

Introduction
Empires in Comparison

We covet no territory, and we have no imperialistic ambitions.
– Sumner Welles, U.S. Secretary of State (1941)

America has never been an empire. We may be the only great power in history that had the chance, and refused.
– President George W. Bush (2000)

Our nations covet no territory . . . only a safer world.
– Donald Rumsfeld on the United States and Britain in Iraq (2003)

America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire. The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. We were born out of revolution against an empire. We were founded upon the ideal that all are created equal, and we have shed blood and struggled for centuries to give meaning to those words – within our borders, and around the world.
– President Barack H. Obama (2009)

These utterances by America’s prominent statesmen represent a longstanding tradition of thought called “exceptionalism.” According to this tradition of thought, the United States has always been different from other countries. Unlike European nations, it lacks a feudal past. Born of an anticolonial revolution against a monarchy, it clings interminably to egalitarian, democratic, and liberal ideals. Because of this unique history and national character, the United States has never been an empire, nor could it ever be. George W. Bush’s claim that America is “the only great power in history that had the chance [to be an empire] and refused” is one expression among many of this exceptionalist theme. Traditional scholarship on American foreign policy has espoused the same idea, consciously avoiding terms like “imperialism” or “empire,” and instead using terms like “diplomacy.” “One of the central themes of American historiography,” observed the historian William A. Williams in 1955, “is that there is no American empire.”¹

¹ Williams (1955).

One goal of this book is to critically reconsider these claims about exceptionalism. On what grounds can we say that the United States has been special, different, or “exceptional”? Can we rightfully assert that the United States has never been an empire? Is exceptionalism a useful way for thinking about America’s past and present standing in the world?

In addressing these questions, this book will argue that exceptionalism obscures more than it reveals. As a set of claims about what is or is not, and as a mode of thought, exceptionalism should be rejected. Yet in making this case, the point is not simply to assert exceptionalism’s opposite and declare that the United States is and always has been an empire. Such a declaration would not be new. Revisionist historians in the tradition of William A. Williams have already mounted assaults on exceptionalism by unearthing America’s real imperial history. Highlighting America’s westward expansion, its treatment of Native Americans, the acquisition of overseas colonies like the Philippines, and America’s multiple military interventions around the world, these scholars and their successors have already shown us some of the ways in which the United States has been an empire. An additional line of scholarship, which we might think of as “neo-revisionist” scholarship has added further insights, scrutinizing not just America’s imperial history, but also how that history has been erased in popular consciousness. According to this scholarship, attempts to deny empire are but predictable manifestations of an “historical amnesia” – a “denial and displacement” of America’s indisputable imperial history.² Therefore, if there’s anything exceptional about America’s empire at all, it is only that it is an “empire that dare not speak its name.” As Niall Ferguson puts it, “the great thing about the American empire is that so many Americans disbelieve in its existence.”³ Denying empire is simply part of the unique *modus operandi* of American empire itself.

There remain those who still insist that the United States was never a proper “empire.”⁴ Still, the growing acceptance of revisionist histories means that critiquing exceptionalism by reiterating America’s imperial past is not sufficient. Calling the United States an empire does not have the potency it might have once had.⁵ In fact, despite the charges of neo-revisionists that America’s empire is an empire in denial, popular discourse has become increasingly willing to call a spade a spade. The phrase “American empire” appeared in one thousand news stories over a single six-month period in 2003. During the early years of the Iraq War, the discourse continued, leading the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* to declare that “the concept of America as world empire, so controversial as to be almost unsayable just a few months ago, is now close to conventional

² See among others Jacobson (1999), Judis (2004), Kaplan (1993), Kaplan (2003a).

³ Ferguson (2004).

⁴ See Ravenal (2009) and Suri (2009).

⁵ “The concept of American-as-imperium, a notion once employed only by scholars of a decidedly revisionist bent or by radical activists . . . has achieved a surprising amount of respectability of late.” McMahon (2001), p. 82.

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wisdom.” Even officials have uttered the once unutterable. In 2003, a senior-level advisor to President George W. Bush stated: “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.”⁶ Nor was this specific to the post-9/11 era. Earlier, in 2000, Richard Haas of the State Department urged Americans to “re-conceive their global role from one of a traditional nation-state to an imperial power.”⁷

America’s so-called amnesia and denial have abated. Apparently, the United States is not always an empire that dare not speak its name. For these reasons, a passionate declaration that there is an American empire would do little in itself to either critique exceptionalism or enrich our understanding of American power in the world. As the pundit Robert Kaplan wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly*, “It is a cliché these days to observe that the United States now possesses a global empire. . . . It is time to move beyond statements of the obvious.”⁸ I agree. A different approach is needed. Accordingly, this book raises and addresses new questions – the very questions invoked by the growing acceptance of revisionist thought. If the United States is and has always been an empire, does this mean that it is exactly the same as other empires? If it is not exactly the same, in what ways has it been distinct? If the United States is no longer an empire that “dare not speak its name,” what remains of the notion of American distinctiveness, of something different or unique about America’s global power? And what accounts for any similarities or differences we might find?

Revisionist historians have opened up these questions about America’s similarity or difference with other empires by alerting us to America’s long-standing and widespread imperial practices. But they have not yet answered them. These are *comparative* questions and, a few exceptions aside, comparative investigations of the U.S. empire are remarkably absent. This is a glaring omission. Conventional exceptionalist thought and revisionist criticisms all depend on comparison. To say that the United States is an “exception” is to say that it is an exception to a rule against which American distinctiveness can be measured. Similarly, to insist as revisionists do that the United States is and has always been an empire is to claim that it fits into the rule rather than deviates from it; that it is like or akin to something else. It is to suggest that the United States has exhibited features or enacted policies similar to those of other empires such that it is worthy of being called an empire in the first place. In other words, both exceptionalism and the revisionist critique are predicated on a silent and unstated understanding of other empires. They both depend on asserting an imperial “rule” or pattern against which American distinctiveness is to be measured or rejected. Their claims therefore conjure the need to look beyond the American empire, investigate other empires, and see how they fare in light of each other. Answering *any* questions about what is similar or different about

⁶ Suskind (2004), p. 44.

⁷ Quoted in Bacevich (2002), p. 219.

⁸ Kaplan (2003b), p. 66.

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Julian Go

Excerpt

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the American empire demands a sustained systematic comparison that puts America's empire, both past and present, into a broader frame.⁹

Take, for instance, the British empire.

Turning to Britain

It is well known that Britain forged one of the largest and most powerful empires in the world over the course of the nineteenth century. This was an empire that reached down to Africa and back up to India, across to Hong Kong and down to Australia. Britain was also the world's preeminent military and economic power in the nineteenth century – sending its gunboats, money, and missionaries to do the Crown's bidding. An empire indeed. Still, not all Britons were always ready to utter the words “British empire.” Historian Bernard Porter, among others, has shown that most Britons from the early to mid-nineteenth century were either ignorant of their empire or rejected the notion of it.¹⁰ Instead, terms like imperialism and empire in the mid-nineteenth century were most often used to refer to Napoleonic France, not Victorian Britain. Even when it did refer to Victorian Britain, it did not mean empire as we might think of it today. It rather referred to “the United Kingdom of the British Isles and to England in particular.” It was “rarely used in connection with topical issues of foreign affairs.”¹¹ Only later, in the late decades of the nineteenth century, did more Britons become cognizant of the British empire and come to freely name it. It was only then, at that specific historical moment, when empire talk among Britons proliferated.

These British perceptions and discourses of empire in the nineteenth century are suggestive in various respects. First, they highlight that repressing, rejecting, or denying empire is not particular to the United States. Even people in the largest and most powerful empire of the time were not always quick to admit that they were part of an empire. In fact, some historians and statesmen have taken up the mantle of denial to suggest that a British empire never *really* existed.¹² Second, the Britons' discourse of empire shows a historical trajectory in imperial consciousness not unlike America's. Britons once denied empire but later began to recognize it, admit it, and talk more about it. This proliferation of empire talk among Britons in the late nineteenth century is akin to the proliferation of American empire talk among Americans in more recent years.

⁹ Exceptions include Maier (2006) and Porter (2006). These works will be discussed throughout, along with how this book differs significantly from them. A good brief overview comparison between the U.S. and British empires can be found in Howe (2003), and a comparison of historiography can be found in MacDonald (2009). There is an older tradition of comparing British and U.S. imperialism (though this is different from a comparison of “empires”): These include Darby (1987), Liska (1978), Smith (1981), and Winks (1997).

¹⁰ Porter (2004).

¹¹ Koebner and Schmidt (1964), pp. 145–6.

¹² See Powell (1969), p. 247. Also, historian John Darwin prefaces his recent work, *The Empire Project*, by saying “the British Empire in its heyday was largely a sham.” See Darwin (2009), p. xi. Such claims obviously depend on what one means by the word “empire,” an issue I take up throughout.

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If Americans used to deny empire, they have done so less and less since the late twentieth century, just as Britons did in the late nineteenth century. In short, there has been similarity in empire talk and consciousness between Britain and the United States that would go undetected without an explicit comparative analysis. Without placing discourses of empire in comparative light, we would too easily and wrongly assume that denying empire is a distinctly American phenomenon.

The comparison in the present study is premised on the assumption that a systematic and sustained examination of other aspects of empire might likewise yield insights into matters of exceptionalism and empire. It might reveal similarities between America's and Britain's empire not just in discourse, but also in policies and practices. It might also help to unearth differences between the two empires and ultimately facilitate an *explanation* of whatever similarities or differences we might find.

This sustained comparison is what differentiates the present study from the revisionist historians' earlier work and from more recent examinations of U.S. imperialism. Although forthcoming chapters will indeed follow the revisionists' path and explore U.S. imperial history, the point is not to simply to catalog America's imperial interventions or therapeutically utter empire's name – as if that is all that is needed to attain a critical understanding. Rather, by employing a sustained systematic comparison, this book hopes to ascertain what, if anything at all, is distinctive, unique, or exceptional about American empire. It likewise aims to *explain* whatever differences or similarities arise from the comparison. Finally, this book seeks to raise some informed speculations about America's most recent imperial ventures in the early twenty-first century and where they might go. In 1902, the British critic and early theorist of imperialism J. A. Hobson wrote that “history devises reasons why the lessons of past empire do not apply to ours.”¹³ At that time, Hobson was criticizing his peers who believed that Britain had nothing to learn from the rise and fall of prior empires like Rome. In regard to the U.S. empire, we might similarly wonder what a consideration of Britain's imperial history has to say about America's imperial present and imperial future – if it has one at all.

First, though, our conceptual apparatus should be laid bare. A large part of what is at stake in our comparison is determining exactly *what it is* that we are comparing. So what exactly is an empire? What about related terms like imperialism or colonialism? After defining these terms, we can better establish the comparison and discuss the theoretical issues underlying it.

“Empire” and its Modalities

Defining terms like empire or imperialism is not a simple task. These terms carry heavy political and emotional baggage. To some, calling the United States an empire is to unfairly charge it with all kinds of wrongdoing and aggression. Another problem is that meanings shift over time. The word empire in the

¹³ Hobson (1902), p. 234.

twentieth century might signify something different than in the eighteenth. To confuse matters even more, scholars sometimes stretch the terms for their theoretical (or political) purposes. V. I. Lenin defined imperialism as a stage of capitalism. Negri and Hardt conceptualize empire as multifaceted abstract relations of power that encompass the globe. Others have spoken of “cultural imperialism” or “economic imperialism.”¹⁴

Definitions cannot be wrong or right. They can only be useful or not. Accordingly, for the purposes of our analysis, this book offers non-normative definitions that begin with elementary points. The goal is not to hurl accusations. Nor is it to narrow the investigation. The goal is offer a conceptual apparatus that can guide our investigation; to mark out some basic conceptual terrain. The trick is to define our terms widely enough so as to be flexible to the reality of history but narrow enough to be analytically robust.

To begin, *power* must be included in the definition. Empires, in their most basic sense, are sociopolitical formations that are constructed and maintained through the exercise of political power. This is not an arbitrary starting point. The word *empire* derives from the Latin term *imperium*, which roughly translates as “sovereignty” or “rule.” During Roman times, *imperium* denoted the capacity to wage war and make laws, thereby describing a sphere of authority.¹⁵ Later, during the early modern period in Europe, the term *imperium* took on added layers of meaning. Some usages rendered empire more or less synonymous with *status* or state. Other usages referred to an emperor or central political authority ruling over a distinct if not distant set of territories.¹⁶ When Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, invaded Lorraine in the fifteenth century, he referred to himself as “Emperor and Augustus” because he had come to rule over two territories rather than one. Empire meant a diversity of territory under a single authority.¹⁷ Later, in 1625, Charles I probably meant something similar when he declared Virginia and New England to be part of “our Royal Empire.”¹⁸ In all these instances, at the heart of the meaning of empire was political power.

Most scholars today build on this basic notion of empire. On the one hand, scholars have included various dimensions of empire beyond political power: economic, cultural, religious, and even psychological.¹⁹ On the other hand, despite these possible multiple dimensions, most scholars would recognize political power as the definitive feature. This is not because political power is most important. Some might say the economy determines everything in the last instance. Yet without the exercise of political power, there is no empire. “Power,” writes the historian Dominic Lieven, “in its many manifestations is

¹⁴ Lenin (1939); Hardt and Negri (2001).

¹⁵ Howe (2002), p. 13; Pagden (1995), p. 12.

¹⁶ Eisenstadt (1968), p. 41; Howe (2002), p. 13.

¹⁷ Pagden (1995), p. 14.

¹⁸ Quoted in *ibid.* p. 15.

¹⁹ Michael Mann’s discussion of America’s “incoherent empire,” for instance, counts four dimensions of power. See Mann (2003).

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the core and essence of empire.”²⁰ Sociologist S. N. Eisenstadt writes: “[T]he term ‘empire’ has normally been used to designate a political system encompassing wide, relatively centralized territories in which the center, as embodied both in the person of the emperor and in the central political institutions, constituted an autonomous entity.”²¹ Political scientist David Abernathy defines empire in “political terms as a relationship of domination and subordination. . . . The distinctive core feature is political control.”²² Empire, adds anthropologist Fernando Coronil, refers to “relatively large geopolitical formations that establish domination by hierarchically differentiating populations across transregional boundaries.”²³

The concept of empire used in the present study follows from these basic definitions. At the risk of sounding overly schematic, this book defines empire as a sociopolitical formation wherein a central political authority (a king, a metropole, or imperial state) exercises unequal influence and power over the political (and in effect the sociopolitical) processes of a subordinate society, peoples, or space. “A kind of basic, consensus definition,” Stephen Howe fruitfully summarizes, “would be that an empire is a large political body which rules over territories outside its original political borders. It has a central power or core territory – whose inhabitants usually continue to form the dominant ethnic or national group in the entire system – and extensive periphery of dominated areas.”²⁴ Other terms used in this book follow accordingly. Empires are involved in *imperialism*, which is the process by which they are established, extended, or maintained. They often have *imperial policies*, which are official and stated plans and practices by which power is exercised.²⁵ And they formulate various *strategies* and deploy multiple *tactics*, *techniques*, or *modalities* – sometimes unstated or unofficial – to realize their policies and extend or sustain themselves.

Keeping these basic definitions in mind is crucial for analytically differentiating empire and imperialism from other phenomena. First, empire is not the same thing as *economic* power. If a private corporation from a country invests in a weaker country and influences its internal affairs, we might call this “economic imperialism.” But in the conceptual apparatus here proposed, this is different from the imperialism of a government. Empire entails political exertions of power by a state. Although such exertions might accompany or support a private corporation’s economic exploitation, empire implies that a state is the main agent, and that the state directs, manipulates, or decisively influences the political – rather than just economic – processes and policies of a weaker society. Empire is a sociopolitical relation, not just an economic

²⁰ Lieven (2005), p. 128.

²¹ Eisenstadt (1968) p. 41.

²² Abernathy (2000), p. 19.

²³ Coronil (2007), p. 243. See also Tilly (1997), p. 3 and Doyle (1986), p. 19.

²⁴ Howe (2002), p. 14.

²⁵ Thornton (1978), p. 3.

one (even though the political operations of empire might entail economic relations).

Empire must also be differentiated from a “great power.” A great power is a state with massive military capabilities and/or extensive territory. But such a state would only be an imperial state if the state uses those capabilities to exert influence on other peoples or societies to incorporate them as dependent satellites. A state that has the greatest military in the world but does not use it to construct a hierarchy of power may not necessarily be an empire. The United States may have the greatest military power in the world. It may also cover extensive territory. However, if it does not hold colonial dependencies or does not exert power over other societies, it would not be an empire (this is why the scholar Dominic Lieven, for instance, does not consider the United States today to be an empire, at least in its internal affairs: The “American president does not rule without consent over vast conquered territories and their populations”).²⁶ Of course, states with such internal capabilities, like the United States, often do use their power in imperialistic ways. A state may be a great power and empire at once. The point here is to analytically separate the two. The issue is not whether a state *has* power (like military strength) but *whether* and *how* that power is exercised.²⁷

A related distinction is between empire and “hegemony.” The concept of hegemony first arose from Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci to refer to a cultural or ideological process, but many scholars who deploy it today often define it as an economic matter. In this conceptualization, a hegemon is a state that enjoys relative preponderance over the world economy. A state enjoys hegemony when it takes up the largest shares of the world’s economic activity (measured by relative share of world GDP, for example).²⁸ Accordingly, hegemony and empire are not the same. A state can have an empire but not dominate the world economy. Similarly, a state can dominate the world economy without being an empire. Moreover, if we define hegemony as cultural influence, this would not be the same as empire either. We might speak of “cultural imperialism” as a modality of imperial power, but we would not define empire as a state that only wields cultural influence.²⁹ Hollywood may dominate the global film industry, and its values or meanings may indirectly influence peripheral societies, but if the U.S. government does not meddle in the affairs of weaker countries and aim to control their affairs, the United States would not be an empire in our strict sense of the term.

²⁶ Lieven (2002), p. 79.

²⁷ Kennedy (1987: 539) defines “great powers” as any “state capable of holding its own against any other nation,” a status that in turn depends on the states’ relative economic capacities. This is not the same thing as empires and Kennedy states from the outset that his book is not about empires (p. xxi).

²⁸ This definition derives from world-systems theory, see Arrighi, Silver, and Ahmad (1999), pp. 26–8; Boswell (1995), pp. 2–4; Wallerstein (2002b). There are other ways to define hegemony of course, but for this book’s purposes the economic definition will be used.

²⁹ On “world leaders,” see Modelski (1978), Modelski and Thompson (1996).

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Empire is analytically distinguishable from great powers, hegemons, and cultural influence, and there is also wide variation across types or forms of empires. Sociological variations are noteworthy. Typically, empires entail internal diversity, with a dominant group residing at the apex of a sociopolitical hierarchy. Perhaps the most common hierarchy is racialized: One race monopolizes political power to rule over other races who reside in the empire's subordinated areas. This is the image typically invoked when one thinks of European colonial empires in Africa during the late nineteenth century. Yet in our conceptualization, an imperial hierarchy need not be racial. It could be ethnic, linguistic, or religious. In the early modern Spanish empire in the Americas, natives subject to Spanish rule were not always conceived as racially different and inferior in the strict phenotypical sense. They were seen as non-Christians, that is, "pagans."³⁰ Difference was marked here as religious rather than as a matter of biology, blood, or stock. Another example might be the Ottoman empire, which articulated religion with dynasty such that Islam and the Ottoman family ruled Kurd or Turk elites.³¹ The Tsarist Russian empire was not even ethnically or religiously differentiated, but class-based.³²

Another variation arises in *how* political influence is exercised. At stake here are the forms or modalities of imperial power. One common distinction is between *formal* (direct) and *informal* (or indirect) exercises of power. The first, formal imperialism, refers to direct territorial rule. The imperial state annexes foreign land, declares official control over it, and subordinates the local population. The controlled territory then becomes a *colony* or dependency. This dependency is part of the metropolitan state, but its inhabitants do not enjoy the same rights or privileges as the state's citizens. Formal empire is thus the same as *colonial empires* involving the annexation of territory and direct rule over it.³³ This type of empire is often, although not exclusively, obtained by military conquest. During the Roman period, most emperors were victorious military generals. However, direct formal control can also be established "by invitation" rather than conquest.³⁴ Or it can be established by unequal treaties, as was often the case with early Europeans and Native American tribes. In any case, this type of direct or colonial empire is usually what most people refer to when they speak of empire in popular discourse. It conjures the image of Spain and its colonies in the Americas, France and its possession of Algeria, or Britain and its rule over India or parts of Africa. Flags are raised. Governors are appointed. Policies for governing the natives are formulated and exercised. States are made.

Variations in formal empires follow. We might think of "settler colonialism," whereby the subordinated colony is dominated by emigrants from the

³⁰ Seed (1995).³¹ Barkey (2008).³² Lieven (2005), p. 139.³³ On the concept "colonialism," see Fieldhouse and Emerson (1968) and Osterhammel (1999b).³⁴ Howe (2002), p. 13.

home land; or “administrative colonialism,” whereby a handful of officials from the home land rule over large native populations. D. K. Fieldhouse goes even further, distinguishing between (1) pure settlement colonies (the majority are settlers from the metropole); (2) mixed colonies (settlers live with a larger indigenous population); (3) plantation colonies (a small settler group managing estates for export); (4) occupation colonies (close to no settlers); and (5) trading settlements or naval bases (small areas of land run by a small group of temporary metropolitans).³⁵ We may think of other subtypes too, such as land-based as opposed to sea-based empires. Or we might order colonial empires chronologically, attending to differences between early modern empires like Spain’s or Portugal’s and the modern administrative colonial empires of the late nineteenth century established by Europe in Africa or parts of Asia. Even within any single empire, the legal or juridical status of territories and subjects can be variously named and differentially treated, creating a complex of juridically heterogeneous peripheries.

The overarching point is that formal empires involve direct political control over territory and the subjugation of inhabitants of that territory into a status that is lesser, inferior, or dependent. This is the “rule of colonial difference,” as Partha Chatterjee (1993) has aptly named it.³⁶ By this measure of colonial rule, colonized peoples are treated as inferior to citizens in the metropole, both in practice and in juridical theory or official doctrine. Due to their perceived racial, ethnic, or some other kind of distinction, the colonized are not given the same rights and privileges as the colonizer or citizens in the colonizers’ home country. In some ways, it is exactly this subjugated status that differentiates colonial empire from pure democratic nation-states or federal states.³⁷ Nation-states involve citizens. Empires involve *subjects*, not citizens, and the difference between them is an important marker of empire.³⁸ For Stoler, McGranahan, and Perdue (2007), it is an essential imperial characteristic: “Uncertain domains of jurisdiction and ad hoc exemptions from the law on the basis of race and cultural difference are guiding and defining imperial principles.”³⁹

Colonialism, as in formal empire, is only one modality of imperial power – one way of exerting influence over societies. There are others. Robinson and Gallagher (1953) famously chided British historians for thinking of the British empire only in terms of its colonies – those parts of the map painted red – when in fact Britain also exercised influence if not political power over societies that were not officially colonies.⁴⁰ Hence the notion of indirect or “informal” empire. This refers to the exercise of power over the internal or external affairs

³⁵ Fieldhouse (1982), p. 11–13.

³⁶ Chatterjee (1993).

³⁷ Tilly (1997), p. 7.

³⁸ As Cooper and Kumar have rightly argued in their own ways, nation-states and empires have not been historically opposed; but here I oppose them as ideal-types only. See Cooper (2005), pp. 153–203 and Kumar (2010).

³⁹ Stoler, McGranahan, and Perdue (2007).

⁴⁰ Robinson and Gallagher (1953).