General Introduction: What is America and the World?

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The Cambridge History of America and the World (CHAW) offers a far-reaching and novel account of American engagement in the world from 1500 to the present day. CHAW takes as its interpretive starting point a deceptively simple insight: adopting frameworks that cut across rather than stop at the nation’s borders could upend established stories and generate new interpretive possibilities. What might happen, as nineteenth-century American historian Thomas Bender asked in a seminal 2002 essay, if historians followed “the movement of people, capital, things, and knowledge” across borders in ways that ignored artificial and state-defined boundaries? An outpouring of work over the last two decades has followed this transnational turn in US history to deprovincialize how we understand the American past. It has now produced a fundamentally new history of America and the world.

Infused with common transnational sensibilities, this novel scholarship has taken a variety of interpretative paths. Some of these new histories were pioneered by diplomatic historians who increasingly placed the perceptions and policies of presidents, diplomats, and generals on a global stage or employed new and sometimes non-American-based archives to illuminate the perspectives of non-state actors from the worlds of business, activism, religion, and what we now call nongovernmental organizations. Other scholars have crafted social and cultural histories, offering a wider vision of American engagement in the world by exploring how the construction of

American state and society has intersected with global forces and contestations over identity abroad. At the same time this work shares many of the convictions that have animated new work on the Atlantic world, slavery, borderlands, migration and the environment, and in critical race and queer studies. In all these ways, historians have embraced multiple transnational optics to reimagine how US history was made.

CHAW brings this exciting new scholarship together for the first time to map the contours of these transformative approaches to the place of America and Americans in the world. In some ways CHAW builds upon more traditional diplomatic approaches to the field. It gives sustained attention, for instance, to such key moments in US international history as the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Monroe Doctrine, the nineteenth-century US rise as a world power, World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. But importantly the volumes open out to other larger and smaller analytical frames for apprehending American engagement in the world while at the same time situating multiple actors and developments within broader global political, social, economic, cultural, and ecological processes.

The four volumes that make up CHAW feature more than 120 contributors from a variety of subfields within American history who explore these new explanatory vistas. While many diplomatic historians are among the contributors, the volumes cast a more inclusive scholarly net to include historians of Native America, the Atlantic world, slavery, political economy, borderlands, empire, the family, gender and sexuality, race, technology, and the environment. Collectively their contributions offer essential starting points for readers coming to the field for the first time, and serve as a critical vehicle for moving this scholarship forward in new directions.

The history of early America and the world that unfolds in Volume I occupies an especially important place in this Cambridge history. As readers will see, it quite self-consciously does not foreground the thirteen colonies that became the United States or the Revolutionary War, nor does "America" simply connote British America as it once did for many histories of American foreign relations. Volume I opens with first contacts in the early fifteenth century in the waters off North America’s northeastern and western coasts.

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where fishing and fur brought Native peoples and Europeans together, and in the tropical band around the Caribbean and the territories that made up the Inca and Aztec empires, where exotic commodities along with gold and silver attracted the Spanish. It then moves to the comparatively late arriving colonists like the Dutch, French, and finally the English, who were left with what would become British North America. Indian Country, which in 1825 still covered much of what was later the continental United States, receives sustained attention throughout the volume, reflecting the crucial ways in which Native American history has become central to new narratives of America and the world. So, too, the histories of men and women brought as slaves or indentured servants to the colonies that European settlers founded.

Volume I carries the narrative of early America and the world through relations between the great empires, Indigenous as well as European, before turning to revolutionary challenges to those empires. Here the focus is not only on the American Revolution but also antislavery campaigns, the broader Atlantic revolution, and state-making in the early republic. At the same time, contributors offer a set of thematic essays on statelessness, imperial trade, international law, women, the environment, and the circulation of ideas. It is important to note that much of the scholarship informing Volume I has occurred in isolation from the general field of American foreign relations, and its more traditional focus on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In offering a layered understanding of the complex nature of empires in the making, the volume provides a completely original take on America and the world in the early period. As the volume editors suggest, early America was a "messy, complicated and multi-directional world."³ Those transformative insights set many of the central interpretative pathways for the volumes of CHAW that follow.

Volume II takes the story of the United States and the world from the War of 1812 to the imperial wars of 1898 in Spain and the Philippines. Here, too, the essays that make up the volume mark a fundamental shift in how historians now see this period from global perspectives. "[I]mperial denial and self-congratulation," the editors of Volume II note, often colored an earlier historiography of this era, whereas in these chapters the nineteenth-century United States emerges as "an exclusionary nation-state forged in violence and an expansive, multiethnic imperial formation."⁴ The Mexican-American War and the

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Civil War, explored here in their transnational and global dimensions, become the fulcrum that links the volume’s consideration of continental expansion and settler colonialism on the one hand and the late nineteenth-century worlds of industrial capitalism and racialized imperialism on the other. As one contributor to the volume puts it, these interpretative modes uncover “the myriad ways in which American history in the nineteenth century is inseparable from an understanding of the world beyond the United States.” Together the chapters that make up Volume II illuminate the multiple pathways through which what had been previously seen as an isolationist nineteenth-century United States were in fact embedded in global fields of imperial power.

None of the nineteenth-century developments foregrounded in Volume II of CHAW emerge as preordained. The contributors painstakingly trace out the remarkable contingencies shaping the exercise of political and economic power over the course of the century from the perspectives of multiple actors. In part an emergent transportation and communication infrastructure along with a blue water navy and a growing state bureaucracy began to bind and integrate the national economy. At the same time iterative panics and extreme economic volatility increasingly linked the United States to the firmament of Victorian globalization and brought new domestic social unrest and political instability. Just as the state and its role in the rise of a two-ocean American empire is disaggregated in these chapters, the engagements of multiple non-state actors receive sustained consideration, among them migrants from Europe and Asia, African American activists, working-class mariners, Christian missionaries, military personnel, and Indigenous peoples. The making of space in the nineteenth-century American state is always near the surface of the volume, particularly the fluidities of its population and borders, processes of racialization and practices of ethnic cleansing, and the vast ecological transformations wrought by unrestrained capitalist development.

The first half of the twentieth century, sometimes oversimplified and even more often overshadowed by the Cold War that followed in an earlier historiography, emerges in Volume III of CHAW as a revolutionary era. “There was nothing inevitable,” the volume editors point out, about “American global ascendancy.” They remind us that for all the transformations of the previous century, the United States in 1900 was still very much a developing nation. And


yet between 1900 and 1945, it became an industrial powerhouse, creditor and cultural model for Europe, administered a host of new overseas colonies, and lent military might, manpower, and resources including the invention of the first nuclear weapons to the winning of two world wars. Americans also became entangled in global processes of modern state-making and supranational governance, encountering new transnational political, ideological, and economic challenges as they went.

Focusing on the rise of the United States to world power status between 1900 and 1945, the chapters that comprise Volume III address the larger impact of the decisive US involvement in two world wars while foregrounding unresolved tensions and contradictions between American commitments to liberal internationalism and self-determination. The volume also explores the ways in which virulent forms of structural racism continued to drive policy at home and abroad. Individual chapters highlight the complexities of exercising American power as an empire, a transatlantic partner, and as a great power in World War I. They also explore competing visions of world order, among them Wilsonianism and Leninism, international organization, law and humanitarianism, Black radicalism, women’s movements, religious politics, and nativism. The concluding chapters take up the nature of American participation in World War II through a consideration of the political, economic, and cultural impact of the era’s growing global interdependence.

The story of American foreign relations after 1945 has usually been told as a Cold War narrative. In Volume IV of CHAW, the Cold War emerges as an element, rather than the defining event, of the era. The volume editors are intent to explore the varying components that contributed to the preponderance of American power in this era, but they are also keen to understand what they call “the internal fissures, divergences and contradictions that came with that increased power.” An accounting of the simultaneous rise of the postcolonial and Cold War worlds is central to the chapters that make up this final volume. As the Soviet-American rivalry intensified, the fall of empire and the rise of the sovereign state under decolonization after World War II dramatically increased the number of newly independent nations. In 1945 there were fifty-one member states in the United Nations. Today there are 193, with most of them in what we now call the Global South. The chapters in the volume also point to the fragility of this state based order. The

Cold War was only cold in the West. Hot wars in Korea, Vietnam, and later Africa, along with sustained US campaigns of covert action against what were seen as left-leaning governments in Latin America, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, often brought havoc and devastation in their wake, in part prompting massive transnational migration that unintentionally would put the United States on a path toward becoming a majority-minority country by the middle of this century.

Volume IV also traces the ways in which the intensification of neoliberal capital flows beginning in the 1970s, along with the growing power of non-state challenges by human rights and environmental advocates, put further pressure on more conventional notions of American state sovereignty and power in the late twentieth century. Chapters on what the volume editors characterize as contestations over the rule of states uncover the often destabilizing role of oil, global religious formulations, and an emergent queer geopolitics in American engagements in the world during this period. At the same time chapters that trace the involvements and commitments of African Americans and Native Americans in a variety of transnational projects open up the actors and issues that were critical to the making of America in the world after 1945. As the editors suggest, the post-Cold War world that closes the volume, particularly the forever wars following the September 11 attacks and the specter of climate change, further deepened the fluidities of power in an era in which the United States was often thought of as a singular superpower.

The chapters that make up all four volumes of CHAW can be read in multiple ways. Perhaps the configuration that allows readers to see just how radical a departure they are from past ways of seeing American foreign relations is to encounter them topically across time and space. For instance, each volume features chapters on Indigenous peoples and their centrality to a fuller understanding of how a plurality of “Americans” operated in the world. The environment also receives sustained treatment. An ensemble of chapters on the centrality of geographies and ecologies in the making of early America opens up Volume I, and this major interpretative thread gets taken up in subsequent volumes. Empire is another important strand across the volumes in chapters that place American empire in a global perspective, whether it be the encounter of Indigenous peoples with European and later American empires, the rise of intertwined domestic and imperial American empires in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or the tensions between empire, decolonization, and domestic social movements after 1945. The complex story of Americans and the world from 1500 to the present
gains further nuance and richness in chapters throughout the four volumes that explore the histories of capitalism, gender and sexuality, borderlands, race and ethnicity, migration, religion, human rights, and humanitarianism. I encourage readers to pick up one or more of these threads that seem most intriguing, and to read the chapters on that subject across the four volumes to better appreciate the critical building blocks through which collectively CHAW offers a transformational set of new interpretative approaches to the American past.

Questions of power are always at the center of work by historians of American foreign relations. Power in an earlier scholarship and for some historians today can sometimes be disconnected from the global flows and processes that affected other states and peoples. This kind of American exceptionalism was reinforced in the period after 1945 when many policymakers and some of the scholars who chronicled their footprints in the world insisted that the preponderance of American power meant that opening up a discussion of its potential messiness and fragility was a fool’s errand. The chapters that make up the four volumes of CHAW suggest a different path forward, offering histories that are simultaneously connected to the world and attentive to the multiple particularities, and singularities, of the American experience. Each of the contributors to these volumes helps us see a critical piece of how that more capacious vision moves toward a fundamentally new understanding of the exercise of American power in the world.

The final volume of CHAW lands on the Anthropocene with a searching chapter in which historian Joshua Howe points to the opportunities and potential perils that this conceptualization of climate change poses for future scholarship. He also reminds us that planetary environmental change, and the outsized role the United States has played in it, shapes our present century in ways that Americans cannot fully control. Howe writes, “Time will tell how – and how well – America deals with the world it has made.”

Together the four volumes that make up this Cambridge History of America and the World provide a frame to help us better come to terms with the always contingent, often unequal, and sometimes dangerous worlds that a diverse cast of American peoples have made and unmade, and to anticipate what future worlds may be in the process of becoming.

The nineteenth century witnessed the transformation of the United States from an insecure association of erstwhile colonies to a continental empire with a global reach. Though forged in a struggle for independence from the British Empire, the United States became a formidable empire in its own right. Historians have long recognized the significance of this transition for the United States and the world, but they have given different meanings to it over time and place. In contrast to critics in Latin America, the Caribbean, and other loci of anti-imperialist sentiment, most US scholars writing before the Vietnam War and contemporaneous civil rights movement regarded the “rise” of the United States as something to be celebrated. America’s republican institutions, in this telling, challenged the oppressive monarchical order of the Old World, while white settlers’ extension of the North American “frontier” gave birth to an exceptionally democratic national character. Even as they denied the existence of US imperialism, such appraisals echoed the boasts of avid US empire builders, among them Massachusetts statesman Henry Cabot Lodge, who heralded the US “record of conquest, colonization, and territorial expansion” as “unequalled by any people in the nineteenth century.”

Both imperial denial and self-congratulation came under increasingly intense criticism from the 1960s onwards. As the historical actors deemed worthy of study expanded and diversified – not coincidentally at the same time as did the historical profession – the nineteenth-century history of the United States began to look very different. The republican ideology of elite statesmen ceased to serve as cover for the exploitative practices of enslavement and colonial dispossession. A broader array of US historians looked beyond triumphalist accounts reeking of white nationalism to foreground

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Introduction to Volume II

other perspectives, such as those of Paiute activist Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins. In her autobiographical account, Hopkins described the violence that forced her people onto a reservation and the violence that followed them there, including an 1865 attack by US soldiers on a group of families encamped by a lake: "The soldiers rode up to their encampment and fired into it, and killed almost all the people that were there. Oh, it is a fearful thing to tell, but it must be told. Yes, it must be told by me."² If Lodge’s account is one of imperial advance, Hopkins’s is one of national retreat and existential struggle, extending beyond the murderous attacks on her own people to the campaigns that her grandfather, in alliance with US forces, waged against Mexicans. As her account suggests, centering Indigenous peoples’ experiences and perspectives brings different themes to light, including horrific violence, suffering, loss, survivance, strategic maneuvering, and anticolonial resistance.

As the blind spots of once-dominant nationalist narratives have become increasingly clear, the pursuit of US economic, strategic, and cultural interests has appeared less as a harbinger of a thoroughly progressive “American century,” and more as manifestations of an imperial power with illiberal tendencies. By the turn of the twenty-first century, American “exceptionalism” had been turned on its head: From the vantage point of a more multiracial democracy and the precipitous heights of seeming hegemony after the Soviet collapse, the nineteenth-century United States stood out not only for its “blessings of liberty” but also for its relentless pursuit of economic advantage, racist hierarchies, and imperial domination.

This volume takes these recent reappraisals of US nation and empire-building as its cue. It starts from the premise that, though it pioneered forms of republican self-government, the nineteenth-century United States was an exclusionary nation-state forged in violence and an expansive, multi-ethnic imperial formation. This volume’s other starting premise – that there is no single perspective or narrative that can fully capture the history of the United States in the world – makes this history of US imperialism appear more contested and thus less inevitable than celebrants have made it out to be. The history of nineteenth-century North America is teeming with alternative political formations, ranging from Indigenous alliance systems to maroon communities and breakaway settler republics, most notably the slaveholding Confederate States of America. Though widely manifest, US

empire-building in this period was certainly not destiny. The diverse peoples caught in the vortex of the expanding American empire were not passive pawns in imperial chess games; they were important foreign relations actors whose on-the-ground actions – from family formation to intercultural mediation, knowledge dissemination, economic production, resource exploitation, diplomatic negotiations, and armed resistance – shaped the character and boundaries of the expanding United States and the extraterritorial exercise and reach of US power. The history presented in this volume differs from traditional accounts of the “rise” of the United States – of both the celebratory and condemnatory types – by foregrounding the contingency and occasional sheer chaos that characterized struggles for sovereignty and power in this period.

To make sense of this complex story, this volume places US history into its wider, oftentimes global, context. Vicissitudes in international capital markets, dynamics of colonial competition and collaboration, individual decisions of millions of migrants, voters, and consumers – all of these and more determined the trajectory of the United States. The US empire took root within a hospitable geopolitical environment, one that was rapidly integrating under the auspices of Europe’s imperial powers. As an ascendant power in a multipolar world, the nineteenth-century United States benefited tremendously from its ties to the leading empires of the day, Britain foremost among them. Despite rivalries with other powers and a policy tradition of remaining neutral in European conflicts, the United States assembled tacit alliances based on race and culture, with its ruling classes aligning more with imperial powers and creole elites than subjugated peoples. Yet even as it profited from its relations with European empires, the United States rattled these empires through destabilizing exports such as evangelical Christianity, financial panics, and the anti-imperial nationalism articulated in the globally reproduced Declaration of Independence.

The coalescence and magnitude of the US empire along with Americans’ ability to work with strategic partners in a larger world not of their own making ultimately shifted the gravity of global power. The events of the nineteenth century made the United States the leading force field of the twentieth. This volume tells the story of these converging developments, pairing its eye on the big-picture exercise of power with an eye on the ways things played out on the ground. Mixing top-down and bottom-up perspectives, insider and outsider views, cultural, social, political, military, environmental, legal, technological, and other veins of analysis, it places the United