

Imperial Paths to Power, 1688–1939

Behold! Behold! An Empire rise!

– Francis Hopkinson, from an ode distributed on July 4, 1788, Philadelphia¹

[I]t is safe to assume, as a rule, that Americans are actuated by much the same ideas, instincts, motives, and modes of thought as their fellow-kinsmen in the Old World.

– Edward Dacey (1898)²

Expansion has ever been the instinct of the United States. The very symbol of the Union is an Eagle and the Eagle is a bird that spreads its wings. . . . Compared with the Eagle the British Lion treads mother earth like a tortoise. And no Eagle has ever flown further afield than the American Eagle.

– P. W. Wilson (1925)³

When the average American thinks of “colonialism”, or of the Colonial Powers, he is apt to confine his thoughts to European “colonialism”. . . . Not many Americans stop to think that Puerto Rico was conquered from Spain (as the British captured Jamaica); that the Virgin Islands were bought from Denmark . . . that Alaska was bought from Russia and Louisiana from the French in the same way; that the Panama Canal Zone was acquired in the twentieth century by methods which would have been condemned if indulged by a European Power at a much earlier period.

– Sir Alan Burns (1957)⁴

The so-called long eighteenth century from 1688 to 1815 was a formative period for Britain. Up to that point, Britain had been a small island monarchy, a minor player on the European scene. The Glorious Revolution in 1688, however, marked a new era. After establishing representative government, the little

¹ Quoted in Burstein (1999), p. 150.

² Dacey (1898), p. 491.

³ Wilson (1925), p. SM7.

⁴ Burns (1957), p. 124.

island slowly shored up its military strength and became increasingly involved in interstate affairs. It defeated its enemies and grew in strength. It expanded its domestic economy and partook of a widening world economic system. It outproduced and outsold its rivals and built its economic infrastructure. By the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, Britain emerged as the world's pre-eminent power. It became a global hegemon, a foe to be feared or a friend to be flattered. Later, the United States followed a similar path. It began as a comparably small series of settlements on the east coast of North America. After World War II, it became the world's new economic mammoth, taking up the role that Britain had held previously. As the years 1688–1815 for Britain marked the path toward world power, so did the years 1776–1945 for the United States.

Scholars have noted these similar paths. But what about the *imperial* dimensions of Britain's and America's respective ascendancies? For Britain the answer might seem obvious. It is well established that Britain's rise to world hegemony was accompanied by the construction of a massive overseas empire. As historian P. J. Marshall notes, the years 1689–1815 marked an important phase in British imperial expansion: "By 1815 Britain's global trade totally eclipsed that of her European rivals and she was the possessor of the only Empire of any consequence."⁵ For the United States, however, the imperial issue is more opaque. Was America's long rise to global hegemony over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also attended by imperialism and the construction of an "empire"? If so, exactly how similar or different was it from Britain's imperialism in the long eighteenth century?

At first glance, a comparison between Britain in the long eighteenth century and the United States in the nineteenth century would not seem tenable. These histories transpired in very different times and worlds. But the similarities merit attention. First, these were times when the relative capacities of the two states were similar. Both states were still rising to world power, engaging in regional interstate affairs while building their economies, and both ended their respective periods by attaining global hegemony. Second, both states began their ascendancies with similar political characteristics. Both were comparably weak, decentralized polities compared to the stronger, more authoritarian states on the European continent. Both were initially averse to the idea of strong armies controlled by a monarch or executive power, and both lacked powerful centralized bureaucracies.⁶ These similarities are notable in themselves. The question explored here is whether they also entailed similarities in imperial practices or forms.

This chapter begins by sketching the processes and dynamics of British and U.S. *state territorial* expansion during their respective periods of ascent. State

⁵ Marshall (1998), pp. 1–2.

⁶ On the comparably "weak" English state, see Stone (1994); on the American state, see Skowronek (1982), cf. Katznelson (2002). This chapter will modify these views of the two states.

territorial expansion is different from the expansion of nonstate entities or social groups like settlers, capitalists, or corporations. It refers to the acquisition and incorporation of new territory by a state such that the new territory becomes subject to that state's sovereignty. This type of expansion cuts to the heart of "empire" as we have defined it in this book. There can be no empire without the exercise of power over a territory, and in this case, no formal empire without a state that annexes territory to rule it. When considering questions of empire, we should first look at state territory.

Although an examination of state territorial expansion is the necessary first step toward considering the imperial dimensions of the two states' prehegemonic histories, it is only the beginning. Territorial expansion is a precondition for empire but does not in itself constitute it. Territories can be acquired, but whether they end up as subordinate units of an imperial formation or as equal polities within a nation is another matter entirely. The former is empire building; the latter is nation building. Therefore, after sketching the dynamics and logics of territorial expansion, this chapter considers whether the two states' respective territorial expansions might qualify as *imperial* expansions and, if so, exactly how.

Comparative Expansions

Dynamics of British Expansion, 1688–1815

The diplomat and poet Mathew Prior returned to Britain from Paris in 1699. In December of that year, he gave one of his most elaborate odes, the "Carmen Seculare for the year 1700." Through forty-two stanzas, he praised King William III, extolling him as Britain's savior who would perpetuate Britain's glories around the world. Britain was bound to "calm the earth, and vindicate the sea." He continued:

Our prayers are heard, our master's fleets shall go
As far as winds can bear, or waters flow,
New lands to make, new Indies to explore,
In worlds unknown to plant Britannia's power.⁷

Britain had only emerged from the Glorious Revolution a couple of decades earlier. Yet the homage was a portent. Over the course of the long eighteenth century, Britain indeed pushed as far as winds could bear, expanding outward to take new foreign land abroad. Of course, Britain had already taken steps beyond its shores before Prior's homage. Explorers and enterprisers had established small outposts on the eastern seaboard of North America, landing on points in Newfoundland, Massachusetts, and Virginia. Backed by royal companies seeking tobacco and cod, these outposts had populations of about 260,000 by the early eighteenth century.⁸ In the 1650s, other enterprises were

⁷ Koebner (1961), pp. 73–4.

⁸ Marshall (1998), p. 2.

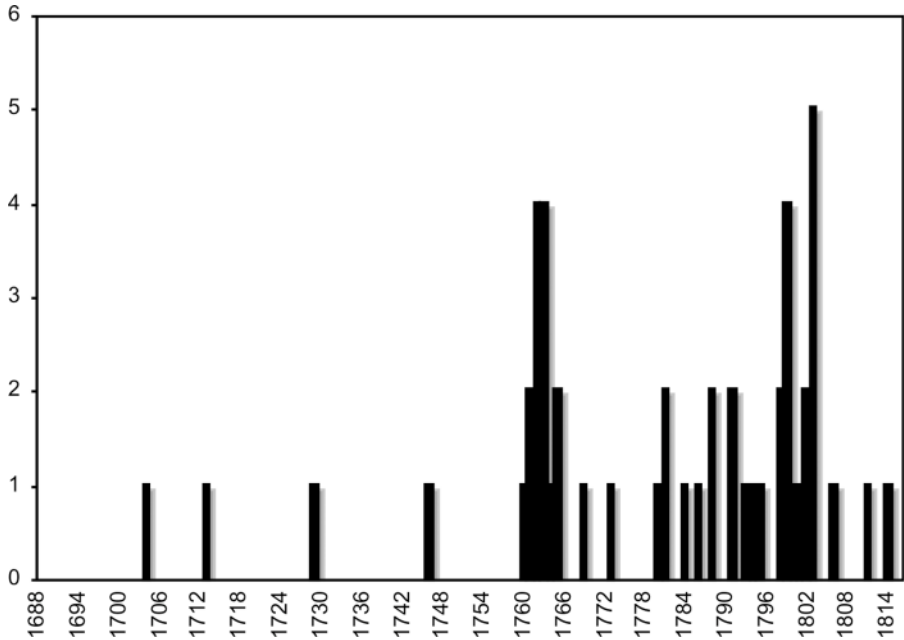


FIGURE 1.1. Britain’s Territorial Expansion: Number of Colonial Annexations by Year, 1688–1815. *Source:* See Appendix: Notes on Data.

established in Barbados, the Leeward Islands, and Jamaica; they would become vital for tobacco, sugar, and the slave trade. The British East India Company had also taken some path-breaking steps. A nominally private company under the English monarch’s charter, it had established a foothold in small spots of Mughal India.

This earlier period of expansion was seminal: It “laid down the pattern for all that was to come.”⁹ But the subsequent territorial expansion through the long eighteenth century remains important. This period saw new developments on various registers, all of which were part and parcel of Britain’s rise to global hegemony. For the purposes of our comparison, these developments warrant attention.

The first development was territorial growth. British agents, explorers, and settlers moved far beyond England’s initial settlements and scattered outposts. The growth came in two distinct phases, with the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763) serving as a sort of watershed (see Figure 1.1). The first phase, from 1688 to the 1750s, saw new acquisitions at a relatively slow rate, largely in the Americas. In the north, Britain acquired Acadia (Nova Scotia) and Newfoundland, and it consolidated early settlements in Georgia. In the Caribbean, Britain made the Bahamas (initially settled in 1647) a Crown Colony in 1718 and took the Mosquito Coast in 1740. The second phase saw continued territorial growth

⁹ Lloyd (1996), p. 3.

in the Americas (Britain added the Windward Islands, Trinidad and Tobago, St. Lucia, and British Guiana, among others) but differed in other respects. Foremost, the growth occurred at a faster rate, and there was a new geographical orientation: The East India Company became more deeply entrenched in India and moved outward; explorers paved the way for trading ports in Western Africa; Captain Arthur Phillip led a settlement in New South Wales; and enterprisers set up a small settlement in Penang.¹⁰

The second development was emigration and population growth. By 1750, the white population of the North American colonies had reached 1.2 million.¹¹ The number of persons in the North American colonies and the West Indies together grew from 412,000 in 1700 to 2,762,000 by 1771. Meanwhile, Britain's population in 1771 was 6,448,000.¹² Additionally, by 1811, there were some 10,000 British subjects living in New South Wales, with a further 1,500 in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania).¹³ This growth abroad was matched, if not propelled, by population growth at home. The population of Britain nearly trebled from 1550 to 1820, whereas at the same time France's population grew only by about 79 percent.¹⁴

The third development had to do with the *character* of expansion. During the seventeenth century, overseas expansion had been driven by explorers, settlers, or merchants. The Crown sometimes sanctioned these initiatives but did not play an active role. However, as the eighteenth century progressed, "government rather than the subject was responsible for extending the empire."¹⁵ For one thing, the British state negotiated the acquisition of colonies from rivals and articulated how the territories fit into wider strategic and economic goals. By enacting the Navigation Acts, along with other measures to eliminate competition from rival powers, it signaled that the economics of the territories were to be subordinated to the state's economic plans. For another, the state took administrative charge from chartered companies and increasingly intervened in territorial affairs overseas. Parliament revoked or modified early royal charters to give London more direct control. Beginning in the 1740s, the Crown increasingly vetoed laws passed by colonial legislatures. The Board of Trade, at this time in charge of most colonial matters, tried to increase the powers

¹⁰ On this growth, see Marshall (1998), p. 1–2 and Bayly (1998). Since Harlow (1952), it has been typical to speak of a "first" and "second" British empire, with the latter referring to a new geographical orientation toward Asia. The division must not be exaggerated; even after the American Revolution, Britain maintained a presence in the Caribbean and small American possessions, and before 1763, the British East India Company had probed parts of Asia. But it is true that Britain reached to Asia in new ways by the late 1700s.

¹¹ Brewer (1994), p. 65.

¹² Horn (1998), p. 100.

¹³ Marshall (1998), p. 4.

¹⁴ Colley (2003b), p. 6. The new expansion and population growth came at a high cost for the native inhabitants. Between 1600 and 1750, the natives of New England probably lost close to ten thousand people resulting from wars with colonists. Historians have estimated a death rate from exposure to alien diseases of about 75 percent. See Merrell (1991), p. 122.

¹⁵ Fieldhouse (1982), p. 75, 84–5.

of the London-appointed colonial governors over their respective jurisdictions and local legislatures. Not all of these assertions of authority were successful (as we will see later), but they nonetheless represented the metropolitan state's increased role in colonial governance. Whereas the state had been "slender and enabling rather than interventionist," it now centralized administration and began to form "a coherent, London-directed British Empire in America."¹⁶

In addition to taking and administering territories, the British state took increasing charge of colonial trade, security, and defense. Throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, it constructed a "maritime-imperial system" whereby London could promote and protect the commercial activities of private interests in the New World in exchange for loyalty and customs revenues. Whereas it had not before, it sent naval squadrons to the Caribbean to help protect commerce and suppress piracy.¹⁷ The British state became active on land as well. Parliament set up new administrative agencies in North America for protecting frontiers against Native Americans and for handling native affairs. In the early 1700s, provincial governors in North America had been in charge of Indian diplomatic matters, but in the 1750s London created its own regional superintendents directly responsible to Whitehall.¹⁸ Fittingly, total expenses of the British home government for army, navy, colonial administration, and other minor activities in North America increased fourfold during the period from 1740 to 1775.¹⁹

This increasing state involvement was part of a larger transformation in the British state itself. Prior to the long eighteenth century, Britain's engagement with Europe had been relatively limited and sporadic. But during the 1700s, it became increasingly enmeshed in European affairs. Between 1680 and 1780, Britain fought four major wars with European powers and engaged in a slew of smaller conflicts and military deployments.²⁰ In turn, these unprecedented foreign entanglements demanded military power and new domestic fiscal arrangements to cultivate it. Accordingly, there was a twofold development in British state formation in this period. On the one hand, Britain's domestic state capacities were comparably weak. After 1688, "the powers of central government were devolved on the localities and diluted by a spoils system which provided income and office for the scions of the landed classes."²¹ On the other hand, the British state's external capacities were enhanced. Even as the British state's "despotic" power at home was weak, its power for engagements abroad grew, leading to a strong "fiscal-military state." As historian John Brewer's seminal work shows, the military became "the most important single factor in

¹⁶ First quote from Colley (2003b), p. 155; referred to in Webster (2006), p. 16; second from Johnson (1998), p. 295. For all of these developments, see Greene (1986), pp. 13–17, 50; Marshall (2005), p. 76.

¹⁷ Baugh (1994), p. 194.

¹⁸ Milner (1981), p. 139.

¹⁹ Gwyn (1980), p. 77.

²⁰ Brewer (1989), pp. 29–31, 57.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

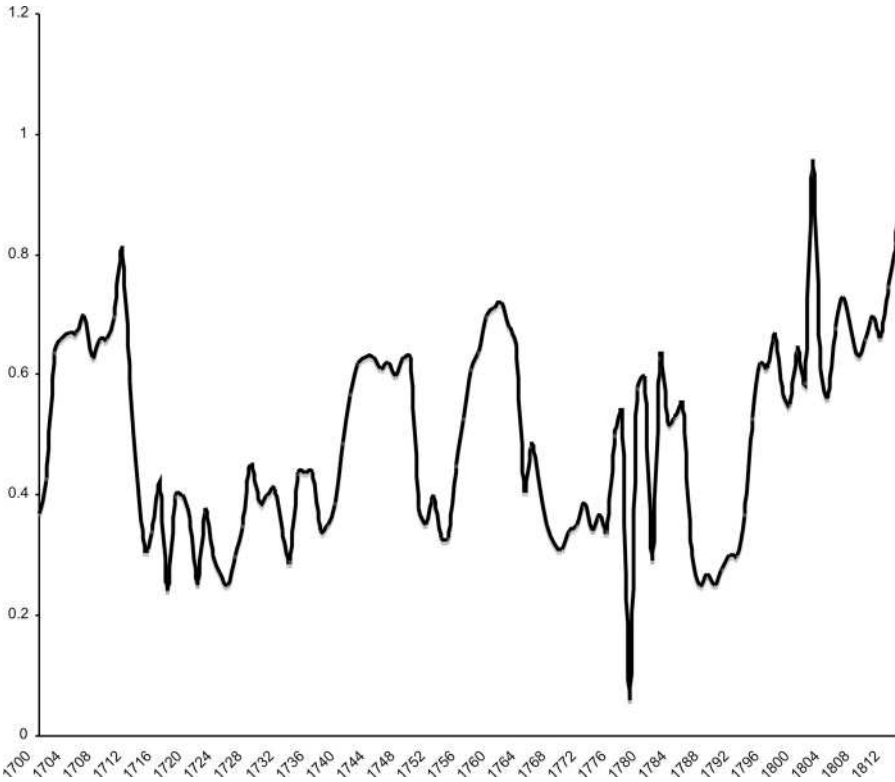


FIGURE 1.2. Proportion of Expenditures Devoted to Military Spending, U.K., 1700–1814. *Source:* From data in Mitchell (1988).

the domestic economy: the largest borrower and spender, as well as the largest single employer. Public spending, fuelled by military costs, rose by leaps and bounds. The civilian administration supporting the military effort burgeoned; taxes and debts increased. Britain acquired a standing army and navy. She became, like her main rivals, a fiscal-military state, one dominated by the task of waging war.”²² Military spending thus grew some 450 percent between the 1720s and the 1820s (see Figure 1.2).²³

Britain’s territorial expansion was inextricably entangled with these developments. Interstate war in the European theater meant that the New World became a site of engagement. During the Nine Years’ War, the French tried to divert Britain’s resources from Europe by attacking Britain’s New England and

²² *Ibid.*, p. 26. See also Stone (1994).

²³ The trend is partly attributable to the overall growth in state spending in the period, but military spending still took a disproportionate share over civil government spending and debt spending. This was the case even during peacetime, when military spending was between three to four times greater than spending on civil government. See Harling and Mandler (1993), p. 49; see also Brewer (1989), p. 30; O’Brien (1988b).

New York territories; this led to various battles that deployed Indian allies.²⁴ During the War of Spanish Succession, the British state feared that a Bourbon prince on the Spanish throne would enable the French to dominate the Spanish Indies, which would in turn threaten Britain's holdings and trade. In response, Britain sent fleets to the West Indies and engaged in yet more battles in North America (where the War of Spanish Succession was better known as Queen Anne's War).²⁵ Territorial expansion needed a more powerful state to protect the new territorial network.

The final development in imperial matters over the long eighteenth century had to do with identity and ideology: The term *empire* became increasingly part of the vocabulary and also took on new meanings. Before the mid-1700s, the vast collection of overseas colonies, plantations, or dominions were not typically unified under the category "British empire." The term rather signified the Crown's power as distinct from the authority of any external power (it thus maintained the original Latin meaning of *imperium* as "sovereignty").²⁶ But around 1743, according to the historian P. J. Marshall, a shift occurred and the idea of a single British empire consisting of its territorial holdings surfaced. And by the 1760s (after Britain's victories over France), it became "conventional to speak and write of a single British Empire" that included all of Britain's overseas territories, plantations, and colonies.²⁷ This discourse of a single empire was especially potent among the Anglophone inhabitants of the New World, who began for the first time "to habitually describe their community as the 'British Empire.'"²⁸ As we will see later, the meaning would be submerged in the mid-nineteenth century, only to be conjured again in the late nineteenth century. But whatever the later usages and shifts of "empire," the long eighteenth century remains transformative: It saw the first development of the empire concept distinct from its Latin roots."²⁹

Contours of American Expansion, 1776–1898

How does the ascendance of the United States compare to these British developments? Surely it also saw territorial growth: From 1803 to 1853, the United States expanded its territorial holdings by more than two million square miles. By the time it acquired Alaska and Hawaii, its territory had expanded almost fourfold from the territory of the original thirteen colonies. The U.S. government thereby became "one of the great landlords of world

²⁴ McLay (2006); Lenman (1998), pp. 152–6.

²⁵ Lenman (1998), pp. 154–5.

²⁶ Armitage (2000): 11, p. 11; Lloyd (1996), p. 8; Pocock (1988), pp. 68–9; Koebner (1952), pp. 85–92. It was also used to refer, not to rule over territory, but to the island Britannia or, in more extreme instances, to "power or dominant interests outside Britain." Koebner (1961), p. 61.

²⁷ Marshall (1998), p. 7.

²⁸ Armitage (2000): 171, p. 171.

²⁹ Koebner (1961), p. 60.

history.”³⁰ This territorial expansion came with population growth, just as Britain’s had. In 1850, the population in the territories newly opened to colonization (which exceeded half a million square miles) numbered about 10 million souls.³¹ This was 44 percent of the nation’s total, which was more than that of Britain’s earlier Atlantic empire. In 1700, for example, the percentage of the total population of Britain and its North American and West Indies colonies that lived in the colonies was only 7 percent; at most, it reached 21 percent in 1750.³²

Given the immensity of expansion, it is appropriate that contemporaries did not hesitate to think of the United States as an expanding empire. Founding statesmen referred to their expanding country as an “American empire” and a “rising empire.” This was an easy appropriation from British discourse. Given “the coming of Revolution and the welding of the Thirteen Colonies into a new sovereign nation, the substitution of the phrase ‘American Empire’ for British came easily and naturally.”³³ To be sure, Reverend Thomas Brockaway in 1784 scripted America’s new imperium as but a continuation of the British imperium: “Empire, learning, and religion have in past ages been traveling from east to west, and this continent is their last western state. Here then is God erecting a stage on which to exhibit the great things of his kingdom.”³⁴ At least until the Civil War, this self-identification of empire was not uncommon. The word empire to refer to the United States remained a dominant part of political discourse.³⁵

In short, not unlike Britain’s expansion earlier, U.S. expansion involved territorial growth, population growth, and ideological developments. But what about state involvement? It is here that popular narratives of U.S. history would stop us from making comparisons. In these narratives, U.S. expansion was led by self-reliant settlers who conquered an empty wilderness.³⁶ Expansion was a private affair rather than a process led by an aggressive and aggrandizing state. This is how the “West has come to stand for independence, self-reliance, and individualism.”³⁷ The narrative also entails long-standing social science claims about the so-called weakness of the American state. Tocqueville claimed that Americans “did not have any neighbors, and consequently no great wars, and neither ravages nor conquest to fear,” thus they did not need “a numerous army, nor great generals.”³⁸ Many social scientists similarly claim that the U.S. state before 1877 was weak and devoid of a strong centralized government.³⁹

³⁰ Sylla (1996), p. 494.

³¹ Meinig (1993), II, p. 223.

³² Calculated from data in Horn (1998), p. 100.

³³ Van Alstyne (1960), p. 2.

³⁴ Quoted in Stephanson (1995), p. 19.

³⁵ Van Alstyne (1960), p. 6.

³⁶ This image pervades much existing scholarship, serving as a vital element in exceptionalist narratives. See Rodgers (1998), p. 36.

³⁷ White (1991), p. 57.

³⁸ Quoted in Zolberg (2002), p. 24.

³⁹ Skowronek (1982).

Supposedly, even if the state *wanted* to play a part in expansion, it did not have the capacities to do so.

But these are misconceptions. First, expansion did not unfold into an empty wilderness. Nearly all of the territories the United States eventually annexed had been populated and/or governed by rival powers. After independence, the eastern colonies and the Northwest Territory, which was organized in 1787, were bounded by Spanish Florida in the south, Spanish Louisiana to the immediate west, and British Canada to the north. After the Louisiana Purchase, Spain still had territory in Florida, and its Mexico territory bordered the southwest, whereas British territory flanked the young United States from the north and northwest. Second, along these borders, across them, and within them were diverse populations. The Northwest Territory already had 60,000 inhabitants in 1796. Previously, in the trans-Appalachian region, the resistance of the Choctaw, Creek, Miami, and other tribes had frustrated the early founders' dreams of easy expansion. In other territories, not only were there multiple Native American groups but also various non-Anglo populations. Creoles, free blacks (many from Santo Domingo), and Cajuns populated the Louisiana territory. Peoples of Hispano, Mexican, and Spanish-Indian descent populated the Spanish-held territories. Few if any of these groups were easily reconciled to U.S. intrusion.⁴⁰

It follows that the American state *had* to take a part in expansion.⁴¹ “The frontier,” notes historian Peter Onuf, “required the exercise of authority . . . by a strong national government.”⁴² The state was needed first of all to explore and survey land. Although images of valiant individual explorers like Lewis and Clark permeate America's consciousness, in fact the U.S. Army led most expeditions throughout the continent.⁴³ Furthermore, the state had to induce or otherwise attract settlement. The Oregon Donation Act of 1850 offered settlers generous land grants to persuade them to move in.⁴⁴ Also, the state was necessary as a coercive force to pacify land. From 1820 to the beginning of the Civil War, fifty-seven military forts were established in Alabama to subdue resistance from Native Americans. By 1868, the U.S. Army had more troops stationed in the West than in the South (even before the end of Reconstruction).⁴⁵ Subduing Indians was America's “central military task throughout the nineteenth century.”⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Sparrow (2006): 17, p. 17, 21–35; Ball (2002): 8, p. 8.

⁴¹ For work that has challenged the characterization of the American state in the nineteenth century as “weak,” see Balogh (2009), Katznelson (2002), and Novak (2008). On westward expansion and state capacity, see especially Heumann (2009).

⁴² Onuf (1987), p. xiii.

⁴³ Goetzmann (1959). See also, for one of the best examinations of the federal state's involvement and the military's role in land acquisition and conquest, Heumann (2009).

⁴⁴ Limerick (1988), p. 45.

⁴⁵ Rauchway (2006), p. 132.

⁴⁶ On Alabama, Katznelson (2002), p. 90; quote from p. 96; on land sales pp. 98–99. Not only did military force facilitate settlement, it also contributed to the economy. It was by the hand of the federal government, through its military power and direct appropriation of land, that

Moreover, whereas military power was necessary for subduing native populations, it was likewise necessary for fending off international rivals and facilitating territorial acquisitions. Consider how Florida was won. Although it is true that some East Florida residents before U.S. annexation had begun to challenge Spanish rule, it nonetheless took the federal government to make the challenge real and to finalize annexation. In 1811, Congress secretly passed the No Transfer Resolution, which expressed America's resolve that Florida would not fall into the hands of any foreign power. Subsequently, General George Matthews bribed locals to foment discontent against Spanish rule and proceeded to use military force to seize East Florida in March 1812.⁴⁷ Although Matthews's efforts were later disavowed in public by President James Madison's administration, all of the Floridas were eventually taken under the auspices of the Adams-Onís Treaty in 1819. And this occurred only after the federal government's forceful hand had pounded the region. Andrew Jackson's army of close to three thousand men had invaded East Florida, conquered recalcitrant Seminoles, and occupied St. Marks and Pensacola.⁴⁸ Boundaries were thus born from bullets; frontiers were tamed by force.

The same is true for most of the other major territories acquired by the United States. Taking the Oregon Territory demanded displays of force to ward off Spanish, Russian, and English claims.⁴⁹ The conquest of the area that would eventually become Texas, California, and New Mexico entailed the deployment of federal troops, leading to the Mexican War in 1848. Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz called this war "one of the most unjust wars in the history of imperialism."⁵⁰ Later, it would take British commentators to remind prominent American statesmen of this conquest. In 1945, during postwar planning meetings, President Roosevelt remarked to the British Colonial Secretary Oliver Stanley, "I do not want to be unkind or rude to the British but in 1841, when you acquired Hong Kong, you did not acquire it by purchase." Stanley retorted: "Let me see, Mr. President, that was about the time of the Mexican War."⁵¹

The aftermath of such conquests demanded yet more state involvement. All of the new territories, once declared under U.S. sovereignty and organized into territorial governments (before statehood), were governed by military commanders. These commanders spent much of their time suppressing resistance and securing the conditions for peaceful settlement, exploration, and commercial development. The targets of suppression were Native Americans in most cases, but these were not the only groups visited by the coercive hand of the

economic development occurred at all. This also involved trade with Native Americans. See Robbins (1994), pp. 64–5; see also Limerick (1988), p. 82.

⁴⁷ Weeks (1996), pp. 35–6.

⁴⁸ Grupo de Investigadores Puertorriqueños (1984), p. 314; Weeks (1996), pp. 42–3.

⁴⁹ Brooks (1934); Ambler (1943).

⁵⁰ Paz quoted in Bender (2006b), p. 199. See especially Hietala (1985), pp. 153–5 and, for more on the war, Gómez (2007).

⁵¹ Quoted in Sebrega (1986), p. 75.

TABLE 1.1. *U.S. Military Interventions and Territorial Annexations by Region, 1810–1870*

Region	Number
Africa	4
Asia-Pacific	22
Caribbean, Central & South America	21
Europe & E. Europe	2
Middle East and N. Africa	3
N. American Continent & Mexico	19

Source: See Appendix: Note on Data.

American state. After Brig. General Stephen W. Kearny unilaterally annexed New Mexico to the United States in 1846, military occupation persisted until 1851. Kearny's Organic Act displaced the Hispano aristocracy and elevated the "American Party" of Anglos and some pro-American Hispanos into power. His successor, Colonel Sterling S. Price, then faced a series of uprisings from Hispano peasants and Pueblo Indians – led partly by Hispano aristocrats and clergy. In response, Price assaulted the town of Mora and led a force of 480 volunteers, regulars, and civilians from Sante Fe across to Taos Pueblo to suppress the remnants of resistance. In subsequent years, antigovernment assaults by *Nuevomexicanos* (1847) and the Navajo (1848) also met military force.⁵²

The new U.S. state even deployed its power overseas (see Table 1.1). In the early nineteenth century, the U.S. Navy sent ships or troops as far as Tripoli, Tunis, and Algiers. It also intervened in the Caribbean to secure the promise of trade there and with Latin America.⁵³ As the United States later looked for profitable passageways to the Pacific through Nicaragua and Panama, it continued to deploy naval power, dispatching troops to Nicaragua on several occasions or meddling with Cuba and Santo Domingo.⁵⁴ The search for trade with Asia extended America's military hand even farther. Attempts to get Japan to open up to American goods in the 1850s led to various demonstrations of naval force, and troops were deployed on various occasions to Formosa, Korea, and China. Similarly, just as Walt Whitman's 1860 poem "The New Empire" suggested that the Pacific would become the "vast highway" to Asia, various instances of American force took place in the Pacific.⁵⁵ The American navy moved into Samoa, Fiji, and Drummond Island in the early 1840s, which in turn unleashed military attacks on native islanders.

All of this suggests that the U.S. state was no less militaristic or interventionist than the British state. Data on military spending are informative. Even

⁵² Ball (2002), pp. 8–9.

⁵³ LaFeber (1989), p. 81; United States Congress Committee on Foreign Affairs (1970), pp. 50–3.

⁵⁴ By 1855, America's trade with Cuba had doubled from the previous decade (LaFeber 1989: 135).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

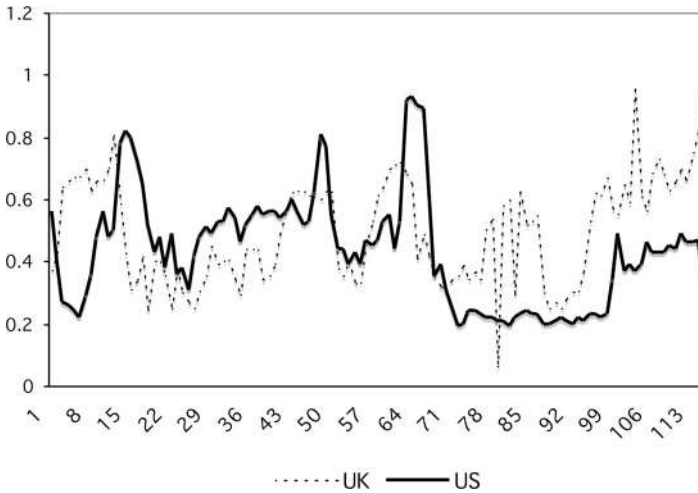


FIGURE 1.3. U.S. and U.K. Proportion of Expenditure Devoted to Military Spending. *Note:* The data cover the years 1700–1814 for the U.K., and 1800–1914 for the United States. *Sources:* Tabulated from data, for U.K., Mitchell (1988); for United States, U.S. Bureau of the Census (1976).

if we bracket local state militias, military expenditures far outweighed other expenditures of the national budget. It accounted for at least 72 percent of total spending and 94 percent each year (except for one year) between 1808 and 1848. This includes naval spending, which from 1798 to 1848 “either outpaced or approximately equaled all civilian federal spending combined.”⁵⁶ When we compare U.S. and British expenditures directly (from 1700 to 1814 for Britain and from 1800 to 1914 for the United States), we see remarkable similarity in the structure of spending (see Figure 1.3).⁵⁷

Both the U.S. and British states, therefore, were fiscal-military states. The British fiscal-military state financed itself partly by drawing on trade revenues. In turn, trade depended on expansion to cultivate more trade and protect existing trading networks.⁵⁸ Similarly for the American state, customs revenue constituted the greatest proportion of total federal revenues; customs revenue was continually enhanced by expanded trade in and with the western territories. Meanwhile, newly conquered land was fiscally lucrative for the state directly because tax on land was among the three top sources of revenue (besides customs and excise taxes), and indirectly because new settlement raised property

⁵⁶ Not surprisingly, as Katznelson shows, the periods of major increase in federal land sales over the nineteenth century (and hence the peaks of settlement) coincided with the more intense periods of Indian removal. Katznelson (2002), pp. 91–2.

⁵⁷ O’Brien (1988b).

⁵⁸ See Cain and Hopkins (1993), pp. 71–5; O’Brien (1998c), p. 68; Brewer (1989), pp. 202–4; Koehn (1994), pp. 20, 61–2.

values and contributed to income growth (that in turn facilitated increased customs and excise taxes).⁵⁹ Expansion was not an appurtenance. It was dependent on American state power even as state power was dependent on expansion.

The interventionist U.S. state was more like the English state than American exceptionalist thought would have us believe. But was it also an *imperial* state? The foregoing discussion discloses some similarities between Britain's and America's territorial expansion. It remains to be seen whether this territorial expansion was also a process of empire formation.

The Forms of England's Imperial Ascendance

As seen, Britons in the long eighteenth century thought of Britain and its territories as an "empire." They called it the "British empire." They also referred to overseas territories as "colonies." It seems, therefore, that Britain was a colonial empire. But we have to be careful. The use of the term empire at the time does not necessarily equate with the analytic concept used by scholars today to refer to a system of unequal political power between a metropole and its territories. It might have been used only to refer to the sovereign power of a monarch.⁶⁰ Nor does the word colony as used by Britons at the time necessarily equate with the notion of modern colonies (as administrative units subordinated to a higher power). Beginning in the late 1600s, the word colonies was often used synonymously with "dominions" and, in some instances, "plantations."⁶¹ So was this really a *colonial empire* in our analytic sense?

There are good reasons for staking the claim that Britain's overseas territories in the long eighteenth century constituted a colonial empire. On the one hand, the earliest acquired territories were considered a part of the monarch's direct domain (even chartered companies, although private bodies, acted under the authority of the Crown). New territories were not unlike England's medieval territorial expanse by which all territories were equal (as in equally subject to the authority of the Crown). These territories included the Channel Islands of Guernsey and Jersey, Wales, and the Isle of Man.⁶² On the other hand, as more territories were later acquired, new distinctions emerged that helped create a new colonial system, such as that between the monarch's realm, which included England and Wales (and after 1707, Scotland), and the monarch's "dominions" or "dependencies." The territories acquired during the

⁵⁹ Sylla (1996), p. 515. For a deeper analysis of expansion and revenue in the American context and in comparison with the British state, see Heumann (2009) esp. pp. 115–55.

⁶⁰ Armitage (2000), p. 11.

⁶¹ Finley (1976), pp. 170–1. Changes in England's own political institutions further complicated matters for overseas territories. And the fact that England lacked a single-document written constitution meant that there was never one authoritative text to guide policy toward overseas territories. Of course, the territories themselves had their own constitutions. But these were largely customary, developed slowly, and often open to dispute. See Greene (1994b), pp. 25–42.

⁶² Steele (1998), p. 105; Marshall (1998), p. 10; Greene (1986), p. 7.

long eighteenth century occupied the latter category. Rather than being “Part of the Realm of England,” they were considered as “Separate and Distinct Dominions.”⁶³ In this sense, the new territories were incorporated as substates of a realm. But they were also *colonial states* in our analytic sense, for they were appendages of the metropolitan state and, most tellingly, subordinate to it. They were seen by Crown officials as “dependent dominions,” where *dependence* signified “both weakness and subordination in relation to some person, body, or institution that was stronger or more competent and superior.” The new territories were thus akin to the way in which “wives, children, servants were dependents.”⁶⁴ As John Dickinson in Pennsylvania would remark in 1768, they were not only “*mixt, but dependent*” upon the Crown.⁶⁵ That is, they were juridically inferior and subordinate; they were rendered subordinate because they were deemed inferior.

The subordination of the territories was a layered historical development. Some of the earliest territories settled in the 1600s were proprietary governments whereby the Crown delegated appointments and political control almost fully to the proprietors. The monarch did not have representatives in the areas controlled by the Hudson’s Bay Company or in the chartered governments of Rhode Island, Connecticut, or the Carolinas.⁶⁶ However, most of those early charters were eventually amended or revoked, leading to a form of “royal government” (also known sometimes as Crown Colonies or royal colonies) that involved direct royal control and hence an imperial hierarchy. This was the form that the vast majority of the territories in the Americas and the West Indies eventually took.⁶⁷ It found precedence in the early colonies of Jamaica and New York, both of which were classified as “conquered countries” akin to Ireland. As conquered countries, they were “subject to the King’s Prerogative Royal”; the king would impose the identical laws of England at his whim, if at all.⁶⁸ Similarly, royal government meant that territories were subject to royal control in ways that domestic territories (or those that were “Part of the realm of England”) were not. In this sense, they became “colonies” or, as many similar territories were later named, “British possessions.”⁶⁹

⁶³ “In this concept each colony was thus a separate corporate entity, a body politic authorized by the crown, with jurisdiction over a well-defined territory and its own distinctive institutions, laws, customs, and eventually, history and identity.” From Greene (1986), p. 10.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Johnson (1998), p. 296.

⁶⁶ Steele (1998), p. 110.

⁶⁷ Greene (1898), pp. 2–22; Walker (1943), p. 17. Steele (1998), p. 110. Only two colonies were the exceptions; hence even the governor – the nominal representative of the Crown – was elected, together with the executive council. “Here the Crown had no authority at all.” But this was the extreme of colonial autonomy. See Fieldhouse (1982), p. 61.

⁶⁸ Greene (1986), pp. 23–4.

⁶⁹ Later the distinction would be codified further by Parliament. The Interpretation Act of 1889 classified most overseas territories as “British possessions” and defined them as “any part of Her Majesty’s dominions *exclusive of the United Kingdom*.” Quoted in Finley (1976), p. 167; emphasis added.

Metropolitan control over the colonies was exercised in various ways. Perhaps the most important was royal appointment. Territories had their own elective assemblies (except for military outposts like Nova Scotia and Newfoundland). In Jamaica and Barbados, the rights and privileges of such assemblies had been established before 1689 and remained the strongest of the assemblies.⁷⁰ But the highest appointment, the colonial governor, was made by the Crown. In turn, the governor appointed members of the colonial council (that served as an advisory group, a colonial court of appeal, and a legislative upper house) and other bureaucratic posts. Furthermore, the governor exercised veto power over the assemblies and could call and even dissolve them. In these ways, therefore, the colonial governor represented “a monarchical power that was supposedly stronger in the colonies than in England.”⁷¹ In fact, whereas the monarchy at home was bound by the Triennial and later the Septennial, colonial governors could (and often did) dissolve the lower legislative assemblies without having to specify when they would be again summoned. And governors could establish courts of law and appoint and dismiss judges, even though the Crown at home had lost such powers with the Act of Settlement in 1701.⁷²

As colonial governments became officially subject to the Crown’s will, the organs of the Crown’s will accordingly became more elaborate. Here we see the formation of an imperial hierarchy corresponding to an expanding imperial bureaucracy. In the 1670s, the Lords of Trade, a permanent committee of the king’s Privy Council, was created to exert greater supervision over the colonies. It required reports from colonial governors and expanded “in scope and specificity the royal instructions given to governors to direct them in their conduct of government.”⁷³ This body also enacted various measures to restrict the legislative assemblies’ powers over the purse.⁷⁴ Such meddling was intensified during historical periods. During the 1740s and 1750s, for example, it used legislative review, royal instructions, and the royal veto over colonial laws to more closely supervise the colonies. Later, after being renamed the Board of Trade, it sometimes took on the responsibility of making appointments and issuing instructions to governors.⁷⁵

The metropolitan Parliament also exercised control (not least as the Crown itself became subject to Parliament at home). In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, parliamentary legislation for the colonies was largely restricted to concerns of foreign affairs and trade (such as the Navigation Acts). But as the long eighteenth century progressed, so too did parliamentary power. From the Glorious Revolution through the first decades of the 1700s, Parliament passed laws that strengthened Crown control over colonies; these

⁷⁰ On West Indies legislatures see Watson (1995) and Greene (1994a).

⁷¹ Steele (1998), p. 110.

⁷² Bailyn (1965), pp. 66–72.

⁷³ Greene (1986), pp. 13–14, quote at 14.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50; Marshall (2005), pp. 74–6.

included acts dealing with the Newfoundland trade (1699) and fixing the value of certain foreign coins in the colonies (1708).⁷⁶ Throughout the century, Parliament often acted in the interests of English business groups and other lobbies at home rather than in the interests of settlers and merchants in the territories. Those domestic lobbies had direct access and representation in Parliament, but the distance separating territorial subjects was too great to allow such access.⁷⁷ Finally, and most notoriously, Parliament increasingly meddled in the internal affairs of the colonies. By the time of the Stamp Act in 1765, Parliament had become “the ultimate arbiter of Imperial affairs.”⁷⁸ Parliament exercised power, but colonists did not have representation.⁷⁹ The English state was an *imperial state* indeed.

America’s Empire

Was the U.S. federal government also an imperial state? In one of the only explicitly comparative examinations of America’s territorial expansion, the historian Robin Winks asks a similar question. Surveying the history of westward expansion to the mid-nineteenth century, he asks: “Was this first period of expansion imperialistic?” His answer: “Perhaps.” Winks’ reluctance rests on the fact that even though the U.S. federal government acquired new territory, it did not keep them as colonies. Instead, it turned them into equal states in the American Union. This makes U.S. expansion fundamentally different from European expansion. It “was not ‘imperialism’ per se but continentalism,” says Winks.⁸⁰

This is a standard part of the exceptionalist narrative. The western territories did not become colonial appendages or dependencies of the United States, but rather equal members of the body politic. Settlers were given equal rights and privileges under the law; they were equal citizens rather than subordinated colonial subjects. In this regard, the U.S. territorial system was not like Britain’s empire.⁸¹ The other part of this narrative is the supposed political genius of America’s Founding Fathers. By making the U.S. government an expanding state that acquired territories and turned them into equal states, Thomas Jefferson and his peers inaugurated a novel republicanism that broke with their imperial English past. Rather than creating a hierarchy of power, they created a federated union of equal territories, “an expanding union of republics held together by ties of interest and affection.”⁸² Rather than an empire opposed to

⁷⁶ Steele (1998), p. 108.

⁷⁷ Greene (1994b), p. 66.

⁷⁸ Steele (1998), p. 109; Greene (1994b), pp. 39–40.

⁷⁹ See Pocock (1995), pp. 335–40.

⁸⁰ Winks (1997), p. 148.

⁸¹ Because “each new US territory was settled or conquered it became, within a very short span of time, a new state within the Union . . . colonialism has never been an option for the United States.” Pagden (2005), p. 54; see also Weeks (1996), p. x. See also especially *ibid.*, p. x.

⁸² Onuf (2000), p. 2.

liberty like England's empire had been, they created an "empire of liberty." The American founders thereby solved the age-old imperial problem of reconciling territorial expanse with liberty and law, security, and freedom.

In this light, American expansion appears as the antithesis of European empire – a notion registered at the time by David Humphreys, George Washington's officer:

All former empires rose, the work of guilt,
On conquest, blood, or usurpation built;
But we, taught wisdom by their woes and crimes,
Fraught with their lore, and born to better times;
Our constitutions form'd on freedom's base,
Which all the blessings of all lands embrace;
Embrace humanity's extended cause,
A world of our empire, for a world of our laws . . . ⁸³

Still, this exceptionalist narrative remains dangerously simplistic at worst and misleading at best. It is right to point out that the territories acquired on the continent (and later Alaska and Hawaii) eventually became fully fledged states in the Union. The story is wrong, however, as it covers up everything else that was involved.

Continental Colonialism

Consider how states were made. How did territories become states in the Union? It was not so simple as signing a document. Before settlers and subjects in the new territories could be granted statehood and citizenship, they had to undergo a period of "territorial government." This meant that the newly acquired territories were kept as subordinated dependencies, subject to the power of the U.S. president and Congress, without representation. The origins of this system lay in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which established a three-stage process before statehood. First, the federal government appointed a governor and three judges. The governor wielded legislative power; even settlers did not have a say. Second, when the free white male population had passed five thousand, an elective two-house legislature could be established; but the upper house remained appointees of the president. The federally appointed governor had absolute veto power and could "convene, prorogue, and dissolve the assembly at his pleasure."⁸⁴ Finally, the territory could write up a state constitution, only after which the territory could become a state. Even then, the U.S. Congress had the power to approve or reject statehood.⁸⁵

The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 added yet more layers of control to the territorial system. President Jefferson started the important precedent of appointing a military governor to the territory before the territory could even get to the

⁸³ Quoted in Stephanson (1995), p. 19.

⁸⁴ Initially the upper house was to be chosen by the U.S. Congress. But after the Constitution went into effect in 1789, the president took on this role. Perkins (1962), p. 15.

⁸⁵ Sparrow (2005), pp. 232–3.

first stage of the process. The territory was then subjected to autocratic military rule – no governor, no judges. And during this stage of military government, inhabitants were not even given the protection of a bill of rights.⁸⁶ Territorial government would begin only when Congress decided it was ready.⁸⁷ This happened for many territories. California and New Mexico were run initially by military governors. Alaska was not organized as a territory for forty-five years, meaning that for those forty-five years inhabitants did not have representation in the metropole or even in a local legislature. Nor did they have a bill of rights. It was a military occupation.

In sum, the territorial system entailed a colonial structure very much akin to Britain's overseas empire. Just as the Crown, its bureaucratic agents, and Parliament ruled on high in the English system, so did the presidency, its branches (first the Department of State, the Treasury Department, and later, in 1873, the Department of Interior), and Congress rule at the apex of the U.S. territorial system.⁸⁸ Making territorial governors appointees of the U.S. president simply replaced the previous monarchical powers of appointment with presidential ones. Having symbolically cut off the king's head, the new American system replaced him with the U.S. president. Furthermore, the president's agencies charged with administering territorial affairs acted similarly to the Lords of Trade in the king's Privy Council. In the Department of State, "appointments and removals of governors and secretaries were studied and submitted for presidential action . . . leaves of absence were granted or refused in the name of the president . . . instructions, advice, and reprimands were sent out on a variety of subjects."⁸⁹ These appointment powers were used to meddle in territorial affairs, not unlike the practice of appointment by the Privy Council in the British empire. Not surprisingly, people in the western territories sometimes made unflattering comparisons between U.S. federal officials and the ministers of King George III.⁹⁰ A newspaper in the Dakota territory declared in 1877: "We are so heartily disgusted with our dependent condition, with being snubbed at every turn in life, with having all our interest subjected to the whims and corrupt acts of persons in power that we feel very much as thirteen colonies felt."⁹¹ Later, in 1903, Albert Bushnell Hart (president of the American Political Science Association) noted that in "any other country such [territorial] governments would be called 'colonial.' . . . In truth, the territories are and ever have been colonies."⁹²

⁸⁶ Perkins (1962), p. 17.

⁸⁷ Sparrow (2006), p. 22.

⁸⁸ For more on the administrative apparatus for the territories, see Pomeroy (1947). There was even an informal colonial service, as federal officials often moved from one territory to another. The clearest example of a "colonial service in operation" are the territorial judges. See Eblen (1968), p. 280.

⁸⁹ Pomeroy (1947), p. 5

⁹⁰ Limerick (1988), p. 23

⁹¹ Lamar (1956), p. 205; see also Limerick (1988), p. 83.

⁹² Hart (1919), pp. 368–9.

The imperial and colonial character to the territorial system was by design rather than in effect. The territorial governments were directly modeled after Britain's own colonies. James Monroe feared that the newly acquired territories would rebel against the federal government just as he and his peers had previously rebelled against the British empire. Consequently, he "considered a strong governor to be necessary from the beginning of representative government, both to get the people in harness and to prevent rebellions before statehood was attained."⁹³ The fact that the architects of the system had previously revolted against British imperialism did not temper the imperialism of their own system; it made them more willing to impose stronger controls over the territories than Britain had previously exercised.

In certain regards, settlers in American territories had less political autonomy than settlers in Britain's previous colonial empire. In the first stage of the U.S. territorial system, federal appointees monopolized legislative, executive, and judicial functions. But in Britain's empire, colonial assemblies were present from the beginning. Even in the second stage of the territorial system, when legislatures were established, the federal state had more powers over territorial subjects than did the British state (at least before 1763, when the British state tightened its controls over its territories). "In this light," notes Eblen, "the Ordinance of 1787 cannot be viewed as innovative or progressive in any basic sense, even in the provision for statehood; on the contrary, its system of colonial government was decidedly more authoritarian than that of the British."⁹⁴

America's continental colonialism was more imperial and authoritarian than Britain's settler empire in theory, and it was even more so in practice. For instance, although the British state controlled top appointments and restricted the power of the colonial assemblies, the actual operations of the system gave colonial assemblies more power than official doctrine implied. One way in which assemblies influenced colonial governors was by their control over salary: Assemblies had the right to vote for the governors' pay from local taxes, which meant that governors often had to negotiate with powerful assemblymen and often grant them many concessions. Assemblies also wielded other informal powers, which made it easy for them to conceive of themselves as local variants of or parallels to the House of Commons at home.⁹⁵ By contrast, in the U.S. territorial system, governors' salaries and those of other officials were set by Congress, leaving the local legislative assemblies with little power.⁹⁶ Furthermore, most scholarship on the British system has shown that although there was an official imperial hierarchy, unofficially London was often forced to engage in a process of two-way "negotiation" with its colonies, whereby loyalty could only be secured by granting colonial privileges and

⁹³ Eblen (1968), p. 42.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁹⁵ Koenigsberger (1989), p. 147; Greene (1994b), p. 47.

⁹⁶ Pomeroy (1947), pp. 38–50.

concessions.⁹⁷ In the U.S. system, Washington's control over all appointments and salaries made for a situation in which there was much less negotiation. The federal government often removed and replaced territorial governors at its whim. And the local courts were subject to direct federal control: Territorial judges were removed and replaced just as often as were territorial governors.⁹⁸

The imperial character of America's territorial system is further disclosed in the federal officials' discourse about territorial populations, which took on a strong colonial tone. After the Louisiana Purchase, Federalists asserted that New Orleans was populated by "a Mixture of Americans, English, Spanish, and French and crowded [sic] every year . . . with two or three thousand boatmen from the backcountry remarkable for their dissipated habits, unruly tempers, and lawless conduct."⁹⁹ One official wrote that "Otters" were "more capable of self-government than Louisiana's *Gallo-Hispano-Indium omnimum gatherum* of savages and adventurers, whose pure morals are expected to sustain and glorify our republic."¹⁰⁰ Thomas Jefferson was no less condescending. He complained that the Creoles were "as yet incapable of self-government as children"; the "principles of popular Government are utterly beyond their comprehension."¹⁰¹ Jefferson was not at all eager to see the territory pass into statehood and in fact suggested that statehood should be delayed for as long as possible.

Even relations with white settler populations took on an imperial tone. Secretary of the Treasury, Oliver Wolcott, referred to the Northwest Territory in 1795 as a "dependent colony."¹⁰² The first ruler of the Northwest Territory, Arthur St. Clair, insisted that the inhabitants of the territories were not full American citizens but "subjects," and repeatedly referred to them as "infants." St. Clair used his autocratic powers to try to keep the territory in a subordinated position by, for example, splitting the territory into smaller divisions to divide the population and thereby preventing the population from reaching sixty thousand. In response, St. Clair's subjects often complained about his "colonial, oppressive and unequal government." One judge of Ohio complained to Jefferson in 1802 that the territorial government was a "true transcript of our old English Colonial Governments," adding that "our Governor is clothed with all the power of a British Nabob."¹⁰³ As late as the 1880s, territorial subjects deployed such discourse. In 1884, Martin Maginnis, a delegate to Congress from Montana Territory (who could speak but not vote), declared

⁹⁷ On this point, see Marshall (2005), p. 76; Olson (1992), p. 134; Greene (1994b), pp. 1–24 and Greene (2002).

⁹⁸ Pomeroy (1947), p. 52; on the British system, see Steele (1998).

⁹⁹ Quoted in Sparrow (2006), p. 21.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁰² Quoted in Onuf (1987), p. 71.

¹⁰³ Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 71–2; more on criticism of governors see Eblen (1968), pp. 143–5; on conflicts and events in the Northwest Territory, including St. Clair and Winthrop, see *ibid.*, pp. 52–86.

that the “present Territorial system . . . is the most infamous system of colonial government that was ever seen on the face of the globe.” He continued:

Territories are the colonies of your Republic, situated three thousand miles away from Washington by land, as the thirteen colonies were situated three thousand miles away from London by water. And it is a strange thing that the fathers of our Republic . . . established a colonial government as much worse than that which they revolted against as one form of government can be worse than another.¹⁰⁴

The standard exceptionalist narrative covers up such discourse and the imperial relations of which it bears witness. It likewise occludes how prevalent the territorial system has been in the history of American state formation. Exceptionalist thought tells us that “only very briefly has the mainland United States ever been considered an empire rather than a nation”; but this overlooks the fact that “three-quarters of the area of the fifty states was at one point under territorial government of some kind” (as the political scientist Bartholomew Sparrow notes).¹⁰⁵ The cumulative existence from 1784 to 1912 of the twenty-eight contiguous territories before they became states amounts to 544 years.¹⁰⁶ New Mexico suffered the longest period before statehood: sixty-two years.¹⁰⁷ This means that “children born when New Mexico was first brought under American control were to be in their sixties when New Mexico became a state.”¹⁰⁸ It follows that the United States has never been “a nation of states” with equal standing.¹⁰⁹ For nearly all of its history, it has had territories alongside its states. The United States has been primarily an *empire-state* rather than a nation-state.¹¹⁰

Comparative Exceptionalisms

If exceptionalist narratives run the risk of downplaying the imperial dimensions of American territorial expansion, they likewise run the risk of *overstating* the imperial dimensions of the British empire. The second follows from the first. Treating the American empire of liberty as exceptionally novel and liberal, the exceptionalist narrative portrays the British empire as vulgarly authoritarian. But was it?

For a start, the discourse of empire among Britain’s territorial subjects is telling. As seen, America’s territorial subjects registered complaints about the territorial system. The views of British colonials, however, were much less oppositional. Surely the planters of Jamaica or other Britons abroad often criticized London’s imperial meddling. And the concatenation of criticisms among New Englanders led to the American Revolution. But prior to the

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Pomeroy (1947), p. 104; see also Limerick (1988), p. 79.

¹⁰⁵ First quote from Pagden (2005), pp. 54–5; Sparrow (2005), p. 232.

¹⁰⁶ Eblen (1968), p. 13.

¹⁰⁷ Sparrow (2005), p. 242.

¹⁰⁸ Pomeroy (1947), p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ Sparrow (2005), p. 232.

¹¹⁰ On “empire-state” see Cooper (2005), pp. 153–204.

revolution, British settlers had developed a view of the British empire that was remarkably positive. More importantly, they had developed a view of their empire as exceptional; as uniquely free, liberal, and democratic. This prefigured the Americans' later sense of imperial uniqueness. It also set the basis for the notion of an "empire of liberty."

The British sense of imperial uniqueness began to emerge as early as the Glorious Revolution. As Greene notes, "many contemporary observers, English and foreign, agreed that the English people's unique system of law and liberty was what principally distinguished them from all other people on the face of the globe. The proud boast of the English was that they, unlike most other Europeans, had retained their identity as a free people by safeguarding their liberty through their laws."¹¹¹ The identity was forged in direct opposition to other European states. Sir John Fortescue in the early seventeenth century set the tone. He contended that England, unlike France where "what pleased the prince . . . had the force of law," enjoyed a unique system whereby the monarchy was constrained by the law and the people "preserve[d] their rights through the law." Englishmen were the only ones who were "ruled by laws they themselves desire[d]." Their laws "favour[ed] liberty in every case."¹¹² Later, Whig theorist Henry Care similarly contended that nations like France and Spain were ruled by "Arbitrary" tyrants, whereas England's government was "the best in the World."¹¹³ Other writers such as John Milton insisted that England was "the mansion house of liberty," and that this was the essence of "England's peculiarity."¹¹⁴

After the Glorious Revolution, this notion of English exceptionalism was deployed in regard to empire as well as nation. Settlers carried the ideology to the New World, conceiving themselves as geographically afar but politically subject to the same privileges of law and liberty as at home. Their sons in the colonies considered themselves "born to Liberty."¹¹⁵ As Greene notes, "the English system of law and liberty was thus crucial to their [the settlers'] ability to maintain their identity as English people and to continue to think of themselves as to be thought of those by those who remained in England as English."¹¹⁶ As with the Americans' self-conceived imperial identity, this image of a liberal empire did not include subject peoples like Native Americans. But it did include all white colonial subjects overseas, from Barbadians to North Americans, who increasingly came to conceive of themselves as part of a larger community of Britons. This was a community "in which Caledonians and Americans, as well as the English, could participate."¹¹⁷ Arthur Young pointed out in 1772 that peoples in the colonies were conjoined with Britons at home, living under

¹¹¹ Greene (1998), pp. 208–9.

¹¹² Fortescue as quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 209–10.

¹¹³ Care quoted in Greene (1998), p. 210.

¹¹⁴ John Milton quoted in Greene (1998), p. 210.

¹¹⁵ Jonas Hanway quoted in Colley (2003a), p. 97.

¹¹⁶ Wilson (1995), p. 277 see also Greene (1998), p. 222.

¹¹⁷ Wilson (1988), p. 104.

“one nation, united under one sovereign, speaking the same language and enjoying the same liberty.”¹¹⁸

Given the hierarchical structure of the empire, how were such ideas about liberty even possible? Part of it was an increasing sense of community covered under the term “British Empire.” During the second quarter of the eighteenth century, as noted earlier, Anglophones in North America and the West Indies began “for the first time habitually to describe their community as the ‘British Empire.’”¹¹⁹ Enabled by transformations in communications around the British Atlantic, colonists saw themselves in union with the British Isles.¹²⁰ This imagined community, however, took on its meaning as a community based on shared liberties more specifically through the political structure of the empire itself. The very sorts of settler privileges and freedoms discussed earlier formed the basis for the ideological conception. For instance, although colonists did not enjoy representation in Parliament, their assemblies nonetheless gave them local representation. In Barbados, “the Council and Assembly were regarded by the white settlers as the equivalent of the House of Lords and House of Commons in England.”¹²¹ Like other whites in the British Atlantic, they likewise considered their territory as “extensions of England, rather than extended dependencies.”¹²² We have seen that the colonies were indeed dependencies in the sense that, officially, they were subordinated to the will of the Crown-in-Parliament. But the idea of metropolitan extension was not completely off the mark. In the northern colonies, the assemblies were elected by a wide franchise of white men and, as noted, they did exert certain checks against Crown-appointed governors. In Jamaica, the local assemblies had been especially powerful, obtaining a reputation for being particularly assertive.¹²³

Besides using their assemblies, colonists also developed legal apparatuses granting them rights and privileges that were not dissimilar from those they would have enjoyed at home. The British state never established once and for all which laws from home applied abroad (the common law or the statute law only?), but this indeterminacy helped rather than hindered the colonists’ cause. Lacking concrete decrees from London, local courts and legislatures “had wide latitude to determine for themselves which laws [of England] applied” and so used all kinds of English law – “the common law, presettlement statutes, and postsettlement statutes [etc.]”¹²⁴ The lieutenant governor of Virginia, holding position from 1727 to 1749, could thereby declare that the colonies enjoyed laws that were “exactly suited to the Circumstances of the Respective Governments, and as near as possible [as] it can be, conformable to the Laws

¹¹⁸ Greene (1998), p. 222 quoting Young. For more on British identifications of liberty and empire, see the essays in Greene (2010).

¹¹⁹ Armitage (2000), p. 171.

¹²⁰ Steele (1986).

¹²¹ Sheridan (1998), p. 405.

¹²² Watson (1995), p. 90.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹²⁴ Greene (1986), p. 27.

and Customs of England.” These included guaranteeing “traditional English legal guarantees of life, liberty, and property.”¹²⁵

The conception of the empire as based on law and liberty was not restricted to the colonists. It was also articulated in the metropole.¹²⁶ English public opinion at home did not find the privileges enjoyed by colonists inappropriate. Conceiving of overseas colonists as commercial vanguards who contributed to the kingdom through their commercial ventures, they took “pride in the commercial vigour that was thought to flow from the local liberties appropriate to communities of free British people living overseas.”¹²⁷ Various prominent writers and philosopher-thinkers contributed to the ideology (especially in the 1740s with the War of Jenkins’ Ear and anti-Walopean agitation), formulating Lockean connections between property and liberty. Such connections ultimately contributed to “a vision of the British Empire as Protestant, commercial, maritime and free founded on the sanctity of property as much at home as abroad, in the metropolis and in the colonies.”¹²⁸

In brief, the British empire was conceived by contemporaries as a fundamentally unique empire. It was a “free and virtuous empire, founded in consent and nurtured in liberty and trade.”¹²⁹ It was “Protestant, commercial, maritime and free” in opposition to Catholic Spain and France.¹³⁰ In America, said Arthur Young, “Spain, Portugal and France have planted despotisms; only Britain liberty.”¹³¹ As David Armitage summarizes, the British empire was “everything that the aspirant universal monarchies of seventeenth-century were not, and could not be – an empire for liberty.”¹³² Of course, with the Stamp Act, this ideology of a benign British empire was shattered. But the discourse of British exceptionalism reveals that the Americans did not so much invent a novel conception of expansion and empire as they did appropriate and rearticulate the idioms and ideology of their former imperial master. After all, American revolutionaries did not at first revolt: Working from the ideology of the British empire as an identity of interests, right, and peoples, they hoped only that Parliament would more properly enact the ideology. The problem – from the Americans’ standpoint – was that King George III was corrupt, deviating from the true tradition and ideals of the British empire. So when the Americans embarked on the revolutionary path, they did so with reluctance. And they did so only to try to enact the ideals already laid down for them by the very imperial masters they sought to cast off. They aimed for a more perfect union rather than an entirely different one.¹³³

¹²⁵ As quoted in *ibid.*, p. 27. See also Steele (1998), p. 112.

¹²⁶ Armitage (2000), pp. 181–95.

¹²⁷ Marshall (2005), p. 73.

¹²⁸ Armitage (2000), p. 188.

¹²⁹ Greene (1998), p. 122.

¹³⁰ Armitage (2000), pp. 173–82.

¹³¹ Greene (1998), p. 223.

¹³² Armitage (2000), p. 195.

¹³³ See Onuf (1987), Onuf (2000).

Empire of Liberty?

What remains, then, of the notion that American expansion in the nineteenth century was an “exception”? It is not that expansion was devoid of colonial rule: The territorial system was even more authoritarian than British colonialism. Nor is it that Americans articulated a liberal imperial identity in opposition to other empires; the British had already prefigured that move. It might even be said that *all* empires conceive of themselves as unique, special, and exceptional. The only thing that remains is the fact that the territories, although subjected to colonialism, were *eventually* admitted into the Union as equal states. This remains one of the key bases for exceptionalists who resist the claim that American expansion was “imperial” and who, therefore, see no warrant for comparing the United States with the British empire.¹³⁴

Still, even this presumably exceptional dimension of American expansion is rightly subject to question. First, incorporating colonized lands and peoples as equal entities in a political formation is not unique to American expansion. The Russian, Ottoman, and Chinese empires all had imperial systems at one point or another whereby territories were incorporated as equal units. France’s “assimilation” strategy was also incorporative in important respects. And England had incorporated Wales and Scotland as equally subject parts of the realm.¹³⁵

Second, America’s “empire for liberty” that incorporated territories as states did not apply to everyone. For nonwhites, it was as repressive as any stereotypical empire. To be sure, slavery was a vital part of America’s imperial formation, yet it was not abolished until 1865. The British empire had abolished slavery much earlier, in 1833.¹³⁶ Furthermore, territorial expansion was a fundamentally racialized process. Whereas white settlers may have initially welcomed territorial annexation by the federal government, there were thousands upon thousands of inhabitants whose wishes were never consulted. Native Americans, freed blacks, Creoles, and various populations of varied Spanish and Mexican descent were essentially forced into accepting U.S. sovereignty.¹³⁷ In New Mexico, as we have seen, many of these groups violently resisted annexation from the outset. Furthermore, once subjected to U.S. sovereignty, these populations remained imperial subjects.¹³⁸ “The Empire of Liberty was to be made up of one people, dedicated to liberty under republican institutions,”

¹³⁴ “American nationalism and American imperialism are unique in world history and cannot be understood by comparison to other nationalisms or imperialism.” Weeks (1996), p. x.

¹³⁵ On the Russian empire, see Lieven (1999), pp. 180–1, Lieven (2002), and Burbank and Hagen (2007). For a good comparison between Russian and U.S. expansion, see Cooper and Burbank (2010), pp. 251–86. On the Ottoman empire, see Barkey (2008). On France, see Betts (1961), Conklin (1998), and Deming Lewis (1962).

¹³⁶ The other areas in the British empire that did not abolish slavery included the possessions of the East India Company, Ceylon, and St. Helena.

¹³⁷ Sparrow (2006), p. 25

¹³⁸ On Jefferson and African Americans, see Onuf (2000), pp. 147–88. On the genesis of American ethnoculturalism and identity, see Kaufmann (1999).

explain Tucker and Hendrickson. “There was to be no place here for subjects, only for citizens. This was why, in principle, Negroes could have no permanent position within the palladium of freedom and why, in practice, Indians as well had to be excluded from it.”¹³⁹

Indeed, the American state’s dealings with Native Americans is exemplary of the racialized character of America’s empire of liberty. As noted earlier, the military repeatedly waged war on Native Americans and seized their land. The federal government justified this process by the “right of discovery” doctrine inherited from the British imperial system. In the 1823 Supreme Court case, *Johnson v. M’Intosh*, the Native Americans’ “right of occupancy” was subordinated to the United States’ “right of discovery” (i.e. white man discovers brown men and women already living on land, but because the discoverer is white, he was there first).¹⁴⁰ Then came the Indian Removal Act under President Jackson in 1830, which was followed by a violent appropriation of Native Americans’ land. By 1837, the Jackson administration had managed to remove 46,000 Native Americans from their land, thereby opening up yet more territory for white settlement.¹⁴¹ To Jackson, the Native American population was not even worthy of treaty. They were “subjects” plain and simple, and for the federal government to negotiate treaties with subjects was an “absurdity.”¹⁴² The Supreme Court shared this view. In its 1823 decision, it declared that Indians were “an inferior race of people, without the privileges of citizens, and under the perpetual protection and pupilage of the government.”¹⁴³

From Continental Colonialism to Overseas Empire

America’s treatment of Native Americans is informative, but even that does not tell everything about the American empire during its ascendancy. If we look beyond the North American continent, we find the limits of the exceptionalist narrative in their starkest form still. The American state conquered the continent, and it also extended its reach overseas. Part of this extension took the form of military rule over foreign lands, turning them into de facto protectorates. The story should be familiar: the Platt Amendment in Cuba’s constitution in 1902 followed by bouts of occupation; military occupation of Nicaragua (1912–1925); invasion and occupation of the Dominican

¹³⁹ Tucker and Hendrickson (1990), p. 161. Schemes were proposed for governing these peoples in ways that *might* lead to eventual liberty. Jefferson believed, for example, that only if African Americans were transplanted back to Africa might they become able to attain liberty. But for the time, and even in the long run, the empire of liberty was aimed at whites only. Hence, three years after the 1787 Northwest Ordinance was enacted, the Naturalization Act of 1790 made citizenship a possibility only for “free whites.”

¹⁴⁰ Tomlins (2001), pp. 335–6.

¹⁴¹ See Wallace (1993).

¹⁴² Prucha (1994), p. 153.

¹⁴³ See for an excellent discussion of this status, Wald (1992), p. 90.

Republic (1916–1924) and Haiti (1915–1934).¹⁴⁴ But the overseas empire did not just involve such temporary occupations. It also involved direct and prolonged colonial rule.

In 1898, the United States declared sovereignty over Hawaii and former Spanish colonies of Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines, and the “Moro” islands of the Philippine archipelago. It later took half of Samoa (1900); the entire Panama Canal Zone (1903), holding approximately 62,00 inhabitants; and the Virgin Islands (1917), with over 26,000 inhabitants (at least 19,000 of whom were classified as “Negro” by the Census).¹⁴⁵ The significance of these acquisitions for U.S. imperialism cannot be overstated. On the one hand, they can be seen as a continuation of westward expansion. Commenting on the Treaty of Paris in 1898 by which the United States acquired Spain’s former colonies, the London *Times* observed:

The signing of the Treaty of Paris . . . marks the beginning of a policy of expansion that seems wholly at variance with the traditional aims of American statesmen. . . . But . . . the new foreign policy is not so alien to the national character or so much at variance with the previous history of the Republic as might at first sight appear. The Anglo-Americans have at bottom the imperial instincts of the great governing and conquering race from which they are sprung. . . . By swift steps they have carried the dominion of the Republic from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and have conquered, both politically and economically, a vast extent of territory.

On the other hand, the new acquisitions marked something comparably new. First, unlike previous territories on the western frontier, the new overseas territories were not accompanied by the arrival of white settlers. Except for Hawaii, white settlement was minimal. Instead, the U.S. military first occupied the territories and were later replaced by civilian administrators from the mainland. This was a form of administrative colonialism rather than settler colonialism: A handful of white officials ruled at least two and a half million colonized subjects.

Second, and more importantly, all of the new acquisitions except for Hawaii and Alaska were declared “unincorporated” through a series of Supreme Court cases known as “the insular cases.” The status of unincorporated meant that the territories were “foreign in a domestic sense,” subject to the plenary power of the U.S. Congress, but not afforded the full protection of the American Constitution. Colonial peoples enjoyed some “fundamental rights,” but not all

¹⁴⁴ Perkins (1981).

¹⁴⁵ Population data on Panama from 1912 census figures and for Virgin Islands for 1917 in United States Bureau of the Census (1943). Although traditional scholarship has overlooked this colonial empire, a number of recent works have begun to explore its multiple dimensions. For a comparative overview on colonial governance, see Thompson (2010). The other literature is too large to list in full, but see the essays in McCoy and Scarano (2009). Earlier seminal work includes Perkins (1962) and Pratt (1950). See Kramer (2006) for an excellent discussion of some of the racial dynamics of U.S. rule in the Philippines.

rights, and statehood was not necessarily the end goal.¹⁴⁶ In fact, none of the legal documents that codified the conquests promised that the inhabitants of seized lands would become citizens or that the new colonies would become states. The U.S. Congress was given the right to decide. Given this, William Willoughby (who served as a colonial official in Puerto Rico) accurately stressed that the new acquisitions marked “the development of an entirely new phase in the expansion of the United States.” Whereas previous acquisitions involved “the incorporation of the new territory into the Union upon full equality with the other States,” the new acquisitions meant that the territory under U.S. sovereignty “would have to be divided into two classes having a different political status; the one constituting the United States proper and enjoying full political rights and privileges, and the other dependent territory in subordination to the former and having its form of government and the rights of its inhabitants determined for it.” In short, the United States had “definitely entered the class of nations holding and governing over-sea colonial possessions.”¹⁴⁷

We see here the clear limits of Jefferson’s “empire of liberty” and the exceptionalist narrative. U.S. expansion did not in fact entail the incorporation of all territories as equal states. Instead, the rule of colonial difference was firmly applied. Some territories were states with equal citizens; other territories and peoples were rendered dependent and subordinate.¹⁴⁸ The Supreme Court’s distinction between “incorporated” and “unincorporated” territory encapsulated the difference exactly. Supreme Court Justice Henry Billings Brown clarified that the difference was about race. Whereas contiguous territory in the west had been “inhabited only by people of the same race [e.g. settlers], or by scattered bodies of native Indians,” he said, the new overseas territories represented “differences of race, habits, laws and customs.”¹⁴⁹ The idea was that Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, Chamorros (in Guam), Samoans, Panamanians, and Virgin Islanders were racially inferior and so not worthy of self-government. They did not deserve independence or statehood. What Jacob Schurman of the Philippine Commission said to President McKinley about the Philippines represents the views held of all the colonies: “There is no prospect of their assimilation in any period of time. They are distant from us by the diameter of the earth, the inhabitants are barbarous and they are populous, and . . . we shall have to hold them as perpetual vassals.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Justice White justified the distinction between incorporated and unincorporated by “the precedents of the Louisiana and Florida territories that were, he said, dependencies initially and were later formally incorporated into the United States” [see Leibowitz (1989), p. 23]. For more on the insular cases and “unincorporation,” see Burnett and Marshall (2001) and Sparrow (2006).

¹⁴⁷ Willoughby (1905), pp. 7–8.

¹⁴⁸ As Pratt noted, the United States “acquired not ‘territories’ but possessions or ‘dependencies’ and became, in that sense, an ‘imperial’ power.” Pratt (1950), p. 68.

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in Weiner (2001), p. 71.

¹⁵⁰ Jacob Schurman to Wm. McKinley, Aug. 12, 1898 (MP ser. 1, reel 4).

Keeping the new colonial subjects as vassals is exactly what happened. Congress had to decide what to do with the territories. For Puerto Rico and the Philippines, it passed organic laws that created colonial governments with no end point in clear sight.¹⁵¹ Colonial control was to be extended indefinitely. “There is a period in childhood,” summarized Secretary of War Elihu Root, who was placed in charge of the territories, “during which the obligations of a guardian can not be performed without the power to control the child’s actions.”¹⁵² Guam and Samoa met a similar fate and in some respects a worse one. In their case, Congress did not even enact legislation establishing a proper government. In the absence of congressional action, the two territories were at the mercy of the U.S. president, who could create whatever form of government he wished – including none at all. He ultimately made them (and the U.S. Virgin Islands later) subject to naval control, in effect establishing permanent military governments wherein the naval commander became the de facto colonial governor with autocratic powers.¹⁵³

The notion of “American empire” in this context took on a new meaning. It was not an empire for liberty but rather an overseas colonial empire. Notably, the discourse of American empire heightened in this period to reflect the new meaning. In the *New York Times*, the number of articles using the phrase “our empire” or “American Empire” leaped during the years 1898 to 1901. Some of this empire talk was critical of America’s new ventures. Anti-expansionists such as the Anti-Imperial League were quick to attack the new imperialism.¹⁵⁴ But much of the discourse was not so negative. Supreme Court Justice John Marshall used the term “American Empire” without negative connotation in his rulings on the insular cases.¹⁵⁵ A spate of popular books with titles like *Our Island Empire* also emerged. One unapologetically referred to the United States as an “Imperial State” ruling over a “Federal Empire.”¹⁵⁶ Articles in popular magazines proliferated on the topic. As one writer observed, “‘Colonial’ and ‘Imperial’ are among the terms extensively used, in recent years, in referring to the relations newly assumed by the United States.”¹⁵⁷ In 1906, the *New York Times* pondered not whether the United States was an “empire” (for its articles often spoke of it), but whether it would ever fall.¹⁵⁸ Decades later it had not: In 1930, the *Saturday Evening Post* carried a two-part article,

¹⁵¹ For Puerto Rico, the Foraker Act of 1900; for the Philippines, the Philippine Bill of 1902 (aka the Organic Act of 1902). The Philippine Bill of 1902 was “an act to temporarily provide for the administration of the affairs of civil government in the Philippine Islands” (*US Statutes at Large*, 1902, vol. 32, p. 691); while the Foraker act was also “an act to temporarily provide revenues and a civil government” (*US Statutes at Large*, 1900, vol. 31, p. 77).

¹⁵² Root to Lowell, Feb. 11, 1904 (USNA, RG 350, entry 364–2).

¹⁵³ On Samoa, see Gray (1960); for Guam, see Thompson (1944).

¹⁵⁴ See Murphy (2009), Schirmer (1972), and Welch (1979).

¹⁵⁵ *New York Times*, Jan. 9, 1901, p. 7.

¹⁵⁶ Morris (1899); Snow (1902).

¹⁵⁷ Pierce (1903), p. 43.

¹⁵⁸ *New York Times*, Aug. 6, 1906, p. 9.

“The American Empire,” offering a “concise compendium of the American empire.”¹⁵⁹

The fact that America’s new empire was neither of nor for liberty had ramifications. In the Philippines, a group of landed elites based in Luzon, joining others around the archipelago, had already begun a war of independence from Spain by the time Admiral Dewey entered Manila Bay in 1898. Led by General Emilio Aguinaldo, they had declared an independent Philippine Republic with its own constitution and legislature at the town of Malolos. The sudden arrival of the Americans during the Spanish-American War was not a welcomed contingency. The revolutionaries had already been fighting Spain; they were not open to facing yet another imperial master. The result was a war of national liberation that became, from the Americans’ side, a war of conquest. Ultimately the war claimed some 400,000 Filipino lives and the lives of 4,000 U.S. soldiers.¹⁶⁰

During the war, atrocities abounded (unsurprisingly, because many of the U.S. military had prior experience against Native Americans in the west). In 1901, Brig. General Jacob Smith vowed to turn the island of Samar into a “howling wilderness.” He ordered: “I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn, and the more you kill and burn the better you will please me. I want all persons killed who are capable of bearing arms in actual hostilities against the United States.” The age limit was ten. Civilians were killed along with those bearing arms. Villages were burned and work animals slaughtered. Samar’s population subsequently dropped by at least 50,000 over the next five months.¹⁶¹ In other parts of the archipelago, the U.S. military deployed torturing techniques that would later resurface in Vietnam and Iraq. The primary one was the “water cure,” known today as “water boarding.” A. F. Miller of the 32nd Volunteer Infantry Regiment explained it: “Now, this is the way we give them the water cure. Lay them on their backs, a man standing on each hand and each foot, then put a round stick in the mouth and pour a pail of water in the mouth and nose, and if they don’t give up pour in another pail. They swell up like toads. I’ll tell you it’s a terrible torture.”¹⁶²

The war officially lasted for three years, but so-called insurgents fighting for independence continued to resist occupation over the next decades. But if the denial of independence summoned anti-imperial resistance among some revolutionaries, the denial of statehood summoned resignation and resentment among others. In the Philippines, a small group of wealthy men in Manila (leaders of the Philippine Federal Party) had made statehood their goal. These elites were distinct from the revolutionaries in the countryside: They had quickly collaborated with American occupation under the impression that statehood was

¹⁵⁹ Hard (1930), p. 12.

¹⁶⁰ On the war, see among others Linn (2000), May (1991), and Shaw and Francia (2002).

¹⁶¹ Quote from Coats (2008), p. 196.

¹⁶² Quote from Pettigrew (1920), p. 285.

a real possibility.¹⁶³ Yet U.S. officials, not to mention Congress, consistently brushed away their demands for incorporation. After many failed attempts, and after some of them experienced the racism of their colonial masters first-hand at the St. Louis Exposition of 1904, their calls for statehood quieted. They astutely recognized the limits of America's empire of liberty and the expanse of its racism at once.¹⁶⁴

In Puerto Rico, demands for statehood had also been registered from the very outset of military occupation. Juan Nieves summarized the attitude of his educated peers in 1898: "Puerto Rico, annexed, living under the shelter of the model Republic, will be a prosperous, happy and respected people." Nieves added that the very reason why the Puerto Ricans had been so quick to accept American occupation and turn their backs on Spain was because the people expected "to be constituted as a State, free, within the American Union."¹⁶⁵ Many of the Puerto Rican elite had had some knowledge of American continental expansion and were hopeful that the "grand empire . . . which began in California, Texas, and Florida" (as one of their leaders put it) would incorporate Puerto Rico similarly.¹⁶⁶ The Puerto Rican elite saw continuity between America's continental past and its overseas present, and their political demands followed. They believed, as the exceptionalist narrative would have them believe, that the United States would offer them an equal stake in the empire of liberty as an incorporated territory. What they did not foresee was the racism of their new imperial masters, which contributed to repeated rejections of their calls for statehood status. Subsequently, many Puerto Ricans became disillusioned with U.S. rule. Although they had never done so before, some even began calling for national independence.¹⁶⁷

As neither national independence nor statehood was given to Puerto Rico and the Philippines, the two colonies were instead subjected to control by Washington. Both initially faced military governments whereby military governors ruled according to their whims. The subsequent civilian administrations concentrated power too. The governor general of the territories was invariably a white U.S. citizen appointed by the U.S. president. Some local representation was offered through executive councils and legislative assemblies, but the governor general and his peers from the mainland wielded ultimate control. These were autocratic regimes akin to the territorial governments in the west, yet there was no hope of later transitioning to statehood. Likewise, Puerto Ricans and Filipinos were denied rights afforded U.S. citizens. The Supreme Court and Congress decided that they were not U.S. citizens even though they were subject to the control of the U.S. government. Later, in 1916, Congress indeed passed the Jones Act, granting Puerto Ricans citizenship, but this was an

¹⁶³ Federal Party of the Philippine Islands (1905). See more in Paredes (1988).

¹⁶⁴ On the Exposition, see Kramer (1999).

¹⁶⁵ Nieves (1898), pp. 9–10.

¹⁶⁶ Rivero Méndez (1922), p. 411.

¹⁶⁷ I discuss these matters in detail in Go (2008a).

emergency measure designed to shore up Puerto Rican support for the pending war with Germany.¹⁶⁸ And this was a very limited citizenship that was decidedly different from the kind white mainlanders enjoyed. It did not give Puerto Ricans a trial by jury system. It did not grant them the right to vote for the U.S. president, even though the president could send them to war. It did not give them an equal voice in Congress. And if it so desired, Congress could take away even this limited form of citizenship with the stroke of a pen.¹⁶⁹ Democracy, liberty, and citizenship had no place in this new American empire.

But was this *really* an empire? The relations between metropole and colony followed the rule of colonial difference: The United States treated the colonized as inferior, both discursively and by law. Furthermore, it monopolized political control. This was direct political control from above, constituting a formal colonial empire by any stretch of the definition. Still, some might accept that the United States had an overseas colonial empire but dismiss its importance or insist that it was not properly a colonial empire.

Some commentators, for example, admit of America's overseas empire but then insist that it was too small to be significant or worthy of comparison with other empires: America's overseas colonies were "too few and too small to constitute an overseas empire."¹⁷⁰ But this is muddy thinking. A proper comparison should not compare the U.S. empire in the late nineteenth century with the contemporaneous British empire. It should look at the U.S. empire in the late nineteenth century with the British empire before 1815, that is, when the British empire too was only developing and when the British state was only ascending in power. Doing so reveals less difference than similarity. Before 1815, the British empire was small too. As David Fieldhouse notes in his comparative survey, Britain's overseas territories "could not compare in size, wealth, population or civilization with such Spanish possessions as New Spain or Peru. The British colonies were young. . . and in 1715 they did not cover the eastern seaboard of North America let alone their hinterlands."¹⁷¹ Are we to say that, because it was small, this was not an "empire"?

Even as the eighteenth century wore on, the British empire only consisted of scattered holdings on the east coast of the United States, a few Caribbean islands, and trading ports dotting parts of Asia and Africa (see Figure 1.4). This was not substantially larger than America's colonial empire in the early twentieth century. That empire included Alaska, Hawaii, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, Samoa, the Virgin Islands, the Panama Canal Zone, and a host of other areas temporarily occupied, such as Cuba, the Dominican Republic,

¹⁶⁸ Carrión (1983), p. 199.

¹⁶⁹ On issues of empire and citizenship regarding Puerto Rico, see Cabranes (1979), Duffy Burnett (2008), and Erman (2008).

¹⁷⁰ See Pagden (2005), p. 54; Rauchway (2006), pp. 13–15. See also Subrahmanyam (2006), p. 227, Maier (2006), Leopold (1966), and Winks (1997), p. 150.

¹⁷¹ Fieldhouse (1982), p. 57.



FIGURE 1.4. Map of the British Empire in 1815.

and Haiti. This list even excludes America's vast western territories. An astute article in the *New York Times* in 1925 was on the mark:

For the American Empire there is, indeed, no precedent. . . . Consider the unemotional geography of it. The area of the thirteen original States was 892,135 square miles. That was seven times the size of the United Kingdom. . . . The twentieth century is still young, yet already this formidable Bird of Prey has swooped upon the Philippines, Panama, Cuba, Haiti, and Porto Rico [sic]. And the territory of the United States has grown from 900,000 miles to four times that area. We may fairly ask: What conquests had Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar or Winston Churchill to match with these?¹⁷²

Some have pointed to the lack of a colonial office to suggest that the U.S. empire was not really an empire proper.¹⁷³ It is true that the various overseas colonies were administered by different agencies in the aftermath of 1898. Alaska and Hawaii were run by the Interior Department, which had previously administered America's western territories. Puerto Rico and the Philippines were administered in the War Department by the Bureau of Insular Affairs. The Virgin Islands, Guam, and Samoa were run by the Navy Department. Meanwhile, the Bureau of Indian Affairs dealt with Native American issues. Nonetheless, there was some centralization. For example, the Bureau of Insular Affairs also had oversight over the Panama Canal Zone, the Dominican Republic occupation, and the Haitian occupation, just as it oversaw Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Furthermore, in 1934, President Roosevelt established the Division of Territories and Island Possessions in the Interior Department that finally centralized territorial administration. This became the colonial office proper.¹⁷⁴

Even the British empire did not always have a strong centralized colonial office. The British Colonial Office was not established until the 1850s – that is, at the height of British supremacy and after centuries upon centuries of colonial expansion. Before that, no proper colonial office could be found. There was only a small office that had been part of the Secretary of State's office for War and Colonies. Even in the 1770s, after at least a century or more of overseas establishments, there was no centralized colonial apparatus: “[N]o central machinery for the government of the first British Empire existed.”¹⁷⁵ Instead, there were different departments with no clear jurisdictions, and they did not even deal exclusively in colonial affairs.¹⁷⁶ Probably up until the 1850s at least, Parliament had much of the power (a fact that shows how American congressional involvement in dealing with America's empire is not unique).¹⁷⁷ So if we compare the two empires during their respective periods of hegemonic ascent (say, the United States in 1934 when the Division of Territories and Island Possessions was established, compared with the late 1700s when Britain

¹⁷² Wilson (1925).

¹⁷³ See Leopold (1966) and Winks (1997) among others.

¹⁷⁴ Pomeroy (1944).

¹⁷⁵ Quoted in Marshall (2003), p. 173.

¹⁷⁶ Marshall (2005), p. 74; see also Davis and Huttenback (1988), pp. 12–15 and Manning (1965).

¹⁷⁷ Marshall (2003), pp. 178–9.

had no comparable office), it is the British empire that looks wanting, not the American empire.¹⁷⁸

Still, it might be suggested that if this was indeed a proper American empire, it was nonetheless too short-lived to merit attention. Some have asserted that “the infatuation with empire subsided as quickly as it had arisen.”¹⁷⁹ Supposedly, Americans no longer had the stomach for colonialism, even if they once did initially. “If for a brief period at the turn of the century things appeared differently,” writes one political scientist, “the outlook quickly returned to normal.”¹⁸⁰ If this were the case, exceptionalists would be right to brush American colonialism under the rug, sight unseen. It was just a deviation, the exception that proves the rule.

But what is evidence for the assertion? Part of it lies in the rise of “Wilsonianism” after 1912, when the Democratic Party took charge from the Republicans. The assumption is that President Woodrow Wilson represented anti-colonialism. With his presidency, America’s true anticolonial character finally triumphed. Did not Wilson’s famous Fourteen Points speech in 1918 famously express America’s exceptional character? Did it not affirm self-government for all peoples and portend a new American order in which the empires of old would pass away to be replaced by a world of equal nation-states?

Yet, Wilsonianism did not equal anticolonialism. When President Wilson spoke of “national self-determination,” he did not mean it for all colonized peoples of the world. Strategically directed toward keeping the Allies in the war, his discourse of self-determination was meant only for southeast Europe. It was not directed at America’s own dependencies.¹⁸¹ Wilson’s secretary of state, Robert Lansing, expressly stated that Wilson’s principle of self-determination

¹⁷⁸ Even if we look at the British apparatus later, in 1892, the Colonial Office listed only 2,400 personnel as running the empire, whereas the total during the previous thirty years had been less than 1,000. This excludes the India office, which had in 1896 about 3,000 personnel, many of whom were Indian; hence Davis and Huttenback estimate that the empire was “managed by less than 6,000 souls!” Davis and Huttenback (1988), p. 14. It is also the case that there was an informal colonial service in the U.S. empire whereby officials circulated through and across the empire. Personnel from the Bureau of Insular Affairs had served in the colonies and vice-versa. Staff in the colonial states in Puerto Rico also served in the Philippines or Guam; colonial governors of the Virgin Islands also served in Samoa, and so on. In the imperial metropole, too, there was circulation and career making through America’s imperial experience. Elihu Root, who oversaw colonial governments in Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Samoa, and Guam from his position as Secretary of War later became Secretary of State and won the Nobel Prize. William H. Taft was the first civil governor of the Philippine Islands and later became president. The man who would become President Harding had served as Chairman of the Senate Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions (ca. 1916). Felix Frankfurter, a law officer in the Bureau of Insular Affairs supervising America’s colonial empire, later became a U.S. Supreme Court Justice. After serving as governor of the Philippines, Henry Stimson became the U.S. Secretary of State (1929–1933) and U.S. Secretary of War (1940–5) and oversaw the expansion of U.S. forces during the Second World War (and recommended the use of the atomic bomb on Japan).

¹⁷⁹ Ninkovich (1999), p. 25. See also Smith (1994), p. 149.

¹⁸⁰ Smith (1994), p. 149.

¹⁸¹ Lynch (2002), Manela (2006), pp. 22–34.

did not apply to “races, peoples, or communities whose state of barbarism or ignorance deprive them of the capacity to choose intelligently their political affiliations.”¹⁸² Presumably this included America’s overseas colonies, which is why Wilson did little to nothing to decolonize the U.S. empire. Wilson signed the Jones Act, giving citizenship to Puerto Ricans, but this was a practical exigency that had no impact on Puerto Ricans’ existing colonial status. If anything, it perpetuated their subjection as an “unincorporated territory.”¹⁸³ And two years earlier, in 1916, Wilson had initiated a military occupation of Haiti that lasted until 1935.

In fact, the Wilson administration *added* to America’s colonial holdings. In 1917, the United States officially took possession of the Danish Virgin Islands. Under the threat of force, Lansing had persuaded Denmark to sell the islands to the United States for \$25 million (the most it had ever spent on acquiring territory).¹⁸⁴ Subsequently, the U.S. government controlled the islands as a colonial dependency. The first bill introduced into the House to set up a colonial government vested all powers in the president. In House hearings over the bill, Congressman J. Willard Ragsdale noticed this and pointedly said to Secretary Lansing that the bill would essentially “create an absolute monarchy, without any supervision over the subject by either branch of Congress.” To this, Lansing simply responded: “In the island of Guam we have that to-day, identically.”¹⁸⁵ As a result, the 26,000 inhabitants of the Virgin Islands, the majority of whom were of African descent, were quickly subjected to the autocratic control of naval governors (some of whom had served in Samoa). When criticisms of U.S. rule surfaced from the so-called Negro press in the islands, governors responded by imprisoning editors or deporting them as “undesirable aliens.”¹⁸⁶ All the while, they urged Washington to keep the existing system intact rather than grant territorial government or statehood. Governor Sumner Kittelle told President Warren in 1922 that “above all the white element [in the islands] must remain in the lead and in supreme control.”¹⁸⁷ Such was the system that Wilson’s presidency inaugurated, some twenty years after America’s 1898 initial foray into colonial empire. Colonialism was hardly a passing phase; it was enduring rather than abjured.

Other evidence has been culled to suggest that America’s colonialism was fleeting. For instance, the United States eventually granted independence to the Philippines. According to this story, the United States took the Philippines and other small colonies but did not really mean to stay long. So, after realizing it didn’t have the stomach for formal European-style empire, it quickly gave its empire away.¹⁸⁸ Yet this is hardly special. Britain eventually gave independence

¹⁸² Lansing quoted in Manela (2006), p. 24.

¹⁸³ Gatell (1960–1961); Fernandez (1996), pp. 62–77.

¹⁸⁴ Boyer (1983), pp. 83–4.

¹⁸⁵ United States House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs (1917), p. 6.

¹⁸⁶ Lewis (1972), pp. 52–3.

¹⁸⁷ Gov. Kittelle to Harding, 27 Feb, 1922, quoted in Boyer (1983), pp. 115–16.

¹⁸⁸ See Ravenal (2009) and Schwabe (1986), p. 17, among others.

to colonies like India. Is this to say that colonialism for Britain was a passing phase too?¹⁸⁹ More to the point, the granting of independence to the Philippines was not preordained. American officials did not plan for its independence from the get-go; nor did they easily cut and run. When soon-to-be President Harding was chairman of the Senate Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions in 1916, he insisted that the United States could not withdraw from the Philippines: “I think it is impossible for us to honorably withdraw.”¹⁹⁰ As late as 1922, Franklin Roosevelt wrote to his friend Leonard Wood in the Philippines: “The vast majority of people in this country, I have always been certain, understand that complete independence for all these peoples is not to be thought of for many years to come.”¹⁹¹ That same year, Secretary of War John W. Weeks spoke for himself and President Harding, saying to a New York newspaper, “I am not in favor of granting immediate independence to the Philippines, and the President is not.”¹⁹² In 1927, the Philippine legislature passed a bill asking for a plebiscite that would enable the Philippine people to express their views on whether they should get independence. The governor general at the time, Leonard Wood, vetoed the bill, and President Coolidge gave his wholehearted support of the veto.¹⁹³ Nor was this against the wishes of the American public. Gallup polls in 1938 showed that 76 percent were against granting independence to the Philippines.¹⁹⁴ All the while, members of the Philippine political class clamored for concrete moves toward independence, sending independence missions to Washington in 1919, 1922, 1923, 1924, and 1925. These were to no avail.¹⁹⁵ The U.S. government eventually did pass the Hawes-Cutting Act in 1933, which declared that the Philippines would receive independence in ten years’ time.¹⁹⁶ This, however, was against the desires of President Hoover and his administration. And those who did support the bill did not act on behalf of America’s anticolonial values or Wilsonian principles. Supporters of the bill were largely farm and labor lobbies who, faced with the Great Depression, wanted Philippine independence to halt economic competition from Philippine products and workers.¹⁹⁷

This suggests that the United States has hardly been the reluctant imperialist. To be sure, the *only* colony of all America’s unincorporated territories to receive independence in this period was the Philippines. The rest – including Puerto

¹⁸⁹ If we consider the actual amount of time India was subject to Crown control (as opposed to the control of the East India Company), the time is not that different from America’s rule over the Philippines. India was directly ruled by the Crown from 1857 to 1946.

¹⁹⁰ Forbes (1945), p. 374.

¹⁹¹ Roosevelt quoted in Dulles and Ridinger (1955), p. 3.

¹⁹² Forbes (1945), p. 374.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

¹⁹⁴ Gallup poll reported in Gallup and Robinson (1938) p. 389.

¹⁹⁵ Churchill (1983).

¹⁹⁶ Hoover vetoed the bill in 1932. The U.S. Senate overrode the veto in 1933. This bill did not pass the Philippine Senate, and so the actual bill that ensured Philippine independence was the 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act that was nearly identical to the Hawes-Cutting Act.

¹⁹⁷ Friend (1963), pp. 511–14.

Rico, Guam, Samoa, and the U.S. Virgin Islands – continued to be tied to the United States in various respects through World War II. If the empire constructed after 1898 was merely a passing fancy, and if independence for the Philippines is to be taken as proof, we would expect America's other colonies to be decolonized as well. But they were not. And this was in spite of continued protests from the islands' inhabitants. A petition to Congress from political elites in Guam in 1917 requested citizenship and the end of arbitrary U.S. rule, but it was ignored. Similar petitions were sent in 1925, 1929, 1933, 1947, and 1950. All were dismissed or ignored.¹⁹⁸ Similar requests emerged in Samoa, one of which in the 1920s had led to a violent rebellion. But these were ignored too.¹⁹⁹ Americans in Washington remained deaf to the voices of their imperial subjects just as King George had been to those Americans' forefathers.

This is one among many facets of America's rise to global dominance that has been too long obscured in traditional stories of American uniqueness and exceptionalism. As seen in this chapter, there were many ways in which the United States was imperial during its period of ascent. All of them reveal that the U.S. empire was not a deviation from its British predecessor but a worthy variant that often drew inspiration from it. It remains to be seen whether the U.S. empire has been as special, unique, or different as exceptionalist thought would have us believe.

¹⁹⁸ See Perez Hattori (1995) and Hofschneider (2001).

¹⁹⁹ Chappell (2000).