of the most highly respected of the so-called Wisconsin School of diplomatic historians, men and women who studied with Fred Harvey Harrington and William Appleman Williams and their students, and were identified as "New Left" when they burst on the scene in the 1960s. LaFeber's newly revised volume covers the last third of the nineteenth century and extends into the twentieth, to 1913, through the administration of William Howard Taft. He discusses the link between the growth of American economic power and expansionism, adding the theme of racism, especially as applied to Native Americans and Filipinos. Once again, his rejection of the idea of an American quest for order is striking. He argues that Americans sought opportunities for economic and missionary activities abroad and that they were undaunted by the disruptions they caused in other nations. A revolution in China or Mexico was a small price to pay for advantages accruing to Americans, especially

when the local people paid it. His other inescapable theme is the use of foreign affairs to enhance presidential power.

The third volume, which begins on the eve of World War I and carries the story through World War II, is again written by Akira Iriye, past president of the American Historical Association and our generation's most innovative historian of international relations. Japanese-born, educated in American universities, Iriye has been fascinated by the cultural conflicts and accommodations that permeate power politics, particularly as the United States has confronted the nations of East Asia. Iriye opens his book with a quick sketch of the international system as it evolved and was dominated by Europe through the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. He analyzes Wilsonianism in war and peace and how it was applied in Asia and Latin America. Most notable is his discussion of what he calls the "cultural aspect" of the 1920s. Iriye sees the era about which he writes as constituting the "globalizing of America" – an age in which the United States supplanted Europe as the world's leader and provided the economic and cultural resources to define and sustain the international order. He notes the awakening of non-Western peoples and their expectations of American support and inspiration. In his conclusion he presages the troubles that would follow from the Americanization of the world.

Much of my work, like Iriye's, has focused on American–East Asian relations. My friend Michael Hunt has placed me in the "realist" school of diplomatic historians. Influenced by association with Perkins, LaFeber, Iriye, Ernest May, and younger friends such as John Lewis Gaddis, Michael Hogan, and Melvyn Leffler, I have studied the domestic roots of American policy, the role of ideas and attitudes as well as economic concerns, the role of nongovernmental organizations including missionaries, and the place of art in international relations. In the final volume of the series, *The Challenge to American Primacy, 1945 to the Present,* I also rely heavily on what I have learned from political economists and political scientists.

I begin Part I of the book in the closing months of World War II and end it with the disappearance of the Soviet Union in 1991. I write of the vision American leaders had of a postwar world order and the growing sense that the Soviet Union posed a threat to that vision. The concept of the "security dilemma," the threat each side's defensive actions seemed

to pose for the other, looms large in my analysis of the origins of the Cold War. I also emphasize the importance of the two political systems: the paradox of the powerful state and weak government in the United States and the secrecy and brutality of the Stalinist regime. Throughout the volume, I note the importance of the disintegration of prewar colonial empires, the appearance of scores of newly independent states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and the turmoil caused by American and Soviet efforts to force them into an international system designed in Washington and Moscow. Finally, I conclude Part I with the reemergence of Germany and Japan as major powers, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the drift of the United States, its course in world affairs uncertain in the absence of an adversary.

In Part II, two chapters focus on the American role in world affairs since the end of the Cold War. I write of the struggle of political leaders and public intellectuals in the United States to find a new lodestar after the collapse of the Soviet Union rendered containment obsolete. George H. W. Bush and William Jefferson Clinton were hampered by a public tired of efforts to pacify an unruly world, demanding attention to domestic affairs. Not until the al Qaeda attacks on American soil on September 11, 2001, was a new foreign policy goal, articulated by George W. Bush, "the War on Terror," widely accepted – with grim consequences in Iraq and Afghanistan. But in the twenty-first century, it was quickly apparent that the principal challenge to American primacy would be the resurgence of Chinese power. As I write, Barack Obama has disposed of Osama bin Laden, but American troops remain in Afghanistan, Iran and North Korea taunt the American president, and he rebalances his nation's defensive forces across the Pacific.

There are a number of themes that can be followed through these four volumes, however differently the authors approach their subjects. First, there was the relentless national pursuit of wealth and power, described so vividly by Weeks and LaFeber. Iriye demonstrates how Americans used their wealth and power when the United States emerged as the world's leader after World War I. I discuss America's performance as hegemon in the years immediately following World War II, and its response to perceived threats to its dominance through the Cold War – and after.

A second theme of critical importance is the struggle for control of foreign policy. Each author notes tension between the president and

Congress, as institutionalized by the Constitution, and the efforts of various presidents, from 1789 to the present, to circumvent constitutional restraints on their powers. The threat to democratic government is illustrated readily by the Nixon-Kissinger obsessions that led to Watergate, Reagan's Iran-Contra fiasco, and the deceptions of the Bush-Cheney administration that led to the invasion of Iraq.

Finally, we are all concerned with what constitutes American identity on the world scene. Is there a peculiarly American foreign policy that sets the United States off from the rest of the world? We examine the evolution of American values and measure them against the nation's behavior in international affairs. And we worry about the impact of the country's global activity on its domestic order, fearful that Thomas Jefferson's vision of a virtuous republic has been forgotten, boding ill for Americans and for the world they are allegedly "bound to lead."

Warren I. Cohen

INTRODUCTION

We have a record of conquest, colonization, and territorial expansion unequalled by any people of the nineteenth century.

Henry Cabot Lodge, 1895

Who can limit the extent to which the federative principle may operate effectively?

Thomas Jefferson, 1801

American history is longer, larger, more varied, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it.

James Baldwin, October 16, 1963

Dimensions of the Early American Empire, 1754–1865, casts the history of antebellum U.S. foreign relations as fundamentally linked to the creation of an American republican empire. Some readers may be surprised to see use of the term "American Empire" in the title. After all, everyone knows that the United States was founded in opposition to British imperialism; moreover, American leaders have long opposed the creation and spread of other empires.

Yet there are least three reasons "American Empire" is the most accurate term to use in talking about antebellum U.S. foreign relations. First, it was the term the Founders themselves used to describe their creation. George Washington conceived of the United States as a "rising empire," an extensive dominion destined to grow in population, territory, and power. Washington and many others of the revolutionary generation self-consciously saw themselves as part of a historic imperial tradition, especially that of the Roman republic. In their commitment to public service and the public good, in their place names, and in the architectural styles of their public buildings, Americans saw themselves as latter-day Romans destined to export their ways of living to the world.

Washington seemed to be a modern-day Cincinnatus both in his devotion to public service and in the way in which he lightly held power. Thomas Jefferson's "Empire of Liberty" placed imperial expansion within the context of an expanding republican system that he saw as synonymous with progress. Peter Onuf writes, "Jefferson cherished an imperial vision of the new American nation," understanding that only rapid expansion could supply the vast new territories needed to stave off internal crises.[1] In fact, use of the term "empire" in the context of U.S. history fell out of favor only when it took on a negative connotation in the latter part of the nineteenth century as a result of the cruelties associated with the European conquest of Africa and Asia. At least until the Civil War, Americans used the term "empire" in a positive way to describe their civilization.

A second reason for using the term "empire" is to better situate the creation of a transcontinental republic amid the imperial rivalries of the time. Mid-eighteenth-century fears of encirclement by the French and Spanish empires provided the initial impetus to the creation of a colonial unity that could win the imperial struggle for North America. To a considerable degree, the United States was conceived as an entity capable of defeating the European and Native American empires that blocked its expansion. Historians have long puzzled over the seeming contradiction of "the imperialism of antiimperialism" characteristic of American foreign policy during this time, but the anomaly disappears when one realizes that Americans were not opposed to all empires, only to those different from their own. They shared this tendency in common with other European empires that sought to defeat their rivals in the name of their own distinct imperial projects. Americans equated their empire with progress, civilization, and, above all, freedom; they did not see it as a tool of oppression and hence were not reluctant to use the term to describe themselves.

Some historians have argued that when the Founders used "empire" to describe the United States they were using it to refer to what is now called a "nation," thereby making anachronistic its use of the word "empire" today. But this objection fails to consider the fact that nations themselves are often imposed unities on at times unwilling populations.

[1] Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville, 2000), 1.

From the Ohio Country westward, the American nation-state was built on the conquest of peoples – Native American, Hispanic, French, and others – incorporated without their consent, who were compelled to give up their traditional ways of life, who often faced removal to new lands further west, and who, in some cases, were threatened with annihilation by acts of violence perpetrated either by frontiersmen or by the U.S. military. Writing the history of American continental expansion requires an excavation of these sorts of basic facts to prevent their being lost to a latter-day version of Manifest Destiny that posits U.S. expansion across an "empty" continent accomplished in a relatively simple fashion. Thus Niall Ferguson is wrong when he states "[O]verland expansion was easy; this is often forgotten."[2] What is often forgotten is the fundamentally imperial nature of the U.S. conquest of a large portion of the North American continent. That expansionist project was neither easy nor cheaply realized; recounting it forms a substantial part of the narrative that follows.

A third reason "American Empire" is an appropriate term is that it encompasses the whole of the territorial domain of the United States, and not only that portion admitted as states at any given moment in history. The western imperial territories functioned as an enormous source of wealth and opportunity to which Americans could remove when conditions turned sour in the states. When economic convulsions such as the Panic of 1837 ruined the prospects of many people in the eastern portions of the country, it created the conditions for an outbreak of "Oregon fever," promising a place to go for a fresh start at realizing the American dream. The development of the states would have been very different without the western imperial territories as a safety valve to defuse and diffuse social and economic crises. Yet the American Empire includes more than the western imperial domain. It also connotes the full cultural, economic, ideological, and maritime reach of a civilization that self-consciously saw itself as the cutting edge of human history. Americans sought not only to trade with the world but also to transform the terms of that commercial intercourse according to the principles of liberal capitalism and to transform the oceans of the world from zones of anarchy to well-ordered highways of commerce. A narrow focus on American "domestic" history – internal

[2] Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York, 2004), 35.

developments within the United States – fails to adequately account for the importance of developments outside the nation's boundaries. A history of the American Empire allows for the foreign policy events crucial to national development to be incorporated into domestic histories and not be artificially separated from them, as often occurs in more traditional national histories. Historians have long understood that the history of American foreign relations is bound up with the history of the American nation-state, but it also must be understood that the history of the American nation-state is to a large extent a function of its foreign relations. More generally it can be said that the boundary between "domestic" and "foreign" is itself an evolving, semipermeable barrier with political, economic, and psychological components. The concept of American Empire allows for a complex transnational, transborder reality to inform the study of both foreign and domestic affairs.

Having established proper terminology the question remains, What is the American Empire composed of? What are its key component parts? How do they fit together to make an imperial entity? This work suggests that the ten key dimensions of the antebellum American Empire are as follows.

First, a preexisting colonial-era desire for expansion and security that could not be met by the individual colonies catalyzed both the creation of the Union and the development of American nationalism. Although the traditional view suggests that a primitive American nationalism led to a union and that this union soon embarked on a program of expansion, *Dimensions of the Early American Empire* argues the reverse: that a preexisting expansionist tendency (and concomitant concerns regarding security) necessitated a union in order to be realized, and that the nation was invented in order to solidify the political union. Historians have demonstrated that concerns over a central government lacking the power to conduct a vigorous foreign policy substantially motivated the creation of the Constitution. This narrative extends that insight, arguing that the idea of union (colonial or otherwise) arose from a desire to execute a foreign policy of expansion and security. Hence, union is the first and most important dimension of the American Empire and of American foreign relations.

A favorable geography forms a second dimension of the American Empire. Although the geographic dimension is often overlooked as a motive force in the creation of the Union, its earliest advocates – such

as Benjamin Franklin and George Washington – understood that North America's vast extent, superabundant resources, relatively small native populations, and remoteness from Europe created the conditions for building a prosperous, expansive, and secure society if a political entity could be created capable of taking advantage of them. These favorable circumstances were not the result either of luck (as some would have it) or God's blessing (as it is seen more commonly) but rather a distinct, historic, contingent opportunity that would create the framework for all that would follow. The world's oceans functioned both as highways and as moats, insulating the United States from excessive fear of invasion (and thus the need for continual military preparedness) even as they provided commercial access to the markets of the world. Facing toward both Europe and Asia, the United States represented the keystone country in an emerging global economy, ideally situated to engage the world if it chose to do so and yet relatively impregnable to foreign invasion. To no small degree, geography was destiny in antebellum American history.

The evolution of a distinctive ideology and rhetoric that characterized the United States as a "redeemer nation" constitutes a third dimension of the American Empire. Redeemer nation ideology proved critical in creating a durable American nationalism and in legitimizing American expansionism. It functioned as a lens through which Americans viewed the world, lending a messianic aspect to American foreign relations, an aspect whose importance is often underestimated. It is no exaggeration to say that the redeemer nation ideology is the philosophical foundation of American foreign relations. In parallel to the evolution of the redeemer nation ideology emerged a distinctive rhetoric of American Empire that gave voice to this ideology in the political realm. This rhetoric both framed and defined the political and diplomatic controversies of the era; mastering its use in the public sphere proved the primary way by which power was acquired and directed in the antebellum American Empire.

The Constitution of 1787 represents a fourth dimension of American Empire. Its significance resides chiefly in its role as the centralizing pact that created a federal authority with the power to tax and to borrow, to make national commercial policy, to raise militaries, and to make war. The loose union created under the Articles of Confederation would never have been able to achieve the foreign policy victories made possible by

the Constitution. The strong union it created was the essential precondition for a successful imperial foreign policy. The Constitution gave the national government total control over foreign policy, placing virtually no limit on its exercise of powers outside state borders while attempting strictly to limit it within those borders. Inevitably, federal power migrated inward, suggesting the extent to which federal power has historically increased from the outside in. The critical transfer to the central government of responsibility for the western territories (done under the articles government) meant that every act of territorial expansion was a de facto increase of federal responsibility and hence, power. This strong state was achieved while being fundamentally at odds with the popular vision of a decentralized republican state. Richard Van Alstyne trenchantly notes, "[T]he founders of the Republic succeeded in performing a political miracle: they created a Leviathan state, but clad it in the garments of the social compact. It took seventy-five years of controversy and four years of bloody warfare, however, to make good on this paradox."[3]

The fifth dimension of the early American Empire is the essentially popular nature of its imperial expansion. The expansionist tendency, which both predated the creation of the republic and to some extent was the reason for its existence, was a popular phenomenon that received critical support from the federal government but was not initiated by it. American imperial expansion was driven by individual economic motives responding to evolving sources of opportunity. It was not centrally planned or directed, something that both distinguishes it from that of other empires in history and explains much of its success. An ongoing response to contingency informed the evolving limits of the American Empire; its final extent was only one of many possible borders that could have resulted from the fluid international environment of the western hemisphere in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

A strong army and navy along with a prominent martial tradition represents the sixth dimension critical to the construction of the American Empire. Notwithstanding the myth of Americans as a peace-loving folk, the nation's history in the first hundred years of its existence is a record of nearly nonstop conflict with European, Native

[3] Richard W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (New York, 1974; first published 1960), 4.

American, and Mexican foes, both on land and at sea. The impressive record of victories in the name of the American Empire is only part of the story; nearly as important as the tangible gains that victory brought is the role the military tradition plays as the preeminent cultural bonding agent of American nationalism. Every victory reinforced the principle of national unity, even in unpopular wars such as the War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War.

A mostly uncompromising policy of "freedom of the seas" is another key dimension of the early American Empire. Essentially the maritime dimension of the redeemer nation ideology, the project to turn the anarchy of the world's oceans into highways safe for travel and commerce under a U.S. vision of international law was vigorously asserted throughout the period under consideration (except during the Civil War, when the idea of freeing the seas was temporarily abandoned on the grounds of national emergency). The principle of freedom of the seas was affirmed via public pronouncements, by diplomatic agreements, and at times by war, as was the case in the first years of the nineteenth century against the North African states and Great Britain. In peacetime the U.S. navy played a key role as a waterborne sheriff in efforts to end piracy and, less effectively, the struggle to suppress the slave trade. A policy of freedom of the seas, asserted with consistency even in the early days of the nation's history, constituted a de facto expansion of American sovereignty to the global commons of the world's oceans.

The creation and promulgation of an American market empire form another dimension of antebellum foreign relations. Once again, the activities of private citizens drove this aspect of the empire, but the central government provided essential support to international commerce via trade agreements, consular services, and the use of the navy as an avenger of the rights and interests of Americans harmed when doing business abroad. More generally, Americans articulated an ideology of international commerce that defined trade as among "the rights and duties of mankind," as John Quincy Adams put it, and presumed to spread that system throughout the world to those interested in it and impose it on those who were not, most notably Japan. The creation of a global market empire was linked to the growth and development of the domestic economy and in part motivated territorial expansion, as in the case of California, whose access to Asian markets was the initial reason for its acquisition.

Another essential dimension of the growth and development of the antebellum American Empire was the technological innovations of the early nineteenth century, particularly in transportation, communication, production, and war. These technological breakthroughs were linked to the larger Industrial Revolution, which arose simultaneously and not coincidentally (from 1750 onward) with the rise of the United States, a fact whose significance has been largely overlooked. The American Empire would not have happened in the way it did but for the railroad, the telegraph, and the revolver, to name only three key technological innovations of the time.

The tenth dimension of the antebellum American Empire is the profound disagreement that existed over the role and future of slavery. This conflict first arose during the framing of the Constitution, receded for a while, and then reemerged during the Missouri Crisis of 1819–21. From then it slowly but steadily worsened until by the 1850s a de facto split had riven the Union into separate nations. By then a significant and motivated bloc of Americans had deemed slavery to be a moral, economic, and, above all, ideological wrong that had to be abolished if the United States was to realize its destiny as the redeemer nation. The crisis of the Union was manifested in a crisis over the future direction of the Empire: territories that had been conquered but not yet incorporated into the Union. The war began in the mid-1850s on the prairies of Kansas, spreading a few years later to battlegrounds within the Union itself.

The conflict over slavery stands as the central irony of antebellum American history: Americans enthusiastically exported freedom even as they shared no consensus as to its exact meaning and form. This contradiction proved unsustainable. The imposing edifice of union at the center of the empire contained a massive crack in its foundation. A design flaw from the Founders, the crack steadily widened until by the mid-nineteenth century a new generation of Americans demolished the temple of the Union in an apocalyptic war, rebuilding it according to a new plan of freedom.

The narrative that follows combines recent new perspectives on American foreign relations with older but still valuable interpretations, along with the author's own points of view, to create a synthesis that rests on a broad empirical base. A bibliographical essay following the main text seeks to provide a better sense of the scholarly context of its

claims. Given the number and complexity of the topics with which it deals and the limited space it has to deal with them, the story must necessarily avoid stepping into the thicket of contrasting interpretations. It proposes a way of conceiving of antebellum American foreign relations but does not presume to be the last word on the matter. Rather, it is hoped that the text stimulates thought, encourages discussion, and suggests possibilities for further study of the antebellum American Empire.

"Are We Rome?" asks Cullen Murphy in a recent thought-provoking book comparing the United States to its Roman predecessor and model.[4] Certainly there are a number of comparisons in this regard that can be made. Yet in the end comparisons to Rome may obscure more than they reveal about the antebellum American Empire. Whatever inspiration and precedent they took from ancient civilizations, especially that of Rome, in the end Americans conceived and accomplished something new and immensely significant at the key transitional moment in world history. This narrative seeks to explain how they did so.

[4] Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (New York, 2008).

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