

## 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?<sup>1</sup> 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 interpretive 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

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Bender, “Introduction,” in Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, 2002), 11. In what was a generative moment for the transnational turn in American history, see also Charles Bright and Michael Geyer, “Where in the World is America?: The History of the United States in a Global Age,” in Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, 2002), 63–99; and David P. Thelen, “The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History,” *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999): 965–975.

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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.<sup>2</sup> Volume I opens with first contacts in the early fifteenth century in the waters off North America’s northeastern and western coasts,

<sup>2</sup> For example, the 1995 *Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations* opened in 1776, while a revised edition pushed the date back but only to the 1750s: Bradford Perkins, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations, Volume I: The Creation of the Republican Empire, 1776–1865* (Cambridge, 1995; revised edition 2015 authored by William Earl Weeks). See also the chronology for George C. Herring’s important survey text *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York, 2011).

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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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup> The Mexican-American War and the

<sup>3</sup> Eliga Gould, Paul W. Mapp, and Carla Gardina Pestana, “Introduction,” to *Cambridge History of America and the World*, Volume I (Cambridge, 2021), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Jay Sexton and Kristin Hoganson, “Introduction,” to *Cambridge History of America and the World*, Volume II (Cambridge, 2021), 8, 9.

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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."<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Guyatt, "The United States between Nation and Empire, 1776–1820," Chapter 1 in *Cambridge History of America and the World*, Volume II (Cambridge, 2021), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Brooke L. Blower and Andrew Preston, "Introduction," to *Cambridge History of America and the World*, Volume III (Cambridge, 2021), 9.

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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."<sup>7</sup> 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

<sup>7</sup> David C. Engerman, Max Paul Friedman, and Melani McAlister, "Introduction," to *Cambridge History of America and the World*, Volume IV (Cambridge, 2021), 9.

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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

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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 policy-makers 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."<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> Joshua Howe, "America and the World in the Anthropocene," Chapter 31 in *Cambridge History of America and the World*, Volume IV (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 751.

## Introduction to Volume IV

DAVID C. ENGERMAN, MAX PAUL FRIEDMAN,  
AND MELANI MCALISTER

This volume of *The Cambridge History of America and the World* opens as World War II ends and the United States stands at the pinnacle of its power relative to the rest of the world. Indexes of that power abound: In 1950, for instance, the United States accounted for only 6.0 percent of the world population – but 27.3 percent of all economic activity (and a far larger share of industrial production), along with 66.3 percent of world military expenditure.<sup>1</sup> Other forms of American global power were just as significant but harder to measure: the United States had taken the lead diplomatically, treating wartime allies like England and France as junior partners; it took a harsher attitude toward its other major wartime ally, the USSR. Economic and military strength, along with the ability to shape world politics – these very real and concrete forms of global power – were hardly the only dimensions of American power in the decades since World War II. By the 1940s, American firms had already begun shaping consumption patterns, especially in Europe; products of American movie studios appeared in an increasing share of cinemas worldwide, prompting fan clubs but also official restrictions. These trends were not new to the 1940s, but in most cases had been building over the previous decades, through world wars and economic crisis. But with the conclusion of World War II, these different vectors of American power had come together at a crucial moment.

The apogee of American power came just as an imperial order – which had organized the globe around European metropolises for centuries – began its uneven demise. And new technologies of communication and modes of social organization would shape not just the arenas of diplomacy and

<sup>1</sup> Population and economic data from Angus Maddison, *Contours of the World Economy, 1–2030 AD: Essays in Macro-Economic History* (Oxford, 2007), 376, 379. Military spending data from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Military Expenditure Database – [www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org) (accessed October 26, 2019).



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economic power but aspects of everyday life the world over. American power thus arrived at a particularly plastic moment in world history.

The 1940s marked, also, a particularly plastic moment in the history of the United States: Depression, war, and their aftermath had prompted new forms of social mobilization and new visions of organizing economy and society. Just as the United States came to have greater influence – economically, politically, culturally – on the world, so too did the world play a greater role in the United States, shaping cultural production, social movements, and everyday life in new and even unprecedented ways.

Any study of “America and the World” must reckon with these different forms available within the possibilities of the vague conjunction “and.” Topics covered in “America and the World” thus include the trajectory of American influence upon the world, the domestic reconfigurations of a national security state, and the domestic and global impact of the deeper enmeshment of the United States in global flows of people, ideas, technologies, and capital. This volume seeks to present a historical arc over some seventy-plus years after 1945, in some cases moving into the first years of the presidency of Donald J. Trump. Whether in the 1950s or in the 2000s, the extension of American power gave rise to countervailing forces and coincided with an increasing sense of American vulnerability. For example, new openness to immigration sparked a strong reaction against it. And the geographic spread of the US military presence provided new sites to contest American power. Such tensions and reversals do not lend themselves to a single authoritative interpretation; this would be challenge enough among the three co-editors, let alone among the thirty-three contributors. In assembling the chapters that follow, we have sought to highlight not just broad interpretations of changing American relations to the world, but also the internal fissures, divergences, and contradictions that came with that increased power.

This is a propitious moment to undertake a scholarly reexamination of the relationship of America and the world in the late twentieth century. For decades, professional divisions of historical labor tended to leave international topics to diplomatic historians who explored the formal relations between states, all too often from the sole perspective of the United States. Heated debates about the nature and operations of American power offered thorough details of motivations and politics on the US side – but had little to say about the motives, the purposes, or even the actions of those with whom American diplomats interacted. By the same token, those scholars who focused on social, cultural, and intellectual history felt comfortable within

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American borders – more comfortable, at times, than did their cosmopolitan subjects. Yet in the last quarter-century or so, the study of American history has undergone an energizing reorientation.

Since the early 1990s, scholars interested in expanding the horizons of diplomatic history have joined with social, cultural, and intellectual historians looking abroad. They have done so both within the nomenclature of existing fields as well as in this new field of “America and the World.” The intellectual antecedents and institutional movers behind these changes are many and varied, but include increasing attention to flows of people, texts, and ideas across national borders; growing attention to the roles of actors beyond the US State Department and the White House; and a focus on the ways that activists drew energy from international events and movements – and on the ways that international events could shape domestic movements.

These changes were especially visible in studies of US global engagements after 1945. One index for the expanding enterprise of “America and the World” is the annual conference and the journal of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR). Founded in the late 1960s as social history began to take root in the American historical profession, this new organization brought together those interested in studying the history of American foreign policy. Debates within the field were varied and frequently fierce, but typically revolved around approval or disapproval of specific American foreign-policy decisions, often linked directly or indirectly to questions about contemporary US politics. When SHAFR created a journal, *Diplomatic History*, the early issues had an eagle on the cover. Changes in the field were driven above all by archival openings, tracking closely the declassification of diplomatic records; the subfield came of age racing to interpret newly available American archival materials from the 1940s and 1950s. The subfield grew rapidly, and focused increasingly on studies of the post-World War II period. But this growth unfolded in ways that frequently led diplomatic historians to criticize “mainstream” study of American history, which in this telling had left state power behind in favor of social and cultural history. A number of criticisms of the field – from within and without – only increased the alienation of diplomatic historians through the 1980s.

In the subsequent decade, however, the tide began to turn. Key diplomatic historians ushered in new approaches to scholarship by advising the work of students who did not abide by the previous assumptions and strictures of the field. Senior scholars, in their capacities as journal editors and program committee chairs, self-consciously opened these core vehicles of scholarly