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H-Diplo State of the Field Essay on **The United States and the World**

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Essay by **Ryan Irwin**, University at Albany-SUNY

Some Parts Sooner, Some Later, and Finally All¹

“May [the Union] be to the world, what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all,) the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government.”

– Thomas Jefferson, 1826

‘U.S. and the World’ history is a relatively new field: Does it have a story? If the question seems peculiar, it is probably because metanarrative went the way of the dodo after the postmodern turn, having been exposed for legitimizing particular ambitions by laying out (with anticipation) a series of unrealized master ideas. Most historians now relish smaller, more intimate tales, using “new” or “post” paradigms to problematize social myths and public concerns.² Yet big stories are making something of a comeback. Some scholars have rebranded synthetic writing as *transtemporal* history, framing grand narrative as an answer to this generation’s “short-termism.”³ Others have defended synthesis more plainly: “Knowledge of our political past is important because it can serve as an antidote to the misuse of history by our leaders,” historians Fredrik Logevall and Kenneth Osgood recently wrote in the *New York*

¹ I’d like to thank Mitch Aso, Brooke Blower, Moncia Kim, Chris Miller, Andrew Preston, and Diane Labrosse for prompting, reading, and critiquing various drafts of this essay.

² This theme is developed masterfully by Barbara Weinstein, “Developing Inequality,” *American Historical Review* 13:1 (2008), 1-18.

³ Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Times.⁴ The fact that all stories are made—and therefore primed for deconstruction—was perhaps more profound before Donald Trump drew even with Hillary Clinton in the polls in September 2016. Myths can hold societies together.

‘U.S. and the World’ history is a useful site to discuss metanarrative. The phrase has become ubiquitous—especially in the United States, where it is a hiring category—but it is claimed by multiple subfields. ‘U.S. and the World’ is frequently associated with the Project on Internationalizing the Study of American History, which unfolded with joint guidance from New York University and the Organization of American Historians (OAH).⁵ However, the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) embraced social and cultural history in these same years, as well as archival perspectives that had been unavailable during the Cold War.⁶ Complicating the picture even more, immigration history has become migration history, raising questions about foreign relations itself, and globalization history has come into its own as a subfield, revealing new insights about world interdependence.⁷ Each of these fields—American history, diplomatic history, migration history, and globalization history—has claimed the moniker of ‘U.S. and the World’ history, which has created something of a historiographical traffic jam.

The result has been confusing. Alongside celebratory roundtables in the *Journal of American History* are rancorous debates over the name of SHAFR’s flagship journal, *Diplomatic History*.⁸ The SHAFR annual meeting remains a dynamic intellectual *entrepôt*, but there is a sense that groups there sometimes move along separate tracks, engaging each other in conversations about methodology while sidestepping debates about synthesis.⁹ Some of the most ambitious recent work, such as the monumental *History of the World* series, downplays narrative coherence, proffering thematic interpretations about culture, migration, the

⁴ Fredrik Logevall and Kenneth Osgood, “Why Did We Stop Teaching Political History?” *New York Times*, August 29, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/29/opinion/why-did-we-stop-teaching-political-history.html? r=0>

⁵ For an introduction, see Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

⁶ An introduction is Frank Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations, third edition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016);

⁷ For insights on the genealogy of migration history, see Donna Gabaccia, *Foreign Relations: American Immigration in Global Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). For an introduction to globalization history, see *Globalization in World History*, ed. A.G. Hopkins (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), as well as the journal *New Global Studies*.

⁸ Thomas W. Zeiler, “The Diplomatic Bandwagon: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* 95 (March 2009), 1053-73; Matthew Connelly, Robert J. McMahon, Katherine A.S. Sibley, Thomas Borstelmann, Nathan Citino, and Kristin Hoganson, “SHAFR in the World,” *Passport: The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Review* 42:2 (September 2011), 4-16.

⁹ Two elegant essays on this point are Erez Manela, “The United States in the World,” in *American History Now*, ed. Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 201-220; Thomas Borstelmann, “A Worldly Tale: Global Influences on the Historiography of U.S. Foreign Relations, in Frank Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan., eds., *America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941*, 2nd edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 338-360.

environment, and money.¹⁰ A few historians have responded to the rise of ‘U.S. and the World’ history by calling for a return to the good ‘ole days—when war and diplomacy organized the scholarly landscape—while others have embraced “the imperial” as an epistemological framework.¹¹ Relatively few scholars have tackled this essay’s question: Does ‘U.S. and the World’ history have a story?

What follows is not a traditional historiographical review. This paper articulates a grand narrative about the logic and consequences of U.S. power. It begins from the assumption that American expansion is the central preoccupation of U.S./World history, and uses about a dozen books—books that have tangled with *transtemporality*—to tell a story about American state-making.¹² The takeaway is straightforward. Since the late eighteenth century, the United States has expanded by creating interdependent sovereign governments. As logics go, this one has been inherently contradictory, and this contradiction is reflected in the Union’s name. The phrase “United States” is so familiar we rarely reflect on the incongruity at its heart. But if statehood is a vessel for sovereignty, then unity suggests the circumscription of sovereign autonomy, presumably in the name of a community-making project that restrains the authority of self-governing polities. Which, at first glance, makes no sense. How can a state be sovereign if it is united with other states? Stated differently, these two words—united and states—drift in opposite directions, and I’d like to suggest that this paradox has defined ‘U.S. and the World’ history. This essay uses this apparent paradox to lump the field as it currently exists.

This approach facilitates two insights. First, the United States—as an idea and an expansionist endeavor—has been distinct. Although the ‘imperial’ is an essential framework, one that rightly challenges myths about American exceptionalism, it also flattens some of the oddities of the American empire project. The United States might have expanded differently. Virginia once claimed land from Appalachia to the Mississippi River, while New York and Massachusetts vied to control the entire Great Lakes. The township model, where the

¹⁰ *Empires and Encounters, 1350-1750*, ed. Wolfgang Reinhard (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); *Global Interdependence: The World after 1945*, ed. Akira Iriye (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); *A World Connecting, 1870-1945*, ed. Emily Rosenberg (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

¹¹ Marc Trachtenberg, “The State of International History,” *E-International Relations* (March 2013); William Keylor, “The Problems and Prospects of Diplomatic/International History,” *H-Diplo State of the Field Essay*: 126 (April 2015), <https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/e126.pdf> (<http://tiny.cc/E126>); Paul Kramer, “Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World,” *American Historical Review* 116:5 (December 2011), 1348-91.

¹² Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in World History* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2006); David Hendrickson, *Union, Nation, or Empire: The American Debate over International Relations* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009); George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Elizabeth Hobbs Coffman, *American Umpire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Andro Linklater, *The Fabric of America: How Our Borders and Boundaries Shaped the Country and Forged Our National Identity* (New York: Walker & Company, 2007); Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012); David Milne, *World-Making: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015); Frank Ninkovich, *The Global Republic: America’s Inadvertent Rise to World Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012); Jeremi Suri, *Liberty’s Surest Guardian: Rebuilding Nations after War from the Founders to Obama* (New York: Free Press, 2012) Ian Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective since 1789* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

Union conferred land to settlers who created self-governing sovereign states that applied for membership in the Union, was neither preordained nor commonplace in the eighteenth-century world.¹³ Foregrounding the logic of American state-making, and doing so in a way that lingers on the tensions between sovereignty and union, makes it possible to revisit a question that has long vexed foreign-relations historians: Why has the American empire denied its name? The New Left found answers in Imperial Anti-colonialism—in the logic of the marketplace—while Post-revisionists emphasized the Geopolitics of Invitation.¹⁴ Perhaps a different answer has been hiding in plain sight—in the United States' name.

A second payoff relates to change. America makes states, but this project has taken different forms, and the tension between statehood and unity—a tension so critical to the idea of the United States—has evolved over time. This essay explores how and why. The first part looks at the period between the Revolution and Civil War. The United States began as a continental experiment dogged by unresolved tensions between white supremacy and the institution of slavery. The Civil War resolved this tension, and the essay's second section examines how the industrial revolutions adjusted the logic and form of American state-making. White supremacy determined the way the United States expanded its borders after the Civil War, and open door diplomacy advanced the premise that interstate interdependence could be achieved without union. This approach proved unwieldy, and a third section explores the period between World War I and the Vietnam Wars. In different ways, the League of Nations and United Nations (UN) were instruments of American power, and even as U.S. elites fought to orient themselves to these institutions, the Cold War rescaled the United States as a transoceanic alternative to modern imperialism. The essay's final section brings this story to the present day by exploring the origins and aftereffects of decolonization. As statehood became ubiquitous, American state-makers recoiled from the assumptions they had proselytized at the century's midpoint, adopting a mindset that fused modified Keynesianism with democracy promotion and human rights. The results have been perplexing.

Yet these two insights—when viewed together—gesture toward a story. The United States began as a continental project and became hemispheric before emerging as a transoceanic and then a global enterprise, and despite these changes, American power has had a coherent logic. The United States makes states, and it has used different institutions to cultivate and police particular, shared standards of behavior and interaction. The United States' pursuit of markets, cast once as the *raison d'être* of American diplomacy, has been entwined with this state-making project, and the modern nation-state system, so critical to Post-revisionist thought, cannot be separated from the story told here. Moreover, today's world is a reflection of American power, and the United States—or the Free World or whatever we call it—has hinged always on the presupposition that self-government can be squared with membership in a rule-based interstate community. Racism has undoubtedly guided this project, and American claims about interstate trade and collective security have persistently equated the interests of powerful elites with the desires of everyone else. Yet this

¹³ For comparative perspective, see Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ Emblematic syntheses are William Appleman Williams, *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1959) and John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

project—this world-making experiment—has arguably organized U.S./World history since the late eighteenth century, and it is with us today.

Splitters will split, as they should, and every grand narrative can be deconstructed. But fields need lumpers too. The American empire has denied its own existence because of a contradiction rooted in its name, and the United States now presides over a world it barely understands. Reckoning with this past is one way to reclaim the future from opportunistic demagogues, and telling this particular story might clarify why we need a field like ‘U.S. and the World’ history.

Continent

Ohio is a useful place to orient a narrative about American state-making. Rich, fertile, and peopled by Native Americans, the Ohio River Valley nudged settlers to clarify their ideas about expansion on the eve of the American Revolution. By the late eighteenth century, most colonists saw expansion as a birthright, necessitated by population growth along the eastern seaboard and justified by their incipient ideas about white supremacy. Claiming this birthright involved remaking the earth itself, and while differences separated the North and South, settlement—as an act of environmental transformation—shaped the political project known as British America. Londoners, in contrast, wanted stability in North America—not Ohio’s land—and saw expansion as a geopolitical exercise. Britain’s alliance with Iroquoia had arguably determined the outcome of the Seven Years’ War in North America, and native sovereignty was not inconsonant with British imperialism. If Pontiac’s War affirmed that Ohio was a thicket of rival polities, not empty land, it also made expansion, in Whitehall’s mind, inconceivable without diplomacy.¹⁵

The American Revolution was partly about expansion, and it stemmed from the irreconcilable differences between these viewpoints. Britain’s Proclamation Line of 1763, which prevented Ohio’s colonization, set the stage for the wrangling of the 1770s, and the Paris Treaty of 1783 resolved this fight in the settlers’ favor. The Colonies were not entirely independent—they relied heavily on capital from Europe—but they were free to expand westward. And the ‘how’ mattered. Forged in the late 1780s, the Northwest Ordinances pushed America’s thirteen states to relinquish their competing claims in Ohio’s river valley. This territory, recast as public land, would be purchased (often at the barrel of a gun) from indigenous peoples and mapped by government surveyors. It would then be divided into townships and sold to settlers, who would create new self-governing states that rejoined a polity that provided collective security and commercial exchange. Military protections and trade standards had self-evident appeal to those living beyond Appalachia, and the Constitution merely reified this peculiar expansionist project. The Union that emerged from Philadelphia in 1787 did not champion boundless freedom as its objective; it canalized interstate conflict and managed interstate trade by subsuming self-government within the institutional architecture called federalism. This approach toward expansion had few precedents, and Ohio’s entry into the Union in 1803 established the blueprint for a distinct sort of empire.¹⁶

¹⁵ Reflections on frontier idea can be found in Linklater, *The Fabric of America*, especially chapters 1-4.

¹⁶ For interstate diplomacy and Constitution, see David Hendrickson, *Union, Nation, or Empire*, especially parts one and two, and *Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003), as well as Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *American Umpire*, especially chapters 1-2.

Early American political theorists fought over this project ferociously. The Union married security and commerce to state sovereignty, while circumscribing that sovereignty within an apparatus managed by political elites. This formula made statehood into the principal conduit of political expression, but it also framed the nation as a pluralist amalgamation of sovereign polities. Within this interstate union, liberty was ritualized through elections and lawmaking, and entangled within a set of shared commercial and military practices, making American freedom coeval with membership in a rule-based community. The French Revolution forced American state-makers to confront the question: Where would this Union take them? As Treasury Secretary, Alexander Hamilton equated the United States idea with the interests of the moneyed elite, ostensibly so Americans could someday obtain economic independence from Europe. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson countered that state-making was a regenerative enterprise, spearheaded by virtuous subsistence farmers who exercised real freedom on the frontier. While both men championed expansion, neither denied the gap between the Revolution's rhetoric and the Union's institutional workings. But they wanted to march this Union in very different directions. Even after Jefferson's 1803 Louisiana Purchase revealed the necessity of federal power, and gently bridged this rivalry, it was genuinely unclear if settlers were moving West to realize some common destiny—as embodied by statehood within the Union—or to run away from the trappings of circumscribed sovereignty altogether.¹⁷



Expansion 1.0: "Michigan and the Great Lakes," in T.G. Bradford, *A Comprehensive Atlas: Geographical, Historical & Commercial* (Boston: Wiley & Long, 1836).

¹⁷ An elegant summation is Herring, *Colony to Superpower*, chapters 1-2.

White supremacy befogged an either/or answer. If the Ordinances provided a conceptual framework for frontier settlement, racial othering held the resulting conglomerate of sovereign polities together. Despite Jefferson's celebration of subsistence farming, southern cash crops made slavery omnipresent within the United States, and the Union trampled native sovereignty at every turn, squashing Britain's earlier willingness to coexist with Indian nations. Stripped of pretense, the United States existed *for* Anglo-Saxon settlers; expansion necessitated the exploitation and conquest of Black and Native America. Yet American racism was also variegated. Although few Americans questioned the morality of extruding native people from the body politic—caging indigeneity itself within a subaltern state system—plenty of people split hairs over the relationship between white supremacy and slavery. Early abolitionists mostly lamented the South's dependence on nonwhite labor, which made extrusion impossible, while guffawing at the idea of racial equality within the Union. This response became stickier after the British Empire abolished the transatlantic slave trade in 1807. The United States existed within an Atlantic world still dominated by Great Britain, and London's actions put a spotlight on the ugly underbelly of America's grand experiment. Viewed from Britain's perspective, the War of 1812 was a semantic fight over the comparative inequity of monarchy and slavery, and while the Missouri Compromise lent order to American state-making after 1820—dividing the unconquered West into slave and free states—this move only amplified the paradox of Black America itself. Racial violence was woven into the Union's sinews.¹⁸

The Industrial Revolutions turned this tension into a crisis. Steam technologies and new machines energized America's Cotton Revolution, making the South essential to the transatlantic economy. Britain's first Industrial Revolution, powered by the textile industry's mechanization, was unimaginable without southern plantations, and the region's commercial tentacles spread quickly throughout the industrialized world. By the mid-nineteenth century, the South grew sixty percent of Europe's cotton, which only confirmed the region's preeminence within the "American System," as Henry Clay termed the Union after 1816. The South's economic importance, in his mind, assured slavery's survival. At the same time, factory life brought the hourly wage to the North, along with concentrated wealth and a renewed commitment to interstate unity. (Which Mr. Madison's War had tested). If slave-grown cotton shaped the North's nascent manufacturing industry—uniting the states economically—the Industrial Revolution also created a new sort of modern aristocrat, and elites with machines did not march in lockstep with America's landed gentry. As London and New York vied for control of the South's cotton, U.S. congressmen brokered increasingly creative compromises to paper over the United States' internal rivalries, even if Jefferson's America, rooted in myths about virtuous yeomen, increasingly seemed like a chimera by the century's midpoint.¹⁹

Conflict was inevitable. If the key innovation of the Industrial Revolution was wage labor, the central premise of the Cotton Revolution was slavery, and by tightening the Union's economic bonds, the Industrial and Cotton Revolutions illuminated tensions that were inherent to interstate unity and sovereign statehood. The Union could not function with two separate economies. While northerners tackled this problem by reviving Hamilton's lexis of federal authority—confident that demographics guaranteed their eventual control of Congress—southerners dreamed increasingly of slave-holding alliances with Brazil, Cuba, and Texas, especially after the United Kingdom abolished slavery altogether in 1833. President James Polk tried to

¹⁸ For summation of racial dimensions of American state-making, Ian Tyrell, *Transnational Nation*, especially chapters 5-6.

¹⁹ For global context, see Sven Beckert, *An Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage, 2015).

resolve this impasse by orchestrating the annexation of Oregon, California, and Texas in 1846. But few Americans saw merit in simply extending the Missouri Compromise to the Pacific. Some clamored to conquer the rest of Mexico, others pontificated about Northern Mexico's racial impurity, and others still fretted over Polk's methods.²⁰ According to then Congressman Abraham Lincoln, for instance, expansion had unleashed a new monster: the Imperial Presidency:

Allow the President to invade a neighboring nation, whenever *he* shall deem it necessary to repel an invasion, and you allow him to do so, *whenever he may choose to say* he deems it necessary for such purpose—and you allow him to make war at pleasure. . . . This [was] the most oppressive of all Kingly oppressions; and [our founders] resolved to so frame the Constitution that *no one man* could hold the power of bringing this oppression upon us.²¹

Lincoln was not the only Westerner asking tough questions about the Union's future in 1848. With the Compromise of 1850, Illinoisan Stephen Douglas became the country's dominant political theorist. His signature innovation, popular sovereignty, upended the Missouri Compromise by freeing settlers to determine their own position on slavery. This approach perverted the spirit of 1787 by turning competition over America's original sin into state-making's *raison d'être*. It also gestured toward a future of perpetual war. Territorial conquest was the "law of this nation's existence," Douglas argued, and without it the American "hive" would consume itself. The ensuing bloodbath in Kansas prompted Lincoln to challenge Douglas for his Senate seat in 1858, and while slavery's future figured prominently in the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates, so too did the paradox of Southern prosperity. The concurrent Wheat Revolution—anchored in Chicago—revealed slavery's economic inefficiencies. For Lincoln, perpetual frontier war merely delayed the establishment of a common, integrated national infrastructure. And there was no greater sin than inefficiency.²²

The 1860 election did not immediately resolve the conflict between these visions. Confronted by the prospect of secession in 1861, William Seward, President Lincoln's Secretary of State, flirted with a Polkian solution, suggesting that the annexation of Cuba might forestall a Civil War. Many Americans responded with disbelief when Lincoln instead sent war supplies to Fort Sumter, and few saw the South's defeat as a forgone conclusion. The Confederacy had economic leverage in Europe, a deep bench of experienced leaders, and an objective that had precedent in the American Revolution. Lincoln, in contrast, faced an unprecedented task—keeping the Union together—with an untested political party and a divided people. He essentially had to succeed where the British had failed in 1782, which he did, thanks to good luck and inspired planning. Europe, it turned out, needed bread more than textiles—denying the South its Yorktown moment—and Lincoln essentially used the industrial technologies to flood the South and West with soldiers and weapons. The Gettysburg Address gave this bloody enterprise some modicum of meaning, but it also distracted from a deeper truth. With General William Sherman's March to the Sea and General Ulysses

²⁰ Bender, *A Nation Among Nations*, especially chapter 3.

²¹ Abraham Lincoln to William Herndon, 15 February 1848, in Paul M. Angle and Earl Schenck Miers, eds., *The Living Lincoln: The Man and His Times, in His Own Words*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 110.

²² For context on Lincoln's vision, Louise Stevenson, *Lincoln in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Grant's Overland Campaign, the North's war machine effectively obliterated the South as a political entity. By 1865, the North had conquered the Union.²³

Hemisphere

This conquest altered the logic of American expansion. Most obviously, the Republican Party, which dominated the federal government after the Civil War, recast the relationship between land, citizenship, and union. If America's political imagination moved along a horizontal or territorial axis before the war—with Jefferson's idealized yeomen renewing their freedom on the frontier—the Civil War helped popularize a new set of myths about workplace mobility. These myths, embodied by industrialists and bankers like Andrew Carnegie and J.P. Morgan, reframed expansion around a new sort of self-made man. Chicago's remarkable prosperity, the argument went, stemmed from its place *within* an integrated commercial infrastructure that stretched across Ohio's river valley. And if every city in Lincoln's America wanted to become the next Chicago, and every individual yearned for success in the workplace, it followed that escape on the frontier—the premise of Jefferson's America—had no future in postwar America. Indeed, Republicans treated the United States as a single political unit—not a conglomerate of polities—and circumscribed state autonomy with an array of intellectual and physical infrastructures, investing in railways, telegraphs, colleges, and homesteads. This project, this effort to create stricter interstate standards, reflected the North's newfound prominence within the Union and modified the conceptual underpinnings of federal governance. The fourteenth amendment was conceptually impossible without this deeper transformation. With slavery abolished, wage labor dominated the country's internal economy, and industrial technology—embodied by the construction of the first transcontinental railroad between 1863 and 1869—made the United States into a proto-Hotel California: Americans might check out, but they could never leave.²⁴

Amidst these changes, racism offered a point of continuity. In the West, for instance, Republican innovations only quickened the pace of settlement, further extruding Native America from the body politic. Within a single decade, Lakota warrior Sitting Bull went from fighting the U.S. military in the Dakota Territory to performing his otherness in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. The show made white supremacy into theater, and unfolded alongside the professionalization of the United States' Native American reserve system. In the South, emancipation merely adjusted the methods of African American exploitation. If the Ordinances offered a political framework for interstate interdependence, Reconstruction had aspired for a higher goal: the hearts and minds of a foreign people. And the ensuing debacle exposed the Union for what it was. Passed off as wage labor, sharecropping dodged the issue of redistributive justice and resituated the routines of white domination, creating a horrific new reality for African Americans. By the late nineteenth century, racial violence had fused with legalese to create a new category of citizenship: separate yet equal.²⁵

²³ Herring, *Colony to Superpower*, especially chapter 6, Tyrell, *Transnational Nation*, especially chapter 7, Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, chapters 8-9.

²⁴ Bender's *A Nation Among Nations*, chapter 3, explores territoriality and liberalism, and Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, especially chapter 10-11, and Suri, *Liberty's Surest Guardian*, chapter 2, offer précises on Reconstruction.

²⁵ Linklater's *Fabric of America* puts this story in context of state-making, especially chapters 10-12, as does Tyrell, *Transnational Nation*, chapter 9.



Expansion 2.0: Poole Brothers, “Bird’s-eye-view of the business district of Chicago” (Chicago, 1898), available in Library of Congress Geography and Map Division.

Reconstruction’s collapse affected the methods of American expansion. Congress obstructed various attempts to annex islands in the Pacific and Caribbean, and critics lambasted the Alaska purchase as folly in 1867. Nine states joined the Union between 1865 and 1900, and none acknowledged the diversity within their borders. Yet racial prejudice did not keep ambitious Americans from gazing at the world beyond North America. Evangelical Protestants, for instance, rehabilitated expansion as a religious project. Spearheaded by northeastern churches—where moral fervor flourished after the Civil War—a missionary diaspora flocked to the outposts of British imperialism during the nineteenth century, cultivating an Anglo-American reform movement that tried to change how governments worked in faraway lands. These missionaries had no interest in growing the Union’s membership, but they expected the societies they reformed to accept the standards so essential to the United States’ idea. Religion, in other words, offered a platform for Union-less interdependence. If this movement softened tensions among English-speaking Christians, it also mapped the world’s nonwhite peoples on the basis of their receptivity to U.S. ideas about morality and sovereignty. Pacific islanders joined Native and African Americans near the bottom of a racialized global hierarchy—peopled by the History-less masses—while Levantines and South Asians inched higher because they possessed written languages and premodern imperial traditions. Chinese sat atop this pyramid with an ancient, organized, backward society which was primed for Christian conversion.²⁶

²⁶ Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*, especially parts three and four, and Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), especially chapters 1-2.

Latin America, brimming with Catholic republics, fit awkwardly in this moral matrix. But missionaries were not alone in stretching the United States' geographic imagination; northern businessmen elaborated their own framework for Union-less interdependence after the Civil War. Part of Lincoln's wartime strategy had involved pushing American financiers to develop autonomous capital markets, which paid dividends when Latin American republics began clamoring for their own factories and railways in the late nineteenth century. Having won their independence in the 1820s, the United States' southern neighbors were not eager to watch the Industrial Revolutions pass them by. However, governments needed foreign money and expertise to build new infrastructure, which created opportunities for any banker with an appetite for risk. For much of Latin America, the ensuing transactions constituted an epic fail. These loans came with conditions and fostered competitive collaboration among North Atlantic lenders. Even as Americans lamented the perfidy of their European counterparts, they invented international laws together to safeguard their mutual investments. In some respects, this approach coalesced around a recognizable endpoint, since U.S. businessmen, like missionaries, embraced statehood as an instrument through which their influence traveled.²⁷

Although U.S. officialdom mostly legitimized the efforts of missionaries and businessmen, schisms nonetheless emerged over how to establish predictable, stable interstate communities without the trappings of Union membership. Hamilton Fish, Secretary of State between 1869 and 1877, freeloaded on the growth of British hegemony. The 1871 Treaty of Washington inaugurated rapprochement between the United States and the British Empire, facilitating closer U.S.-Canadian relations while solidifying a European market for American wheat and cotton. James Blaine, Secretary of State in 1881 and between 1889 and 1892, jumped off this bandwagon to shore up U.S. unilateralism in Latin America. Blaine not only upended the Monroe Doctrine of 1823—turning it from empty statement about anti-colonialism into a clarion call for hemispheric supremacy—but he also established the scaffolding for a new polity known as Greater America. The United States would shape the entire vocabulary of politics in the Western hemisphere.²⁸ “Our great demand,” Blaine announced in 1890, “is expansion.”

I mean expansion of trade with countries where we can find profitable exchanges. We are not seeking annexation of territory . . . [but] it would be unwise if we did not engage in [the] . . . *annexation of trade*.²⁹

This project reimaged the geography of American state-making. Commercial contracts and reciprocity treaties took the place of land deals, settlement, and frontier war. Rather than incorporating new territory into the union, the United States cast itself as the hemisphere's northern reformer, proselytizing a standard approach toward property rights, currency convertibility, and revenue collection. Like continental expansion, this process unfolded haphazardly, but the overall objective was instantly recognizable. The United States wanted a pluralist amalgamation of sovereign polities—each with a constitution and like-minded (elected) elites—and it expected these polities to facilitate trade and travel, resulting in a networked political

²⁷ This shift is handled carefully in David Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Trade and Investment: American Economic Expansion in the Hemisphere, 1865-1900* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1998).

²⁸ Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2012), especially chapter 5.

²⁹ Quoted in Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), 106.

environment with shared labor and business norms. This approach undoubtedly favored the United States, and it flourished because London accepted Washington as its surrogate. But it also contrasted with the logic of the 1884 Berlin Conference, where Europeans erased African self-government with a principle known as ‘effective occupation,’ resituating African sovereignty within territorially coherent European empires. If the Northwest Ordinances had pioneered an alternative framework for empire, the outlines survived the Civil War. For the United States, the existence of a metaphorical door—a sovereign government that determined public policy—was as essential as the fact that that door stay open.³⁰

Two obvious problems dogged this mindset. First, while America’s economic sphere of influence grew in the late nineteenth century, international law—which had different implications in South America than North America—lacked the binding authority of Union membership. Second, U.S. officials did not see their southern neighbors as political partners. By annexing Latin American trade, Blaine explained, the United States would “raise the standard of [Latin America’s] civilization,” since Spanish-speaking people were so “hot-blooded” and “excitable.”³¹ For an approach rooted in sovereignty, this sounded awfully imperialist. Indeed, it was no mistake that U.S. citizens claimed a title—‘American’—that ostensibly belonged to inhabitants of the whole Western hemisphere. (Even today, there are no ‘United Statesians’). This mindset framed the First International Conference of American States, held in Washington in 1888, where U.S. officials used the United States’ domestic legislation as a framework to rationalize and integrate hemispheric interstate relations. If the National Bank Act of 1863 had developed the United States’ capital markets, it followed that an inter-American bank and commercial bureau could do the same, especially if it were located in Washington. A hemispheric customs union promised to curtail Europe’s influence, just as tariffs had fostered U.S. autonomy in the 1860s, and a pan-American railway explicitly evoked the United States’ first transcontinental railway. Most dramatically, the Conference rescaled collective security—the hallmark of the American union—through a mandatory arbitration process. For its architects, the Conference hinted at the possibilities of Union-less interdependence; most everyone else found the whole thing paternalistic, and the United States ultimately failed to bend Latin America to this vision. After considerable debate, the attendees cohered instead around a modest plan of trade reciprocity, and a string diplomatic crises eroded the overall appeal of pan-Americanism after the 1880s.³²

Deeper contradictions plagued the United States after the Civil War. By the 1890s, the instruments of Northern power were thwarting the premise of Lincoln’s union. If the self-made man ever truly existed, he was laboring under a lot of debt by the United States’ centennial. Collaboration between government and industry, forged in the name of vertical mobility, had empowered a cohort of corporate behemoths who were adept at making infrastructure and amassing wealth. But getting a paycheck from a rich person was not prosperity. Southern sharecroppers and Western farmers toiled under different circumstances, but neither necessarily thrived within America’s new status quo. Similarly, immigrants became essential and expendable, while laborers toiled on Latin American plantations now owned by U.S. companies. Hotel California turned out to be rather hellish. By the 1890s, strikes unfolded on a weekly basis and unrest festered throughout the

³⁰ Cobbs Hoffman’s *American Umpire*, chapters 5-6, asks useful questions about the open door concept, and Mazower, *Governing the World*, chapter 3, summarizes the relationship between imperialism and international law.

³¹ Quoted in Sexton, 183.

³² Herring, chapter 7, and Sexton, chapter 5.

hemisphere. Anarchism rightly terrified industrialists, but this discontent stemmed from the newly entwined relationship between industrial corporations and the land and people they controlled. You did not need a fancy degree to grasp that Greater America reproduced sovereignty while eroding individual autonomy, and that liberty, when ritualized as voting and lawmaking, mocked the poor. This was not just a foreign-policy problem—it was a United-States problem.³³

Oceans

One response was to impose more order on this unruly thicket. Imperialism was all the rage in Europe, and President William McKinley tried his hand in 1898 with a short, triumphant war against Spain. The administration's acquisition of land in the Caribbean and Pacific hinted at a hands-on alternate Union-less interdependence. In one fell swoop, the United States annexed the Philippines, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Guam, Wake Island, and parts of Samoa. Who needed international conferences if one could simply impose rules and regulations on foreign places? When Cuba regained its sovereignty in 1901, the island could neither sign its own treaties nor establish diplomatic relations abroad; the U.S. government maintained an outpost at Guantanamo Bay and gave itself the right to return whenever it wanted. Within two decades, American business controlled sixty percent of Cuba's agricultural land, ninety percent of its tobacco plantations, and nearly one hundred percent of its mining, electric, and railway industries. In the Philippines, where comparable plans met fiercer resistance, the American military simply stayed. Although Filipino leaders used words from America's own Declaration of Independence to explain their ambitions, Theodore Roosevelt, who entered the White House after McKinley's 1901 assassination, escalated the Philippines War and then deployed missionaries, engineers, and businessmen to the islands. His actions rested atop the racial worldview popularized earlier by Christian missionaries—Pacific islanders, he claimed, were among the world's least civilized peoples—and ultimately globalized the premise of subaltern sovereignty, which was so essential to the United States' domination of Native America.³⁴

Imperial America was more orderly than stable. While Roosevelt admittedly disrupted the marriage between government and industry at home, his bluster could not hide the shaky foundations of the transoceanic empire he had inherited. The 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth bolstered America's status as a Pacific power, but the Great White Fleet's ensuing circumnavigation of the world was impossible without British naval support. Going into the twentieth century, the United States lacked a global basing network, an ocean-going merchant navy, or a worldwide communications grid. It manufactured a lot of stuff, yes, but other countries got that stuff across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Moreover, while Americans talked loudly about their plans for the Latin south, sterling still dominated trade there, and U.S. lenders had relatively little influence in the illusive China Market. Secretary of State John Hay's Open Door Notes explicated the logic of American state-making beautifully—suggesting that China's administrative and territorial sovereignty went hand-in-hand with freer trade and interdependence—but Europeans barely acknowledged Hay's existence. For an audience abroad, Greater America needed Greater Britain; Washington's influence stemmed from London's

³³ Bender, chapter 3, provides astute reflections on this contradiction.

³⁴ This shift has been explored extensively, and especially well in Sexton, chapter 6, Bender, chapter 4, and Tyrell, chapter 10.

prerogatives in the Western hemisphere and East Asia. Then and now, critics saw tragedy in this combination of hubris and weakness, since it ignored and exacerbated the Union's underlying problems.³⁵

World War I changed everything. Europe's self-immolation disrupted Britain's commercial network, nudging the United States to invest in its own communication and transportation grid. These initiatives flourished as the War pushed enormous amounts of money from London to New York. The United States began 1914 as a debtor nation and ended 1916 as the world's principal creditor and its preeminent exporter. This shift had few precedents, and President Woodrow Wilson responded by reframing the United States idea. A native of Virginia, he lamented McKinley's imperialism as coeval to Southern Reconstruction, and anchored his peace plan in the simple rejoinder that interdependence was not possible without Union. Wilson's League of Nations took the bedrock principles of the United States—free trade and collective security—and embedded them within an international institution that attacked the premise of unrestricted sovereignty, situating politics itself within an architecture that made interstate conflict impossible, celebrated commercial exchange, and held all members to a universal 'sacred trust.' In theory, this formula would make self-government and interstate unity mutually constitutive, eliminating militarism while extending the civilizing mission everywhere. The plan obviously suited America's newfound economic hegemony. After all, if the League worked, imperial preference would collapse in Europe and Asia, and do so in a way that aligned with a particular narrative about America's past.³⁶ In Wilson's words,

I am proposing [that] nations should . . . adopt the doctrine of President Monroe as the doctrine of the world: that no nation should seek to extend its polity over any other nation or people, but that every people should be left free to determine its own polity.³⁷

Wilson's conclusions aligned with one interpretation of the Open Door Policy, but his critics pushed back in Paris. British and French diplomats, for instance, made their participation in the League contingent on German reparations and war guilt. For French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, who had lived in United States during the 1860s, Wilson's peace plan was curiously Southern, rooted in the false presupposition that postwar reconciliation required a victor-less peace. The infamous campaigns of Grant and Sherman carried different implications for those who shared a border with Germany. Japanese officials, meanwhile, nudged Wilson to renounce white supremacy. Wilson's unwillingness to do so, combined with the President's warm embrace of mandated colonialism, managed to both confirm Japan's unease and globalize the concept of subaltern statehood. Plenty of nonwhite peoples, when they learned they would be 'separate yet equal' within this world union, turned away from the organization altogether. The Russian Revolution, which unfolded on the other side of Europe in 1917, situated self-determination within an anti-capitalist critique of imperialism—dismissing the League as an instrument of the bourgeoisie—and Karl Marx's writings provided a rich vocabulary to conceptualize world unity without state sovereignty. By the time American voters

³⁵ Kate Epstein, *Torpedo: Inventing the Military-Industrial Complex in the United States and Great Britain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014) provides a superb microcosm of this story.

³⁶ Mazower, *Governing the World*, chapter 5, offers suburb context, as does Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), while Tyrell, Bender, and Milne provide astute interpretations of Wilsonianism.

³⁷ Woodrow Wilson, "Peace Without Victory," 22 January 1917.

themselves repudiated Wilson in 1919, ostensibly because of the stringent nature of collective security, American history's varied contradictions were on full display.³⁸

However, the Versailles debacle did not stymie the United States' transoceanic ambitions. Wilson's Republican successors merely returned to the riddle of Union-less interdependence. The economic context, after all, had changed. The Immigration Act of 1924 announced that the United States stood apart from the world, laying out an American identity that turned racial otherness into federal law while rebuking the premise that Asian people could be American. At the same time, Republicans professionalized collaboration between government officials, financiers, and manufacturers in order to bind East Asia and Europe to North America. If the Washington Conference of 1921-1922 provided a blueprint—resulting in shared standards about arms expenditures and Chinese sovereignty—the Dawes Plan of 1924 embodied how this anti-Wilsonian internationalism might work. Rather than politicking through Geneva, American corporatists reformed the tariff and trade policies of specific governments. And, for better or worse, it worked. By the late 1920s, Republicans had created an enormous Ponzi scheme in Europe; Germans took American money to rebuild and to repay their reparations, which Britain and France used to rebuild and to repay their loans to Americans, who then funneled money and manufactured goods back into Europe. The approach saturated Europe with American dollars and created an investment bubble that inevitably popped, facilitating the conditions for a worldwide economic depression. It turned out that private-public collaboration only worked with profits. This was a tough lesson with dramatic consequences that distracted from a deeper truth: the United States idea was broken. It simply was not possible to cultivate an interstate community and then exploit the sovereigns therein in the name of national self-interest. The formula itself guaranteed disaster.³⁹

The Great Depression prompted debate about the Union's geographic reach. President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal turned attention inward to Lincoln's beleaguered self-made man—recasting economic security as a government imperative—and his Good Neighbor Policy rescaled the spatial contours and political instruments of American ambition. The Export-Import Bank, for instance, supplanted private U.S. banks at the forefront of interstate lending, bracketing the autonomy of large American corporations, and a 'League of Nations for the Americas,' built on the twin pillars of collective security and predictable trade, gained support as a regional alternative to Wilson's grand plans, all of which resonated among U.S. liberals. However, for those recovering from the deluge and sudden retrenchment of American capital, the Depression revealed a different set of lessons. The true evidence of political power, German theorist Carl Schmitt wrote in 1932, was a nation's ability to determine other people's words, and American imperialism had no rival in this regard. Protected by two oceans, the United States had crushed Native America, exploited Black America, and ascended with few European entanglements, which offered lessons for aspirant world-makers. Japanese nationalists evoked America's past as they expanded their empire from Korea to Manchuria in 1932, and articulated their own Monroe Doctrine to discredit pan-European ambitions in the Pacific. Adolf Hitler similarly cast his idea of *Lebensraum* as equivalent to American manifest destiny. Even within Geneva,

³⁸ Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916-1931*, especially parts two and three, and Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³⁹ Tooze, especially parts three and four.

autarky captured the imagination of ardent internationalists, as Britain and France embraced imperial preference systems and flirted with the logic of five-year plans.⁴⁰

Roosevelt's supporters fought back during World War II. That conflict united Republicans and Democrats and nudged U.S. planners to articulate an alternative to the League of Nations. They recast 'Collective Security,' which Wilson had framed as a universal legal principle, as a pliable political project for the world's great powers. The United States compensated small countries by championing a General Assembly—where states shaped international norms together—and a new financial system, anchored by a World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) that provided funds for national economic development. If the General Assembly nudged UN members to recognize the merits of constitutions and elections, the Bretton Woods system hinted at a UN economy undergirded by the U.S. dollar. This formula was instantly recognizable, of course. However, it also institutionalized interstate arbitration, assuring that every UN member—including the United States—experienced its sovereignty as constant negotiation. For liberal Americans, this formula slammed the door on comparisons between Axis and American history. Washington guarded against the recrudescence of autarky during the war's final years, making China into a Security Council member, nudging India into the General Assembly, and replacing the rhetoric of racial otherness with talk of universal development. But racism did persist. When conversation drifted to U.S. segregation, for instance, Americans silenced their critics forcefully, and the War Department buttressed an expansive Pacific-base network with tropes about native backwardness and dubious reinterpretations of trusteeship. Yet U.S. diplomats wanted to impart their post-imperial order with some measure of verisimilitude. By conferring statehood to the Philippines, and Hawaii and Alaska, the 'American Century'—as Henry Luce's *Time* magazine labeled this new order—hinted at a future where Asian and Levantine states might experience independence through the United Nations.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Mazower, chapter 6.

⁴¹ Milne explores this period creatively in chapters 4-5, as does Preston in part four, and Herring in chapters 12-13; Bender offers thoughtful reflections on liberal internationalism in chapter 5, as does Tyrell in chapters 12-13. However, few scholars have explored the nineteenth-century roots of midcentury world-making, which is the focus of my current research.



Expansion 3.0: "The United Nations fight for freedom" (Washington, DC: Office of Facts and Figures, 1942).

Maintaining worldwide good neighborliness was not easy. Washington and Moscow locked horns immediately within the United Nations. Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin had entered the organization—and ostensibly put aside proletarian revolution—in order to legitimize Soviet conquests in Eastern Europe, not engage in constant, canalized conflict over the terms of international peace and commercial exchange. As Soviets deployed their Security-Council veto, U.S. leaders walked away from their plans to let the United Nations control nuclear energy, culminating in a series of crises that turned the superpowers into outright antagonists.⁴²

However, the Cold War also emboldened American state-makers. Within the United States, anti-Communism created fear, which facilitated the institutionalization of a military-industrial complex that powered America's postwar economic growth and bracketed private enterprise and partisan rancor in the name of national security. These transformations, when combined with legislation that married citizenship to

⁴² The centrality of the United Nations to the early Cold War is explored thoughtfully in Ilya V. Gaiduk, *Divided Together: The United States and the Soviet Union in the United Nations, 1945-1965* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

service, reimagined Lincoln's hardworking climber as a hungry consumer while putting hard cash in the pockets of white Americans. Abroad, meanwhile, the Marshall Plan and Japanese Reconstruction unleashed billions of American dollars, giving the United States leverage to export goods, services, and ideas across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The resulting Free World rested atop a slew of defense arrangements—forged in Rio, Manila, Tokyo, and Brussels—that made collective security synonymous with U.S. military protection and economic aid, all of which enhanced Washington's negotiating leverage at the U.N. General Assembly.⁴³ By the time Pyongyang attacked Seoul in 1950, the American Union had become genuinely transoceanic, and America's ability to march the United Nations into battle—against the concept of interstate aggression—with the authority of the U.N. General Assembly and support from the American people—only confirmed that anti-Communism *served* U.S. internationalism.

World

Step back for a moment. In 1919, American voters had recoiled from the League because they feared it might contaminate the United States idea. Schmitt, unsurprisingly, had opinions about Korea, since it now seemed that the United States shaped the world's political vocabulary. The American establishment had stumbled upon a potent cocktail, one that mixed anti-Communist hysteria with interstate defense pacts, giving the United States real control over the negotiations happening within the United Nations. Only Washington was surprised when this cocktail exploded. China's Communist revolution and entry into the Korean War sobered the liberal spirit. Because Moscow had detonated its own nuclear bomb in 1949, Stalin's alliance with China's Mao Zedong undercut the possibility of total war in Northeast Asia; an American attack on Beijing would surely prompt Soviet retaliation in Berlin. This impasse set the stage for the creation of rival Korean states, and while the United Nations welcomed the South, the North's exclusion—coming so quickly on the heels of China's Communist Revolution—upended the whole edifice of America's newfound hegemony. Unlike the United States, the Soviet Union had industrialized without foreign capital. Collectivized planning, which was so essential to communist statehood, divorced modernization from internationalism, thereby challenging the underlying premise that circumscribed sovereignty differed from imperialism.⁴⁴ If North Korea (or China) thrived, why would any country join the United Nations? Why would governments automatically follow the United States?

Ironically, this setback made American state-making into a worldwide enterprise. Earth itself, Washington concluded, was a closed circuit. This premise was not new, but it had never before oriented American foreign policy. After Korea, containment encouraged a zero-sum approach toward expansion, pitting the Free World against the Communist World, while inflating the geographic parameters of American ambition. Since Communism appealed to everyone, the United States had to make states everywhere. This mindset informed quixotic quests to feed the world, and it transformed the Free World into a vessel for the United States idea.⁴⁵ "We Americans are individualists," Secretary of State Dean Acheson explained in 1952, "but we are at the

⁴³ Suri, *Liberty's Surest Guardian*, chapter 4, reviews this argument effectively.

⁴⁴ Herring, chapter 14; Mazower, chapter 9; Hajimu Masuda, *Cold War Crucible: The Korean Conflict and the Postwar World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015) provides an especially creative interpretation of Korea's world impact.

⁴⁵ Milne, chapters 5-6, and Preston, part four, provide complementary insights about this moment, as does Cobbs Hoffman, chapter 9.

same time keenly sensible of the unity of society.” Freedom, in other words, went hand-in-hand with community. Acheson continued,

These two principles—the worth of man and the unity of society—are not merely English principles or American principles. They are aspects of the ideal of liberty. And the ideal of liberty is going out across the world, as Jefferson said it would, ‘to some parts sooner, to some later, and finally to all.’ And so, when nations . . . group themselves together in a free international society, we should expect that larger community—if it is to be a valid—to build upon these two fundamental principles.⁴⁶

Decolonization raised questions about the relationship between freedom and community. Thanks, in part, to American diplomatic pressure, Britain and France relinquished control of the Levant and South Asia between 1946 and 1948, and the Dutch left Indonesia in 1949. When in 1955 the world’s ‘colored people’ held their own international conference at Bandung, they purposefully recast world union as an instrument in the fight against racism and poverty. Asian-African solidarity pried freedom from anti-Communism, and the Third World idea—rooted in the repudiation of colonial authority—challenged racial hierarchies that had shaped American political theory since before the nineteenth century. Gamal Abdel Nasser pushed the argument ahead in 1956, claiming that Egypt’s U.N. membership justified the nationalization of the Suez Canal, since the emblems of imperialism had no future in the New World order. Free countries should control their national resources. The resulting British-French-Israeli invasion, an example of interstate aggression if ever there was one, exposed tensions that now coursed through the United Nations. Although the United States had covertly destroyed nationalization initiatives in Iran and Guatemala, Nasser played his hand publicly—as did Britain, France, and Israel—which forced Washington to choose between overt hypocrisy and a Korean-style intervention against its closest allies. Viewed in one light, the methods and rhetoric of U.S. expansion had parted ways; although anti-Communism made the Free World work—coercing the terms of interstate collaboration— anti-colonialism made the Free World legitimate. Suez revealed how easily these dual imperatives could be turned against each other.⁴⁷

The reckoning came almost immediately. With the winds of change blowing, Britain, France, and Belgium abandoned their African empires, just as anti-colonial revolutions erupted in Cuba and Algeria. This turn of events altered the U.N. General Assembly’s membership, which not only eroded Washington’s leverage in New York but also put the Free World idea on trial. After all, American and African history were profoundly entwined. Because of the transatlantic slave trade, five times more Africans than Europeans had migrated to the American hemisphere before the nineteenth century, and Black America’s subjugation had helped define American identity afterwards. The same officials who championed the United Nations as an alternative to imperialism in the Levant and Asia squirmed as Caribbean and sub-Saharan African states took their seats in the U.N. General Assembly. For too many Americans, Africa was a history-less landmass whose significance

⁴⁶ Dean Acheson, “The Development of the International Community,” *Proceedings of the American Society of International Law* Vol. 46 (April 1952), 20.

⁴⁷ For elaboration, see Ryan Irwin, “Decolonization and the Cold War,” in Artemy Kalinovsky and Craig A. Daigle, eds., *Routledge Handbook of the Cold War* (Routledge, 2014), 91-104.

grew from fantasies about African American remigration. When black diplomats arrived in New York they not only upended entrenched stereotypes—they affirmed the moral bankruptcy of racial segregation.⁴⁸

Could the Free World—as a vessel of the United States idea—respond? Although President John Kennedy adjusted the vocabulary of American power, acknowledging Jim Crow as a national problem in 1963, it was Lyndon Johnson who recast the Free World as a multicultural utopia. The Great Society attacked legal segregation, declared war on poverty, and abolished the quota system that had shaped U.S. immigration policy since the 1920s. Unlike his liberal predecessors, who had invented federal programs to facilitate vertical mobility, he made diversity itself the rationale for American union. The United States could lead, his surrogates argued, because the Union was History’s melting pot. This claim took some liberties with the past and it raised profound questions about the administrative capacities of the U.S. government. The Union had stumbled upon several formulas to canalize interstate conflict, but it had not righted many historical wrongs—especially when those wrongs involved white supremacy. Johnson’s administration nonetheless embraced the logic of planned modernization, doubling down on the precept that it could build state capacity anywhere. America’s Second Reconstruction, as historian C. Vann Woodward termed this effort, promised a *just* interstate world—with Marshall Plans for everyone—and it subtly resituated the conceptual relationship between individualized fulfillment and circumscribed sovereignty. The former now mattered as much as the latter.⁴⁹

In some respects, we still live in the shadow of Johnson’s gambit. His mistakes were apparent immediately. The President overcommitted in South Vietnam, and that country, which arguably existed by American fiat, became a symbol for the Great Society’s wider contradictions. Washington’s grotesque turn toward militarized state-making guaranteed the failure of planned modernization, and the ensuing backlash, which stretched from Detroit to Saigon, confirmed the span of U.S. power while attacking its terminology. If OPEC’s embargoes popularized the idea of natural resource sovereignty—and revealed America’s dependence on Middle Eastern oil—the U.N. General Assembly’s New International Economic Order discarded circumscribed sovereignty altogether. By the mid-1970s, many critics saw decolonization itself as an instrument of United States imperialism. As Saigon fell, George Manuel, Chief of the National Indian Brotherhood, announced the existence of a Fourth World, peopled by marginalized nations whose existence had been erased by America’s interstate system. For those with a long enough memory—and the proper theoretical tools—the claim resonated profoundly.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ On this conjuncture, see Steven Jensen, *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) and Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), plus Ryan Irwin, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴⁹ Mazower, chapter 10. For insight on this moment, see Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Michael Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

⁵⁰ Mazower, chapters 11-12. For additional insight, see Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); plus as well as Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the*

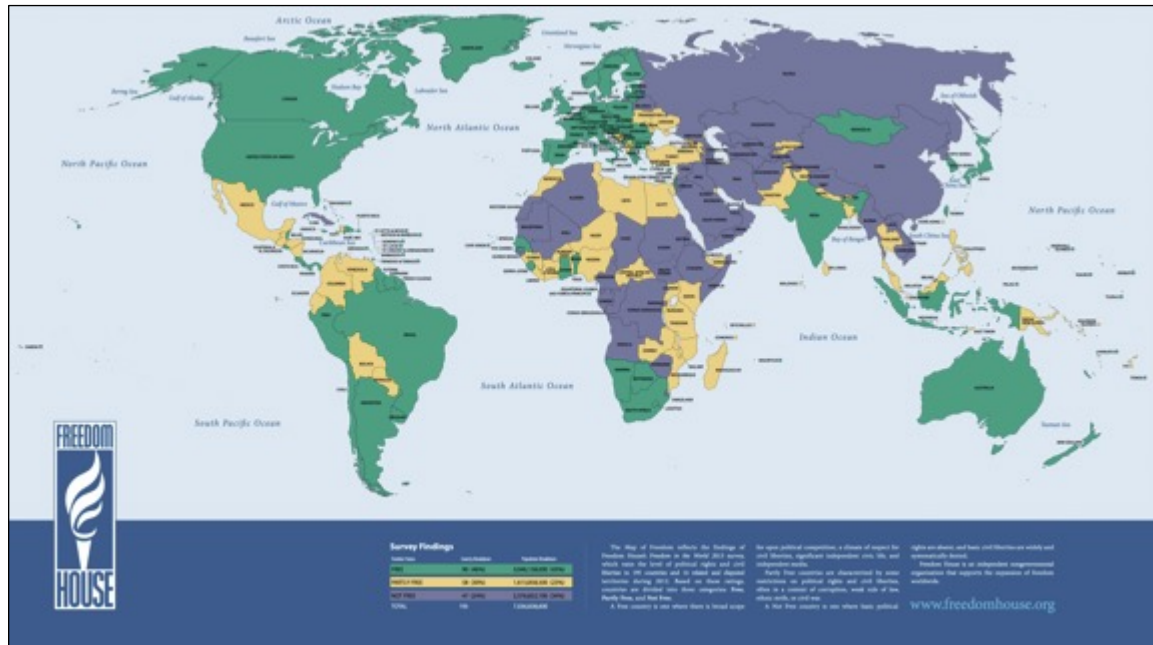
The fact that Washington no longer controlled other people's words was not even the worst of its problems in the mid-1970s. The Free World—when defined as a policymaking project that provided sovereign states with cheap, reliable security and development assistance—had eroded the conditions for the United States' economic hegemony. Most Americans had not reflected on the catch-22 within the postwar order; they simply assumed that American preponderance was unassailable. However, Japan's and Western Europe's recovery eroded the conditions for the dollar-backed gold standard, and beginning in the late 1960s, investors began draining America's gold reserves. This shift planted the seeds for a major transformation, and within a decade, the United States had become a debtor nation. Some Americans saw this change as evidence of their country's moral decay. Others, such as Henry Kissinger, who served as Richard Nixon's National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, blamed the international system itself. He and Nixon abandoned the Bretton Woods system altogether in 1971—allowing the U.S. dollar to compete against other currencies on a foreign exchange market—and triangulated their way back to geopolitical relevance. But if containment once energized American state-making, it now buttressed a realpolitik that rewarded any state that pledged fealty to Washington. Détente bolstered the United States' influence by foreclosing the premise that U.S. power existed within an interstate community. America's elites, Nixon argued, had to be unencumbered by the norms of others.⁵¹

This claim—that freedom and community could not be squared—lost its appeal after the Watergate fiasco, but it prompted a reconsideration of the United States idea. Since the late eighteenth century, Americans had explored different frameworks for interstate interdependence. Human rights had been woven *into* this project; constitutions curtailed government abuses at home while organizations restrained unbridled sovereignty abroad, facilitating, in theory, the establishment of stable and heterogeneous political environments where liberty was recognized and discussed. Nixon's corruption, viewed alongside Johnson's hubris, left plenty of Americans asking: What if states actually *suppressed* human rights? The question would have blown Acheson's mind, but it oriented a slew of social movements within the United States. On city streets and within rural communes, self-reliance and anti-establishmentarianism had a following by the 1970s. Conservatives who bristled at the counterculture nonetheless coalesced around anti-statism, claiming that international oversight hampered innovation, communication, and prosperity. Even U.S. officialdom joined the fray by inventing the category of failed statehood. While liberals and conservatives cast their aspersions differently—and fought ferociously over the comparative inequity of right-wing and left-wing dictators—they

Vietnam War, 1954-1965 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Paul Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of War and Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); as well as forthcoming work by Christopher Dietrich, Victor McFarland, and others.

⁵¹ Milne, chapter 7; Herring, chapters 17-18; Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), plus Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds., *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

shared tropes about a borderless world, lending credence to the idea that statehood obstructed a transnational rights project.⁵²



Expansion 4.0: “Map of Freedom” (New York: Freedom House, 2013)

The irony was inescapable. The Cold War had empowered a generation of builders who had invested enormous sums in public infrastructures abroad, yet its final chapter was now defined by the presupposition that walls were an existential threat to the United States. America would make states no longer, President Ronald Reagan explained, but the Union would remain a beacon of world freedom, its greatness confirmed and refreshed by immigration. This trope, which inverted the logic of American expansion, dovetailed with a worldwide campaign to deregulate markets, as Reagan’s surrogates assaulted the newly defined malady of underdevelopment. The IMF, invented four decades earlier to build state capacity, became an instrument to tear down public-owned assets and roll back price and currency controls in foreign countries. While Americans continued to pay lip service to sovereignty, an industry of think tanks now monitored the freedoms of foreigners, equipping aspirational policymakers with endless rationales for humanitarian intervention. Reagan’s robust anti-Communism camouflaged the nature of this transformation. But even those who lambasted the President did not ask for a second shot at the Great Society.⁵³ Instead, many liberals, such as financier George Soros, called for a less exploitative version of Reagan’s anti-statism. The President’s policies, Soros claimed, had created an “Imperial Circle” that extracted wealth and resources from

⁵² For complementary insights, Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Barbara Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution in the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁵³ This shift is handled thoughtfully in Mazower, chapters 12-13; Herring, chapter 19; Milne, chapter 8; Preston, chapter 29.

poor countries in order to enrich multinational corporations in the United States. And this approach *looked* awful. In Soros's words,

It held the international economic and financial system together but was inherently unstable because the strong dollar and high interest rates were bound to outweigh the stimulating effect of the budget deficit and weaken the U.S. economy. This Imperial Circle could not last indefinitely. What would happen next?⁵⁴

The answer—the collapse of the Soviet Union—elided a deeper contradiction. Union-less interdependence was back, but with one essential difference: the infrastructures that supported trade and travel had changed. American banks and fiber optic cables shaped how money and information moved during the 1980s, and American corporations dictated the nascent computer revolution, which, in turn, powered the American economy's financialization. Elites made sense of these transformations within barricaded outposts like Davos, Switzerland—where the World Economic Forum held its annual meeting—and industrialized countries developed entirely new platforms, such as the Group of Seven, to manage and discuss economic governance, international security, and energy policy. Soros was correct; this did not look good. Although the United Nations did not disappear, Americans now ridiculed its inefficiencies, creating a cognitive dissonance that grew with revelations about the shadowy partnerships between America's security establishment and gatekeeper states around the world. In its original form, the United States—as a governing concept—had subsumed self-government within an institutional architecture that canalized interstate conflict and fostered the conditions for community-wide prosperity. It now strove to obliterate an enemy known as disorder while expounding the merits of trickle-down growth.

Requiem

The unipolar moment resolved nothing. On the one hand, it merely nurtured American militarism. Defense Secretary Dick Cheney argued that America's military-industrial complex—and Reagan's support for that complex—had bankrupted the Soviet Union, leaving Washington with a lesson about unbridled military supremacy. The claim was a half-truth, but it resonated among contractors, Congressmen, and Pentagon officials throughout the 1990s. On the other hand, unipolarity quickened the pace of American indebtedness. Secretary of State George Shultz and his successor, James Baker, essentially flipped liberal internationalism inside-out, importing capital from abroad to bolster consumer spending and keep the U.S. government solvent. New regional pacts, such as the North American Free Trade Association and the European Union, put this approach on firmer footing, and bilateral partnerships, especially with China, assured cheap labor, inexpensive manufactured goods, and new investment opportunities for wealthy Americans. President George H.W. Bush balanced these viewpoints effectively, but lacked that "vision thing," and American voters cast him aside after the Gulf War, leaving Bill Clinton to implement his various plans.⁵⁵ "America must continue to lead the world we did so much to make," the new President declared in

⁵⁴ George Soros, *The Alchemy of Finance: Reading the Mind of the Market* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1987), 19.

⁵⁵ For political and intellectual framing, see Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016) and Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (New York: Verso, 2005).

1993. But what did this mean? If the world was “more free but less stable,” it often appeared that Clinton was jogging a middle path between Cheney and Baker while applauding the world’s McDonaldization.⁵⁶ Soros cheered him on, and made billions.

Prominent political theorists did not help the situation in the 1990s. Some distorted the recent past with grand proclamations about the end of history; others mined History’s annals for new monsters to destroy.⁵⁷ Within the ivory tower, empire talk became ubiquitous. Although historians continued to fight about the United States’ motives, few questioned the imperial as a tool for explaining America’s global history; sovereignty’s globalization had occurred in an environment saturated by U.S. money, ideas, and institutions. Outside the ivory tower, frustration with the Imperial Circle—or the Free World or American Century or Greater America or the Empire of Liberty or whatever moniker it went by—simmered. Cosmopolitans lamented wealth inequality and nationalists chastised multiculturalism, but both sides agreed that the new status quo was undemocratic and confusing. And they were not alone. While individual acts of terrorism shocked, the practice relied on a recognizable claim, namely that the United States propped up pliable states to advance a set of narrowly defined security objectives. These partnerships were rarely as straightforward as critics said, but the overall logic of American power felt woefully inadequate by the end of the 1990s. Elites mocked the poor by equating freedom with emigration, and acculturation, when cast as immigration’s only endpoint, managed to simultaneously obscure economic inequality and trample cultural traditions. This diversity of discontent was less astounding than the establishment’s incredulity on September 12, 2001. That ubiquitous question—“Why do they hate us?”—only confirmed that the United States had no vocabulary to comprehend its own footprint abroad.

If the problem was recognizable—interdependence without union—the solution was not, and Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama have pulled the United States in different directions during the twenty-first century. The former, an emblem of the establishment, reinvigorated American state-making, arguing that Washington might overcome cynicism by creating open societies in the Middle East. Bush executed this project with shocking incompetence, sending troops to Iraq under false pretenses and then empowering private contractors to implement what amounted to America’s Third Reconstruction. Iraq’s 2005 elections belied the administration’s turn toward old-fashioned imperialism—as embodied in counterinsurgency—and while President Obama repudiated this project vocally, his alternative was somewhat paradoxical. A living embodiment of American multiculturalism, Obama authorized an Afghanistan surge, only to abandon the method altogether and collapse the distinctions between covert assassination and grand strategy. The results have been mixed. Anti-modern polities, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, have captured territory and newspaper headlines, but, more substantially, Moscow and Beijing have restored the intellectual pillars of autarky, and received boisterous support among Anglo-American nativists such as Nigel Farage and Donald Trump. Moscow’s actions in the Ukraine unfolded with no pretense of U.N. approval; Beijing’s embrace of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank stems from its dissatisfaction with the World Bank and IMF; and the United Kingdom’s vote to exit from the European Union reflects a wider backlash against

⁵⁶ Bill Clinton, “First Inaugural Address,” 21 January 1993, available: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/clinton1.asp.

⁵⁷ The classic examples are Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, Free Press, 1992) and Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

immigration and economic inequality. The instruments of global governance—already gutted from within after the 1970s—are under attack.

Historians cannot solve this planet's problems. But we ask questions and tell stories, and this essay has explored the logic and consequences of American power. If expansion is the central preoccupation of 'U.S. and the World' history, today's field tells a particular story about American state-making. There is a prescience in Jefferson's claim that the United States would spread to "some parts sooner, to some later, but finally to all."⁵⁸ What began as a grand compromise over Ohio became a hemispheric, transoceanic, and finally a global project, and while this project has employed different institutions to cultivate and police interstate behavior, it has, when viewed in the *longue durée*, exhibited a certain coherence. Since the late eighteenth century, the United States has championed liberty—or at least elections and lawmaking—and it has circumscribed sovereignty by habituating certain commercial and military practices. Freedom came with membership and membership came with rules. How can a people be free if they are bound by rules? This paradox—inherent in the phrase 'United States'—helps explain why the American empire has denied its name, and it hints at why so many Americans justify such ferocious racial hierarchies, still in effect today, while cultivating—and then exploiting—sovereigns in the name of national self-interest. We live today with the consequences of the United States idea.

Why should anyone care? Lumping is problematic—it organizes messy realities under well-ordered teleological subheadings that invite consternation, qualification, and reconsideration—but lumping also clarifies why we do what we do. A story about American state-making can empower students to see the water they swim in, and wrestle with a hard question: Does this world need more freedom or better governance? There are pitfalls to tackling this question uncritically, making the whole planet into a playground for American grand strategists. There are also pitfalls in denying the entrenched and global nature of our own interdependence, or relishing in narrative deconstruction with a surfeit of self-satisfaction. We need stories. Our readers and students might fight for equality, liberation, or genuine sovereignty; they could stew on the relationship between globalization and global government. But they should understand that there is no easy formula for creating a fairer, solvent, well-governed world. History can inspire modesty, but it must nurture a society's collective imagination.

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⁵⁸ Thomas Jefferson to Roger Weightman, 24 June 1826, available online: <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/declara/rcwltr.html>.