



## Not An Empire, America? Really?

Thomas BENDER

**Elizabeth C. Hoffman** *America claims that America has never been an empire. From the era of the founders to the end of the Cold War, her book defends the notion of a self-interested but fair umpire in issues of foreign policy. Thomas Bender shows us why the notion of empire yet applies to the American use of power.*

**Reviewed:** Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *American Umpire*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2013, 440 pages, \$35.00.

*American Umpire* is a deeply researched and learned book that addresses American foreign policies from the era of the founders to the end of the Cold War. It is also a very peculiar book. Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman's story draws to a close in 1991, when, she tells us, the "age of empire ended" (330), an event Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, and a bevy of neoconservatives failed to notice. The book has a strongly stated, if not well argued, thesis: America is not and has never been an empire. The average U.S. citizen, of course, has long held this view, but generally historiography has been skeptical of that belief. The U.S. empire may be unlike French and English colonial empires, but historians have largely accepted the language of empire regarding the U.S., with the widely discussed phrase "empire by invitation" sometimes softening the notion. One way or another, the U.S. "preponderance of power" has for long been understood as some kind of empire.

Rather than offering another rethinking of American empire, Hoffman insists that the U.S. was not an empire at all either before or after 1945. She argues that "the United States acted not as an empire in modern foreign relations, but as a kind of *umpire*." (her italics) But it is a unique sort of umpire. The United States is by analogy a team that has taken it upon itself the role of umpire too. She notes this is a somewhat unusual understanding of umpiring: "What made the American role controversial was that it was also a player, and therefore never completely above the game." (17) This acknowledgement, however, does not play into her later arguments. We are left with a mostly well informed and mostly unobjectionable narrative that covers the sweep of American foreign relations and a thesis that is inserted and asserted from time to time rather than argued. To sustain the notion of a self-interested but fair umpire through the book, she must omit, or explain away, or sometimes acknowledge in the most *sotto* of a *sotto voce* some of the complexity of the American use of power.

**Putting an Name on Empire**

Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman uses a quite singular and perhaps irrelevant definition of empire. She contrasts empires and nation-states. Her initial definition of “empire” closely resembles the Ottoman Empire, which is fair enough. Jane Burbank and Fred Cooper do much the same in their important book, *Empires in World History* (2010), and, like Hoffman, they make the contrast with modern nation-states. While Burbank and Cooper examine gains and losses,<sup>1</sup> Hoffman celebrates the nation-state. It represents for her a triad of virtues, which to me remain somewhat opaque: arbitration, access, and transparency. The origin of this world order is for her the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and finds its initial realization in the founding of the American republic. From that point forward nation-states and republicanism have gradually vanquished empire. The result is the new world of nations.

The role she gives to the United States as the successor model to empire runs into some linguistic problems because there are multiple meanings of empire in different historical periods. While for her the founding of the American republic nudges empire into the ash heap of history, the founders, including Washington and Jefferson, frequently referred to the new republic as an “empire.” Pierre Charles L’Enfant, the planner of Washington, D.C., understood his commission from Washington and Jefferson, to be the making of a suitable “Capital of this Vast Empire.” Empire then meant a large and prosperous nation. Before and after that moment there have been many other forms of empire. The classic work of John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson on the British free trade empire offers a theory of empire that might well fit the United States.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a rough equivalent of it was, as the author notes, incorporated into several of the works of her *bête noire* William Appleman Williams. She need not agree with this definition of empire, but it warrants a serious critique, rather than a dismissal. In fact, she needs a more complex and historically situated Post-World War II account showing that the United States may represent a distinct form of polity that needs a novel description and definition. For what it is worth, I have used the term “nation-empire” to characterize the United States in the twentieth century as a modern nation-state that in important ways behaves as an empire.<sup>3</sup>

In her account of the growth of the United States after the Constitution, she adopts the old school textbook interpretation of westward expansion. It was not empire, she argues, because the people who settled there were given full citizenship and allowed to organize themselves into states equal to the east coast ones. Yes, that is one of the strokes of genius in the United States Constitution, but alas she, like too many civics textbooks, overlooks the fate of Native Americans uprooted, killed, or the victims of federal efforts to strip them of their culture. Citizenship was not conferred on Native Americans until 1924 – forty years after Frederick Jackson Turner announced the closing of the frontier.

The author distinguishes “manifest destiny” from “empire.” With that linguistic move the taking by conquest half of the national territory of Mexico was not empire. This war caused the political crisis that put the United States on the path of civil war. It was also the first battle

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.booksandideas.net/The-Persistence-of-Empires.html>

<sup>2</sup> John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade,” *The Economic History Review*, Second series, Vol. VI, no. 1 (1953).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.booksandideas.net/American-Exceptionalism-at-Its-End.html>

assignment of the general who won the Civil War. U.S. Grant was not, however, proud of his participation in the Mexican War. For him it was empire. As he recalled it in his autobiography, it was “one of the most unjust ever engaged by a stronger against a weaker nation.” He thought it “an instance of a republic following the bad example of European monarchies, in not considering justice in their desire to acquire additional territory.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Empire Ignored**

The one act of empire she acknowledges—the Spanish-American-Philippine War—was, she argues, different from the western movement, which was not empire. But in the minds of Theodore Roosevelt and many other imperialists of the 1890s the war started in 1898 was a continuation of the westward movement. He collapsed the two. Both were empire—and he was fine with that. In the preface for the 1900 edition of his *Winning of the West*, he wrote that the overseas expansion in 1898 “finished the work begun over a century before by the backwoodsman” and is “but a variant of the western movement.”<sup>5</sup>

An interpretation of American history that sees nothing but empire, nothing but oppression, would be a very thin history indeed. But so is a history that is blind to empire and oppression. One cannot credit a history that does not take seriously the use of financial and military superiority to invade the sovereignty of weaker nations for one’s own aggrandizement of power. Like Emily Rosenberg, in her important book,<sup>6</sup> I think that is empire. Mexico is not the only western hemisphere case.

Hoffman makes little of pre-1945 ventures in the Caribbean. U.S. troops occupied Haiti for seventeen years, and the Platt Amendment severely limited the national sovereignty of Cuba (allowing us to intervene at will), to say nothing of the taking permanent control of Cuba’s Guantanamo Bay, now the site of a prison that seems more a symbol of empire than of an umpire. She can say that these concessions were agreed to by the Cubans. That is true, but it was hardly a free choice. Independence and the removal of the U.S. military depended upon their assent to these demands.

With the Truman Doctrine the U.S. assumed the “responsibility” for what she styles “pre-emptive crisis management.” (271). This runs to what in recent years has been called “regime change,” the first instances of which were under the Eisenhower administration in Iran and Guatemala, both of which removed leaders identified with the left and resulted in brutal military dictatorships. The later results in Chile, when the U.S. collaborated with Chile’s generals to oust Salvador Allende, were no different. If this sequence is not empire, it is at least stupidity. Interestingly, the author did not use the term “regime change” in relation to these events, though

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters* (New York: Library of America, 1990), p. 41,

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Paul A. Kramer, “Empires, Exceptions, and Anglo-Saxons: Race and Rule Between the British and United States Empires, 1880-1910,” *Journal of American History*, 88 (2002), p. 1315.

<sup>6</sup> Emily S. Rosenberg. *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900-1930*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999.

she does once use the term and defines it. But her definition has little semblance to what has come to be understood as regime change after Stephen Kinzer's *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (2007). She defines it as "a basic transformation" in the political culture of a nation, ruling out assassinations of leaders or the use of the military to remove a legitimate holder of high office. Where has this worked? Japan and Germany come to mind, and they are obviously special cases.

### **The Problem of the Collective Good**

What is never discussed is the question of disproportionate power. When nations of quite unequal economic and military power negotiate a *real umpire* seems crucial to insure fairness. The author's endorsement of the most powerful negotiator serving as umpire seems in fact to define empire. Empire is all about power. Power can translate into authority, but only if it takes seriously, as Jefferson put it, the scrutiny of the "opinion of mankind." Power is not inherently empire. But if it breaks the rules of international norms—and laws—purely for its own self interest it is.

What may be Hoffman's underlying concern is right. For the good of the human community and the world of nations the powerful nations must shoulder distinctive responsibilities for global economies, peace, and increasing human rights. The anti-imperial left is too often ready to look toward isolationist positions for fear of doing harm, for fear of again seeking to decimate and dominate. Case by case judgment is necessary. But more worrisome is the assumption by the Right, especially neoconservatives, that power legitimates itself. It does not. Legitimacy has to be earned.

In fact, the global society needs the United States to be an enforcer of global norms, broadly but only roughly represented by the United Nations and other international organizations and treaties. The U.S. is a hegemonic power, and the wise and fair use of its power is essential to the collective work of making the world safe for us and our fellow nations. That means the hard work of diplomacy and the selective and legitimated use of force. Sometimes getting international legitimation may be impossible. That is when the nation's leadership has to ask itself some hard questions. If there is no international support, leaders must inquire deeply into the reasons. Is it a collective good or only narrow self-interest? And, perhaps most important, is success likely?

Theodore Roosevelt the imperialist is well recognized and worth avoiding. But he learned from the horrific war that followed American intervention in and blocking of the Philippine independence movement. Not enough of us remember his late and very different work that earned him the Nobel Peace Prize, which was for his diplomatic intervention in the Russo-Japanese conflict. That was more like being an umpire. But American power was crucial. It was the equivalent of the umpire's power to eject from a game a player who violates the rules.

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