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WHY STUDY IMPERIALISM?
A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE UNITED STATES IN 2010

We have lived through, or are living through, an age of American empire, or so we’re told. As early as the 1820s, the United States began to understand itself as the pre-eminent power on the American landmass, a status that was represented partly by the linguistic mapping of the proper adjective “American” to decribe solely U.S. projects. In 1941, as the industry and military of the United States geared up for the Second World War, publisher Henry Luce predicted an “American century” in which the formal European empires would crumble before the onslaught of the financial, cultural, and corporate imperialism of the United States.\(^1\)

Certainly some of Luce’s forecasts proved correct. In the post-war period, and especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States has become the world’s pre-eminent military power, the only nation-state truly able to exert its will around the globe through a network of client-states and semi-permanent bases on every continent. On the other hand, American hegemony has never been unchallenged, and has almost always been carried out in cooperation or through negotiation with other states. In the decade of the 1990s, there were many charges of American imperialism in Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East, but rarely did U.S. involvement in these regions take the form of large-scale military intervention or the formal occupation of overseas territories.\(^2\)

In the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States by al Qaeda terrorists, American imperialism became once again a leading theme of both popular and scholarly debate. In a search for the motives behind such a terrible operation, some commentators put the blame on American foreign policy.\(^3\) The architect of the attack himself, Osama bin Laden, who described American operatives abroad as crusaders, wrote that “What America is tasting now, is something insignificant compared to what we have tasted for scores of years. Our nation [the Islamic world] has been tasting this humiliation and this degradation for more than 80 years. Its sons are killed, its blood is shed, its sanctuaries are attacked, and no-one hears and no-one heeds... When the sword comes down [on America], after 80 years, hypocrisy rears its ugly head.”\(^4\)

The administration of President George W. Bush responded to the 9/11 attacks with a vigorous and global campaign that culminated in the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. In preparing the American and global public for these campaigns, the administration avidly sought to avoid any imputation that they were seeking to build an American empire. The elected officials, bureaucrats, and generals involved in planning the operations scrupulously avoided the public use of terminology that smacked of imperialism, consistently stating as their objectives the restoration of global stability and the protection of America’s borders.\(^5\) The President himself explicitly avowed

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that the United States “has no empire to extend” and no “territorial ambitions.” Rather it was the administration’s critics who introduced the terminology of empire. Among the first were politicians, like British Liberal Democrat party leader Charles Kennedy, who denounced what he called the Bush administration’s new American imperialism. Soon, a flood of influential scholars, pundits, and government leaders worldwide were railing against American “imperial ambitions” or “imperial delusions.” In response, supporters of the war in Iraq began to appropriate the vocabulary of empire, defending the notion of an American empire rather than arguing that it did not exist. Policy analyst Max Boot wrote in May 2003: “If we want Iraq to avoid becoming a Somalia on steroids, we’d better get used to U.S. troops being deployed there for years, possibly decades, to come. If that raises hackles about American imperialism, so be it. We’re going to be called an empire whatever we do. We might as well be a successful empire.” Meanwhile Niall Ferguson, the centrist scholar of the British Empire, warned Americans to shake off their imperial denial: “deny it who will, empire is as much a reality today as it was throughout the 300 years when Britain ruled, and made, the modern world.”

The defeat of the Republican party in 2008 ushered in the prospect of a less unilateral and aggressive foreign policy, and proponents of a bellicose U.S. foreign policy like Victor Davis Hanson at the conservative Hoover Institute bemoaned “the omnipotent influence of Obama’s multicultural creed: Western civilization is exceptional in comparison with other cultures, and history must be the story of an ecumenical, global shared brotherhood.” Yet President Barack Obama has not managed to unravel the sinews of foreign entanglement that critics call imperialism, and even in the midst of a domestic recession U.S. troops are based or involved in conflicts around the world.

The passions ignited by the debate over American empire, both at home and abroad, do not merely reflect current U.S. foreign policy. Instead, they arise from a world shaped by the collective memories of centuries of imperialism and colonialism. Formal empires may no longer cover the globe to the extent they once did, but their after-effects are all around us. This is nowhere more obvious than in the relationship between the secular/Christian-majority states of the United States and Europe (along with Jewish-majority Israel) on the one hand and the Muslim-majority states of Asia and North Africa on the other. Their relationship today is complex, in large part because the history of that relationship is messy and multifaceted. Islamic and Christian empires of the medieval and early modern eras co-existed both peacefully and fractiously, as crusaders and as traders. Africans, Europeans, and Asians of both religions were for centuries not only enslaved to labor in each other’s colonial fields and to fight in each other’s imperial armies, but also often experienced tolerance and even welcome in states that thrived on religious diversity. For a time, the great Muslim empires ruled over millions of Christian subjects, and some Muslim-majority states still do. However, in the last two centuries much of the Islamic world came to be formally ruled by or informally subject to vast maritime empires based in Europe. In the context of these shared imperial experiences, modern notions of race and class and contemporary structures of expansion and oppression with global significance

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11 Victor Davis Hanson, “Just Make Stuff Up,” National Review Online, June 12, 2009, http://article.nationalreview.com/print/?a=OTAyNzFjMmMwOWJjYmFmMTA2ODdjODZmZmtQ0MWE1Mzg=
were formed. The events of 9/11 and the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan cannot be understood outside of these experiences.

But it is not merely the events of 9/11 and the occupation of Iraq that have an imperial past. No part of the world was untouched by empires over the past half-millennium, and very little of importance that happens today can be divorced from an imperial context. Conflicts in Ireland, Israel–Palestine, the Balkans, and elsewhere are rooted in the legacies of empire. It was as subjects of modern empires that the world’s populations re-arranged themselves. The movements of Africans to the Americas, Europeans to Oceania, and Asians to the Caribbean were often compelled or facilitated by imperial technologies and policies. Less obviously, imperialism also constrained the movements of peoples, as when East Asians were excluded from Australasia and North America. Stretching across continents, these empires helped to shape the movement of not only humans but also species of plants, animals, and pests. These organisms were carried across seas and land to new places, along with languages, religions, and cultures. Diplomacy, commerce, and war between empires shaped global boundaries. Moreover, imperialism served as the foster parent of both globalization and nationalism in the modern era. As with any parent and its children, the relationship between these three trends has not always been a smooth one, but it is not possible to understand them separately.

The purpose of this book is to explore imperialism and colonialism: an inter-related series of trends that have embraced much of the human experience in the last half-millennium. The building of modern empires—once treated as the ascendency of one part of the world over the others—was in fact a shared, global experience that tied together the world’s regions as never before. Under the rule or influence of great inter-continental empires, diverse populations expanded their political, economic, military, and social links and exchanged ideas, human populations, plant and animal species, and technology. This is not to suggest that empire created an even, equal exchange between societies; by definition, it did not. Nevertheless, for better or for worse, these great empires have been among the most important institutions in shaping modern history.

This textbook addresses modern imperialism and colonialism from a truly global and holistic perspective. From the formation of centralized gunpowder empires in Eurasia and parts of Africa to the demise of the bi-polar Cold War world, this book investigates our evolving understanding of the origins, nature, mechanisms, and demise of modern empires. As well as evaluating empires as structures, it explores the doctrines, ideologies, and practices of imperialism and colonial rule. This approach is relatively novel. Conventionally, texts that deal with these topics either focus on a single empire or component of empire, such as a colony or metropole, or investigate imperialism across several empires but for a tightly defined period. Almost all histories of modern imperialism begin in Europe, and few contextualize European empires within global imperial networks and systems. Many are comparative, but none so far has managed to tell the story of modern empires from a truly integrated perspective. In this era of increasing globalization, such approaches are increasingly inadequate.

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