

**Patterns of Empire**  
*The British and American Empires,  
1688 to the Present*

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## Introduction

### *Empires in Comparison*

We covet no territory, and we have no imperialistic ambitions.

– Sumner Welles, U.S. Secretary of State (1941)

America has never been an empire. We may be the only great power in history that had the chance, and refused.

– President George W. Bush (2000)

Our nations covet no territory . . . only a safer world.

– Donald Rumsfeld on the United States and Britain in Iraq (2003)

America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire. The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. We were born out of revolution against an empire. We were founded upon the ideal that all are created equal, and we have shed blood and struggled for centuries to give meaning to those words – within our borders, and around the world.

– President Barack H. Obama (2009)

These utterances by America's prominent statesmen represent a longstanding tradition of thought called "exceptionalism." According to this tradition of thought, the United States has always been different from other countries. Unlike European nations, it lacks a feudal past. Born of an anticolonial revolution against a monarchy, it clings interminably to egalitarian, democratic, and liberal ideals. Because of this unique history and national character, the United States has never been an empire, nor could it ever be. George W. Bush's claim that America is "the only great power in history that had the chance [to be an empire] and refused" is one expression among many of this exceptionalist theme. Traditional scholarship on American foreign policy has espoused the same idea, consciously avoiding terms like "imperialism" or "empire," and instead using terms like "diplomacy." "One of the central themes of American historiography," observed the historian William A. Williams in 1955, "is that there is no American empire."<sup>1</sup>

One goal of this book is to critically reconsider these claims about exceptionalism. On what grounds can we say that the United States has been special, different, or "exceptional"? Can we rightfully assert that the United States has never been an empire? Is exceptionalism a useful way for thinking about America's past and present standing in the world?

In addressing these questions, this book will argue that exceptionalism obscures more than it reveals. As a set of claims about what is or is not, and as a mode of thought, exceptionalism should be rejected. Yet in making this case, the point is not simply to assert exceptionalism's opposite and declare that the United States is and always has been an empire. Such a declaration would not be new. Revisionist historians in the tradition of William A. Williams have already mounted assaults on exceptionalism by unearthing America's real imperial history. Highlighting America's westward expansion, its treatment of Native Americans, the acquisition of overseas colonies like the Philippines, and America's multiple military interventions around the world, these scholars and their successors have already shown us some of the ways in which the United States has been an empire. An additional line of scholarship, which we might think of as "neo-revisionist" scholarship has added further insights, scrutinizing not just America's imperial history, but also how that history has been erased in popular consciousness. According to this scholarship, attempts to deny empire are but predictable manifestations of an "historical amnesia" — a "denial and displacement" of America's indisputable imperial history.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, if there's anything exceptional about America's empire at all, it is only that it is an "empire that dare not speak its name." As Niall Ferguson puts it, "the great thing about the American empire is that so many Americans disbelieve in its existence."<sup>3</sup> Denying empire is simply part of the unique *modus operandi* of American empire itself.

There remain those who still insist that the United States was never a proper "empire."<sup>4</sup> Still, the growing acceptance of revisionist histories means that critiquing exceptionalism by reiterating America's imperial past is not sufficient. Calling the United States an empire does not have the potency it might have once had.<sup>5</sup> In fact, despite the charges of neo-revisionists that America's empire is an empire in denial, popular discourse has become increasingly willing to call a spade a spade. The phrase "American empire" appeared in one thousand news stories over a single six-month period in 2003. During the early years of the Iraq War, the discourse continued, leading the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* to declare that "the concept of America as world empire, so controversial as to be almost unsayable just a few months ago, is now close to conventional

<sup>2</sup> See among others Jacobson (1999), Judis (2004), Kaplan (1993), Kaplan (2003a).

<sup>3</sup> Ferguson (2004).

<sup>4</sup> See Ravenal (2009) and Suri (2009).

<sup>5</sup> "The concept of American-as-imperium, a notion once employed only by scholars of a decidedly revisionist bent or by radical activists... has achieved a surprising amount of respectability of late." McMahon (2007), p. 82.

wisdom." Even officials have uttered the once unutterable. In 2003, a senior-level advisor to President George W. Bush stated: "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality."<sup>6</sup> Nor was this specific to the post-9/11 era. Earlier, in 2000, Richard Haas of the State Department urged Americans to "re-conceive their global role from one of a traditional nation-state to an imperial power."<sup>7</sup>

America's so-called amnesia and denial have abated. Apparently, the United States is not always an empire that dare not speak its name. For these reasons, a passionate declaration that there is an American empire would do little in itself to either critique exceptionalism or enrich our understanding of American power in the world. As the pundit Robert Kaplan wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "It is a cliché these days to observe that the United States now possesses a global empire... It is time to move beyond statements of the obvious."<sup>8</sup> I agree. A different approach is needed. Accordingly, this book raises and addresses new questions — the very questions invoked by the growing acceptance of revisionist thought. If the United States is and has always been an empire, does this mean that it is exactly the same as other empires? If it is not exactly the same, in what ways has it been distinct? If the United States is no longer an empire that "dare not speak its name," what remains of the notion of American distinctiveness, of something different or unique about America's global power? And what accounts for any similarities or differences we might find?

Revisionist historians have opened up these questions about America's similarity or difference with other empires by alerting us to America's long-standing and widespread imperial practices. But they have not yet answered them. These are *comparative* questions and, a few exceptions aside, comparative investigations of the U.S. empire are remarkably absent. This is a glaring omission. Conventional exceptionalist thought and revisionist criticisms all depend on comparison. To say that the United States is an "exception" is to say that it is an exception to a rule against which American distinctiveness can be measured. Similarly, to insist as revisionists do that the United States is and has always been an empire is to claim that it fits into the rule rather than deviates from it; that it is like or akin to something else. It is to suggest that the United States has exhibited features or enacted policies similar to those of other empires such that it is worthy of being called an empire in the first place. In other words, both exceptionalism and the revisionist critique are predicated on a silent and unstated understanding of other empires. They both depend on asserting an imperial "rule" or pattern against which American distinctiveness is to be measured or rejected. Their claims therefore conjure the need to look beyond the American empire, investigate other empires, and see how they fare in light of each other. Answering *any* questions about what is similar or different about

<sup>6</sup> Suskind (2004), p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Bacevich (2002), p. 219.

<sup>8</sup> Kaplan (2003b), p. 66.

the American empire demands a sustained systematic comparison that puts America's empire, both past and present, into a broader frame.<sup>9</sup>

Take, for instance, the British empire.

### Turning to Britain

It is well known that Britain forged one of the largest and most powerful empires in the world over the course of the nineteenth century. This was an empire that reached down to Africa and back up to India, across to Hong Kong and down to Australia. Britain was also the world's preeminent military and economic power in the nineteenth century – sending its gunboats, money, and missionaries to do the Crown's bidding. An empire indeed. Still, not all Britons were always ready to utter the words “British empire.” Historian Bernard Porter, among others, has shown that most Britons from the early to mid-nineteenth century were either ignorant of their empire or rejected the notion of it.<sup>10</sup> Instead, terms like imperialism and empire in the mid-nineteenth century were most often used to refer to Napoleonic France, not Victorian Britain. Even when it did refer to Victorian Britain, it did not mean empire as we might think of it today. It rather referred to “the United Kingdom of the British Isles and to England in particular.” It was “rarely used in connection with topical issues of foreign affairs.”<sup>11</sup> Only later, in the late decades of the nineteenth century, did more Britons become cognizant of the British empire and come to freely name it. It was only then, at that specific historical moment, when empire talk among Britons proliferated.

These British perceptions and discourses of empire in the nineteenth century are suggestive in various respects. First, they highlight that repressing, rejecting, or denying empire is not particular to the United States. Even people in the largest and most powerful empire of the time were not always quick to admit that they were part of an empire. In fact, some historians and statesmen have taken up the mantle of denial to suggest that a British empire never *really* existed.<sup>12</sup> Second, the Britons' discourse of empire shows a historical trajectory in imperial consciousness not unlike America's. Britons once denied empire but later began to recognize it, admit it, and talk more about it. This proliferation of empire talk among Britons in the late nineteenth century is akin to the proliferation of American empire talk among Americans in more recent years.

<sup>9</sup> Exceptions include Maier (2006) and Porter (2006). These works will be discussed throughout, along with how this book differs significantly from them. A good brief overview comparison between the U.S. and British empires can be found in Howe (2003), and a comparison of historiography can be found in MacDonald (2009). There is an older tradition of comparing British and U.S. imperialism (though this is different from a comparison of “empires”): These include Darby (1987), Liska (1978), Smith (1981), and Winks (1997).

<sup>10</sup> Porter (2004).

<sup>11</sup> Koebner and Schmidt (1964), pp. 145–6.

<sup>12</sup> See Powell (1969), p. 247. Also, historian John Darwin prefaces his recent work, *The Empire Project*, by saying “the British Empire in its heyday was largely a sham.” See Darwin (2009), p. xi. Such claims obviously depend on what one means by the word “empire,” an issue I take up throughout.

If Americans used to deny empire, they have done so less and less since the late twentieth century, just as Britons did in the late nineteenth century. In short, there has been similarity in empire talk and consciousness between Britain and the United States that would go undetected without an explicit comparative analysis. Without placing discourses of empire in comparative light, we would too easily and wrongly assume that denying empire is a distinctly American phenomenon.

The comparison in the present study is premised on the assumption that a systematic and sustained examination of other aspects of empire might likewise yield insights into matters of exceptionalism and empire. It might reveal similarities between America's and Britain's empire not just in discourse, but also in policies and practices. It might also help to unearth differences between the two empires and ultimately facilitate an *explanation* of whatever similarities or differences we might find.

This sustained comparison is what differentiates the present study from the revisionist historians' earlier work and from more recent examinations of U.S. imperialism. Although forthcoming chapters will indeed follow the revisionists' path and explore U.S. imperial history, the point is not to simply to catalog America's imperial interventions or therapeutically utter empire's name – as if that is all that is needed to attain a critical understanding. Rather, by employing a sustained systematic comparison, this book hopes to ascertain what, if anything at all, is distinctive, unique, or exceptional about American empire. It likewise aims to *explain* whatever differences or similarities arise from the comparison. Finally, this book seeks to raise some informed speculations about America's most recent imperial ventures in the early twenty-first century and where they might go. In 1902, the British critic and early theorist of imperialism J. A. Hobson wrote that “history devises reasons why the lessons of past empire do not apply to ours.”<sup>13</sup> At that time, Hobson was criticizing his peers who believed that Britain had nothing to learn from the rise and fall of prior empires like Rome. In regard to the U.S. empire, we might similarly wonder what a consideration of Britain's imperial history has to say about America's imperial present and imperial future – if it has one at all.

First, though, our conceptual apparatus should be laid bare. A large part of what is at stake in our comparison is determining exactly *what it is* that we are comparing. So what exactly is an empire? What about related terms like imperialism or colonialism? After defining these terms, we can better establish the comparison and discuss the theoretical issues underlying it.

### “Empire” and its Modalities

Defining terms like empire or imperialism is not a simple task. These terms carry heavy political and emotional baggage. To some, calling the United States an empire is to unfairly charge it with all kinds of wrongdoing and aggression. Another problem is that meanings shift over time. The word empire in the

<sup>13</sup> Hobson (1902), p. 234.

twentieth century might signify something different than in the eighteenth. To confuse matters even more, scholars sometimes stretch the terms for their theoretical (or political) purposes. V. I. Lenin defined imperialism as a stage of capitalism. Negri and Hardt conceptualize empire as multifaceted abstract relations of power that encompass the globe. Others have spoken of "cultural imperialism" or "economic imperialism."<sup>14</sup>

Definitions cannot be wrong or right. They can only be useful or not. Accordingly, for the purposes of our analysis, this book offers non-normative definitions that begin with elementary points. The goal is not to hurl accusations. Nor is it to narrow the investigation. The goal is offer a conceptual apparatus that can guide our investigation; to mark out some basic conceptual terrain. The trick is to define our terms widely enough so as to be flexible to the reality of history but narrow enough to be analytically robust.

To begin, *power* must be included in the definition. Empires, in their most basic sense, are sociopolitical formations that are constructed and maintained through the exercise of political power. This is not an arbitrary starting point. The word *empire* derives from the Latin term *imperium*, which roughly translates as "sovereignty" or "rule." During Roman times, *imperium* denoted the capacity to wage war and make laws, thereby describing a sphere of authority.<sup>15</sup> Later, during the early modern period in Europe, the term *imperium* took on added layers of meaning. Some usages rendered empire more or less synonymous with *status* or state. Other usages referred to an emperor or central political authority ruling over a distinct if not distant set of territories.<sup>16</sup> When Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, invaded Lorraine in the fifteenth century, he referred to himself as "Emperor and Augustus" because he had come to rule over two territories rather than one. Empire meant a diversity of territory under a single authority.<sup>17</sup> Later, in 1625, Charles I probably meant something similar when he declared Virginia and New England to be part of "our Royal Empire."<sup>18</sup> In all these instances, at the heart of the meaning of empire was political power.

Most scholars today build on this basic notion of empire. On the one hand, scholars have included various dimensions of empire beyond political power: economic, cultural, religious, and even psychological.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, despite these possible multiple dimensions, most scholars would recognize political power as the definitive feature. This is not because political power is most important. Some might say the economy determines everything in the last instance. Yet without the exercise of political power, there is no empire. "Power," writes the historian Dominic Lieven, "in its many manifestations is

<sup>14</sup> Lenin (1939); Hardt and Negri (2001).

<sup>15</sup> Howe (2002), p. 13; Pagden (1995), p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Eisenstadt (1968), p. 41; Howe (2002), p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Pagden (1995), p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Mann's discussion of America's "incoherent empire," for instance, counts four dimensions of power. See Mann (2003).

the core and essence of empire."<sup>20</sup> Sociologist S. N. Eisenstadt writes: "[T]he term 'empire' has normally been used to designate a political system encompassing wide, relatively centralized territories in which the center, as embodied both in the person of the emperor and in the central political institutions, constituted an autonomous entity."<sup>21</sup> Political scientist David Abernathy defines empire in "political terms as a relationship of domination and subordination. . . . The distinctive core feature is political control."<sup>22</sup> Empire, adds anthropologist Fernando Coronil, refers to "relatively large geopolitical formations that establish domination by hierarchically differentiating populations across transregional boundaries."<sup>23</sup>

The concept of empire used in the present study follows from these basic definitions. At the risk of sounding overly schematic, this book defines empire as a sociopolitical formation wherein a central political authority (a king, a metropole, or imperial state) exercises unequal influence and power over the political (and in effect the sociopolitical) processes of a subordinate society, peoples, or space. "A kind of basic, consensus definition," Stephen Howe fruitfully summarizes, "would be that an empire is a large political body which rules over territories outside its original political borders. It has a central power or core territory – whose inhabitants usually continue to form the dominant ethnic or national group in the entire system – and extensive periphery of dominated areas."<sup>24</sup> Other terms used in this book follow accordingly. Empires are involved in *imperialism*, which is the process by which they are established, extended, or maintained. They often have *imperial policies*, which are official and stated plans and practices by which power is exercised.<sup>25</sup> And they formulate various *strategies* and deploy multiple *tactics*, *techniques*, or *modalities* – sometimes unstated or unofficial – to realize their policies and extend or sustain themselves.

Keeping these basic definitions in mind is crucial for analytically differentiating empire and imperialism from other phenomena. First, empire is not the same thing as *economic* power. If a private corporation from a country invests in a weaker country and influences its internal affairs, we might call this "economic imperialism." But in the conceptual apparatus here proposed, this is different from the imperialism of a government. Empire entails political exertions of power by a state. Although such exertions might accompany or support a private corporation's economic exploitation, empire implies that a state is the main agent, and that the state directs, manipulates, or decisively influences the political – rather than just economic – processes and policies of a weaker society. Empire is a sociopolitical relation, not just an economic

<sup>20</sup> Lieven (2005), p. 128.

<sup>21</sup> Eisenstadt (1968) p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> Abernathy (2000), p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Coronil (2007), p. 243. See also Tilly (1997), p. 3 and Doyle (1986), p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> Howe (2002), p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Thornton (1978), p. 3.

one (even though the political operations of empire might entail economic relations).

Empire must also be differentiated from a "great power." A great power is a state with massive military capabilities and/or extensive territory. But such a state would only be an imperial state if the state uses those capabilities to exert influence on other peoples or societies to incorporate them as dependent satellites. A state that has the greatest military in the world but does not use it to construct a hierarchy of power may not necessarily be an empire. The United States may have the greatest military power in the world. It may also cover extensive territory. However, if it does not hold colonial dependencies or does not exert power over other societies, it would not be an empire (this is why the scholar Dominic Lieven, for instance, does not consider the United States today to be an empire, at least in its internal affairs: The "American president does not rule without consent over vast conquered territories and their populations").<sup>26</sup> Of course, states with such internal capabilities, like the United States, often do use their power in imperialistic ways. A state may be a great power and empire at once. The point here is to analytically separate the two. The issue is not whether a state *has* power (like military strength) but *whether* and *how* that power is exercised.<sup>27</sup>

A related distinction is between empire and "hegemony." The concept of hegemony first arose from Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci to refer to a cultural or ideological process, but many scholars who deploy it today often define it as an economic matter. In this conceptualization, a hegemon is a state that enjoys relative preponderance over the world economy. A state enjoys hegemony when it takes up the largest shares of the world's economic activity (measured by relative share of world GDP, for example).<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, hegemony and empire are not the same. A state can have an empire but not dominate the world economy. Similarly, a state can dominate the world economy without being an empire. Moreover, if we define hegemony as cultural influence, this would not be the same as empire either. We might speak of "cultural imperialism" as a modality of imperial power, but we would not define empire as a state that only wields cultural influence.<sup>29</sup> Hollywood may dominate the global film industry, and its values or meanings may indirectly influence peripheral societies, but if the U.S. government does not meddle in the affairs of weaker countries and aim to control their affairs, the United States would not be an empire in our strict sense of the term.

<sup>26</sup> Lieven (2002), p. 79.

<sup>27</sup> Kennedy (1987: 539) defines "great powers" as any "state capable of holding its own against any other nation," a status that in turn depends on the states' relative economic capacities. This is not the same thing as empires and Kennedy states from the outset that his book is not about empires (p. cxxi).

<sup>28</sup> This definition derives from world-systems theory, see Arrighi, Silver, and Ahmad (1999), pp. 26-8; Boswell (1995), pp. 2-4; Wallerstein (2002b). There are other ways to define hegemony of course, but for this book's purposes the economic definition will be used.

<sup>29</sup> On "world leaders," see Modelski (1978), Modelski and Thompson (1996).

Empire is analytically distinguishable from great powers, hegemons, and cultural influence, and there is also wide variation across types or forms of empires. Sociological variations are noteworthy. Typically, empires entail internal diversity, with a dominant group residing at the apex of a sociopolitical hierarchy. Perhaps the most common hierarchy is racialized: One race monopolizes political power to rule over other races who reside in the empire's subordinated areas. This is the image typically invoked when one thinks of European colonial empires in Africa during the late nineteenth century. Yet in our conceptualization, an imperial hierarchy need not be racial. It could be ethnic, linguistic, or religious. In the early modern Spanish empire in the Americas, natives subject to Spanish rule were not always conceived as racially different and inferior in the strict phenotypical sense. They were seen as non-Christians, that is, "pagans."<sup>30</sup> Difference was marked here as religious rather than as a matter of biology, blood, or stock. Another example might be the Ottoman empire, which articulated religion with dynasty such that Islam and the Ottoman family ruled Kurd or Turk elites.<sup>31</sup> The Tsarist Russian empire was not even ethnically or religiously differentiated, but class-based.<sup>32</sup>

Another variation arises in *how* political influence is exercised. At stake here are the forms or modalities of imperial power. One common distinction is between *formal* (direct) and *informal* (or indirect) exercises of power. The first, formal imperialism, refers to direct territorial rule. The imperial state annexes foreign land, declares official control over it, and subordinates the local population. The controlled territory then becomes a *colony* or dependency. This dependency is part of the metropolitan state, but its inhabitants do not enjoy the same rights or privileges as the state's citizens. Formal empire is thus the same as *colonial empires* involving the annexation of territory and direct rule over it.<sup>33</sup> This type of empire is often, although not exclusively, obtained by military conquest. During the Roman period, most emperors were victorious military generals. However, direct formal control can also be established "by invitation" rather than conquest.<sup>34</sup> Or it can be established by unequal treaties, as was often the case with early Europeans and Native American tribes. In any case, this type of direct or colonial empire is usually what most people refer to when they speak of empire in popular discourse. It conjures the image of Spain and its colonies in the Americas, France and its possession of Algeria, or Britain and its rule over India or parts of Africa. Flags are raised. Governors are appointed. Policies for governing the natives are formulated and exercised. States are made.

Variations in formal empires follow. We might think of "settler colonialism," whereby the subordinated colony is dominated by emigrants from the

<sup>30</sup> Seed (1995).

<sup>31</sup> Barkey (2008).

<sup>32</sup> Lieven (2005), p. 139.

<sup>33</sup> On the concept "colonialism," see Fieldhouse and Emerson (1968) and Osterhammel (1999b).

<sup>34</sup> Howe (2002), p. 13.

home land; or "administrative colonialism," whereby a handful of officials from the home land rule over large native populations. D. K. Fieldhouse goes even further, distinguishing between (1) pure settlement colonies (the majority are settlers from the metropole); (2) mixed colonies (settlers live with a larger indigenous population); (3) plantation colonies (a small settler group managing estates for export); (4) occupation colonies (close to no settlers); and (5) trading settlements or naval bases (small areas of land run by a small group of temporary metropolitans).<sup>35</sup> We may think of other subtypes too, such as land-based as opposed to sea-based empires. Or we might order colonial empires chronologically, attending to differences between early modern empires like Spain's or Portugal's and the modern administrative colonial empires of the late nineteenth century established by Europe in Africa or parts of Asia. Even within any single empire, the legal or juridical status of territories and subjects can be variously named and differentially treated, creating a complex of juridically heterogeneous peripheries.

The overarching point is that formal empires involve direct political control over territory and the subjugation of inhabitants of that territory into a status that is lesser, inferior, or dependent. This is the "rule of colonial difference," as Partha Chatterjee (1993) has aptly named it.<sup>36</sup> By this measure of colonial rule, colonized peoples are treated as inferior to citizens in the metropole, both in practice and in juridical theory or official doctrine. Due to their perceived racial, ethnic, or some other kind of distinction, the colonized are not given the same rights and privileges as the colonizer or citizens in the colonizers' home country. In some ways, it is exactly this subjugated status that differentiates colonial empire from pure democratic nation-states or federal states.<sup>37</sup> Nation-states involve citizens. Empires involve *subjects*, not citizens, and the difference between them is an important marker of empire.<sup>38</sup> For Stoler, McGranahan, and Perdue (2007), it is an essential imperial characteristic: "Uncertain domains of jurisdiction and ad hoc exemptions from the law on the basis of race and cultural difference are guiding and defining imperial principles."<sup>39</sup>

Colonialism, as in formal empire, is only one modality of imperial power — one way of exerting influence over societies. There are others. Robinson and Gallagher (1953) famously chided British historians for thinking of the British empire only in terms of its colonies — those parts of the map painted red — when in fact Britain also exercised influence if not political power over societies that were not officially colonies.<sup>40</sup> Hence the notion of indirect or "informal" empire. This refers to the exercise of power over the internal or external affairs

<sup>35</sup> Fieldhouse (1982), p. 11–13.

<sup>36</sup> Chatterjee (1993).

<sup>37</sup> Tilly (1997), p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> As Cooper and Kumar have rightly argued in their own ways, nation-states and empires have not been historically opposed; but here I oppose them as ideal-types only. See Cooper (2005), pp. 153–203 and Kumar (2010).

<sup>39</sup> Stoler, McGranahan, and Perdue (2007).

<sup>40</sup> Robinson and Gallagher (1953).

of nominally independent states through a variety of methods falling shy of annexation. The subordinated periphery in this case does not become a colony but an informal dependency, weak ally, or client. The imperial state keeps these nominally independent territories in line or compels them to meet its interests, but does not declare sovereignty over them. It offers money, protection, access, or other resources in exchange for deference. It might also employ threats of force or actually use force. The methods are thus multiple, the tactics nefarious. They include financial aid or market control, temporary military occupation or deployments of military power, covert operations to topple recalcitrant regimes, or just the threat of military assault.<sup>41</sup> The point is that any or all of these tactics fall short of declarations of sovereignty, even as they facilitate influence.

Classic and premodern imperial formations show early elements of this sort of imperial power. Athens exercised informal control over its allies in the Delian League (478–404 BC). Although nominally independent, the allies were forced to pay contributions (money and ships) to Athens, and Athens was considered to be their informal ruler.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, classic patrimonial empires such as the Egyptian and the Sassanid empires enlisted clients who paid tribute in exchange for protection; those clients then became part of the empires.<sup>43</sup> The modern era has also seen informal imperialism. In modern informal imperialism, nations retain their nominal independence and status as sovereign entities, but a foreign imperial state exercises power over them through various means short of direct rule.

We must not be too stark in our distinctions. Formal and informal empire might be better thought of as two ends of a blurry continuum. In some cases or at some historical moments, the two might become hardened and rigid as distinct types, but not always. The point is that empire can take different forms and have different modalities; and imperial states have a large repertoire of methods, tactics, and techniques by which to establish, extend, or maintain themselves. Imperial states might even mix colonial control and informal methods across different domains, holding an official colony here while establishing an informal client there. Or they might shift modes, decolonizing a territory only to replace formal colonialism with informal control.

There could also be distinctions between tactics or techniques cross-cutting formal or informal modalities. Empires, for instance, might vary in their aggression. At times they can be more indirect or subtle, whereas at other times they might be bolder in exerting power. Declaring sovereignty over foreign territory (i.e., formal imperialism) would be one example of the latter; so, too, would

<sup>41</sup> Informal empire is "a situation in which a single state shapes the behavior of others, whether directly or indirectly, partially or completely, by means that can range from the outright use of force through intimidation, dependency, inducement, and even inspiration." Gaddis quoted in McMahon (2001), p. 82.

<sup>42</sup> Doyle (1986), p. 30.

<sup>43</sup> Eisenstadt (1963).



military invasion. In contrast, financial aid, offering protection, or covert operations are more subtle and indirect; they are quieter, more silent, or hidden and thus involve less direct aggression than military invasion. Empires can thus shift between these modalities or tactics, substituting indirect tactics for direct ones, or vice-versa. Or they could mix and mingle them in different places, constituting a complex of strategies dispersed across sites. There are different ways to be imperial. It may be that this diversity contributes to the flexibility, and hence persistence, of empire over time and across different contexts.

In any case, we aim to be alert to these differences; to be aware of the multiplicity of imperial power; and to apprehend them in their possible combinations, shifts, substitutions, or transformations over time. It is for this reason – and due to this complexity and multiplicity – that we would fare well to think of empires not as essences but rather as *imperial formations*: sets of relations and forms involving multiple tactics, policies, practices, and modalities of power; hierarchically ordered formations wherein a state or center exercises control or unequal influence over subordinated territories, peoples, and societies through a variety of means and methods.<sup>44</sup> In this book, the word empire is used as shorthand for these complex formations of relations and practices.

### The Task Ahead

The preceding discussion offers an admittedly rudimentary conceptual sketch. Yet it is nonetheless useful as a starting point. For example, with the foregoing definitions in mind, we might ask *where* and *when* political control is established and by what means. Formal or informal? We might also ask *why* formal control is established rather than informal, or vice-versa. Furthermore, we can investigate the empire as a whole at any given point in time – its formal territories and informal clients – and consider how the different parts are related or not. We might also consider the expansion or contraction of the imperial formation over time. In other words, we could examine the historical dynamics of empires, looking at moments when imperialistic activity is extended, stable, or retracted; or we could probe degrees of boldness and directness over time, looking for when imperial states become angry aggressors or when they shift to more subtle puppeteering from behind the scenes. Finally, the foregoing conceptual distinctions enable us to *compare* empires or imperial formations; to consider how the preferred strategies and forms are similar or different between the empires under scrutiny.

The main tasks of this book are guided by these conceptual distinctions and comparative questions. First, this book focuses foremost on the actions and operations of the *imperial state*. Although there are many actors involved in imperialism – from corporations to settlers, missionaries, and merchants – and although these actors will be discussed throughout, the primary focus here is the state: the institutional complex wielding resources deployed to establish

<sup>44</sup> On “imperial formations,” see Stoler, McGranahan, and Perdue (2007).

and maintain its formal sovereignty or informal regimes. This follows from our conceptualization. As noted, empire at base is a matter of political power exerted by a ruling authority, a state. Therefore, an examination of empires can and should begin (but not necessarily end) with a focus on the imperial state. Accordingly, this book explores how the activities of the American state and British state constitute imperialism or not. It then discloses their imperial modalities and methods, policies and practices, and tactics and techniques. Chapters will also explore the activities of each state as they unfolded historically: how they might have expanded or contracted, how modalities in one era might have shifted in another, and the overall configuration of imperial power.

This book also puts imperial states into comparative perspective. To be clear, the comparison is not between British and American hegemony, nor is it about the United States and Britain as “great powers.” It is not a comparison of how or why the two nations rose to hegemony; the policies that contributed to their socioeconomic development; or the factors that made them wealthy military powers. It is a comparative analysis of imperial formations. It is a comparison of how and why the two states have (or have not) exercised power over weaker societies, the forms that that exercise has taken, the modalities by which it has occurred, and the dynamics of imperialism over time. The comparison is precisely motivated. Following the implicit methodology of exceptionalist thought so as to better apprehend exceptionalism’s operations and limits, the examination aims to illuminate differences and similarities between the two imperial formations. It looks at the modalities of the American imperial state in light of the British imperial state and vice-versa. It examines their respective transformations over time, comparing patterns of emergence, formation, or re-formation. In short, the comparative goal of this book is to better pinpoint what has been different about the American empire from the British empire.

The comparison is undoubtedly large. In taking on the task, this book admittedly runs the risk of overlooking certain complexities, details, and nuances. Multiple studies on these smaller aspects of empires have emerged: studies, for example, of the minute details of the lives of soldiers or settlers, merchants and housewives, travelers and slaves. This book does not purport to be of such caliber. Rather, in the tradition of comparative-historical sociology (and, by the same token, macrosociology and comparative history), it is unabashedly aimed at big comparisons. It looks for overarching patterns and dynamics and underlying forms and features that would otherwise go unnoticed amidst the trees. It is probably true that “empire is in the details” (as one anthropologist puts it), but this book ventures the risk that there might be overarching patterns, modalities, and iterative forms across time and space that warrant investigation too.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Lutz (2006). For representative work on the British empire that has paid close attention to the lives of everyday actors, see among others Colley (2003a). Much of this work constitutes new “cultural” or “social” histories of empire that also incorporate studies of gender, sexuality, and emotions. See for the U.S. context, among others, Stoler (2006), Tyrrell (1991b), and Hoganson

The final goal of this book is to *explain* whatever patterns we might find. Rather than only uncovering differences or similarities, this book hopes to account for them. What explains the fact that the U.S. empire has been this way or that way, as opposed to the British empire? Why did the U.S. imperial formation shift in one direction whereas the British formation shifted in the other? These are the sorts of questions that will be addressed as our analysis proceeds. We thereby weave between questions of *what* (What are the differences or similarities?) and *why* (Why the differences or similarities?). And on this matter we return to the issue with which we began: exceptionalism.

### Explanation and Exceptionalism

Exceptionalism is relevant for our question of explanation because exceptionalism is more than just a description of the United States. It also has important implications for analyzing it. One implication is that any comparison between the United States and other countries is unfounded. As the United States is exceptional, comparisons to the British empire or any other empire would be misguided at best, misleading at worst. We would be better off rejecting the label empire and discarding "false analogies from a distant past."<sup>46</sup> The other implication has to do with explanation. As the United States has distinct values, cultural traditions, and institutions, whatever it does reflects those values, traditions, and institutions. In other words, America's exceptional history and behavior are caused by its exceptional internal characteristics.

This explanatory regime has been embedded in exceptionalist thought since it was first articulated by Alexis de Tocqueville (and by subsequent writers like Frederick Jackson Turner).<sup>47</sup> The basic theme is twofold. First, as Ian Tyrrell clarifies, American history "has been special and unique, standing as the only example of a true liberal democracy that the rest of the world would emulate."<sup>48</sup> Or as Kammen puts it, "the US has had a unique destiny and history . . . with highly distinctive features or an unusual trajectory."<sup>49</sup> Second, these unique features and trajectory have been caused by America's unique "national character." The United States exhibits special "traits" and "liberal, democratic, individualistic, and egalitarian values," and these traits or values

(2000). For macrocomparative studies of empire from which the present book draws inspiration, see Barkey (2008), Cooper and Burbank (2010), and Darwin (2008).

<sup>46</sup> Motyl (2006). One historian recently argues that the "empire" label "obfuscates more than it explains," for it "asserts a core American similarity with historical empires that overrides too many fundamental differences." See Suri (2009), p. 524.

<sup>47</sup> Exceptionalism, as a configuration of thought, has deeper roots. It originates in the discourse of early American settlers, politicians, and clergy who articulated the tenets of republicanism with the view that history is the unfolding of God's millennial plan. After these early stirrings, exceptionalism emerged as a more or less coherent framework influencing historical thinking and scholarship. See Ross (1984), pp. 910-11 and Madsen (1998) for good overviews.

<sup>48</sup> Tyrrell (1991a), p. 1035.

<sup>49</sup> Kammen (1993), p. 6.

account for America's unique features and trajectory.<sup>50</sup> The United States is the way it is (exceptional) because it has avoided the "class conflicts, revolutionary upheaval and authoritarian governments of Europe," and therefore has distinct values and beliefs that continue to shape it.<sup>51</sup> Social scientists in particular have drawn on these ideas to characterize various aspects of American history and explain features of American political development. Just as some historians claim that "America is a special case in the development of the West," so too do political scientists and sociologists insist that "American political institutions are more open, liberal, and democratic than those of any other major society," and that the American state exhibits "particularities as a liberal state" that cannot be described "as one would describe any other."<sup>52</sup> These social scientists then call on such particularities to understand such things as why the United States has been averse to Communism, why it is the richest country in the world, or why it is more litigious than, say, Canada.<sup>53</sup>

Exceptionalism in this sense has implications for thinking about and explaining empire. In exceptionalist narratives, America's unique values of democracy, liberty, and self-government have led the United States to be a distinctive global power, compelling the American state to behave differently than European powers: America's values and democratic institutions have meant that the United States never constructed an empire. Early expressions on this theme in the 1950s insisted that the United States eschewed empire because the United States was itself "a product . . . of revolt against colonial rule."<sup>54</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, comparative historians argued that the United States since World War II has had various opportunities to seize colonies, but "deliberately rejected" the opportunities because the United States has been "obliged to conform to the principles which are the unalterable foundation of its political tradition."<sup>55</sup> A more recent commentary puts it simply: Empire is "not in America's DNA."<sup>56</sup>

In short, exceptionalism is not just a set of historical claims. It is a "way of talking about American history and culture," a "form of interpretation with its own language and logic."<sup>57</sup> This way of thinking is deeply entrenched in popular thought. In fact, even some revisionist scholarship critical of exceptionalism runs the risk of reproducing its tenets. As noted, revisionism has examined

<sup>50</sup> Huntington (1982), p. 13. Seymour Martin Lipset calls this an "American Creed" consisting of "liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire" that "reflect the absence of feudal structures, monarchies and aristocracies" [see Lipset (1996), p. 19].

<sup>51</sup> Tyrrell (1991a), p. 1035.

<sup>52</sup> Douglas (1995), p. 3; Huntington (1982), p. 14; Katznelson (2002), p. 84.

<sup>53</sup> The literature is voluminous, but for a recent exemplar, see Lipset (1996) and Shafer (1991). For exceptionalism and foreign policy see Leggold and McKewen (1995), Ignatieff (1995), and Hoffman (1968). On exceptionalism and law see Koh (2003).

<sup>54</sup> Pratt (1958), p. 114.

<sup>55</sup> Schwabe (1986), p. 30; Liska (1978), p. 153.

<sup>56</sup> Hirsch (2002), p. 43.

<sup>57</sup> Madsen (1998), p. 2.

and reexamined America's global ambitions, its territorial and colonial expansion, and various aspects of American foreign policy that disclose imperial tendencies.<sup>58</sup> Whereas exceptionalism denies empire, this revisionist scholarship shows that empire has been an important feature of American history. Yet even this revisionist scholarship has not completely escaped exceptionalism's assumptions or explanatory models. This might seem odd, considering that the revisionist historians who inaugurated the study of American empire initially pitched their work *against* exceptionalism. Still, it remains the case that exceptional thought's mode of explanation remains a silent shaper of even revisionist thinking.

We can see this in two variants of revisionism. The first of these, which we might call "neo-revisionism" (or "liberal exceptionalism"), is seen in commentaries that emerged in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.<sup>59</sup> This sort of revisionism approach admits that there has long been an American empire. "Ever since the annexation of Texas and invasion of the Philippines," declares Niall Ferguson, "the United States has systematically pursued an imperial policy."<sup>60</sup> But it also insists that American empire has been special. Giving with one hand while taking from the other, it reinscribes exceptionalism by claiming that America's empire has been unique for its liberal and benign character. Whereas European empires were tyrannical and exploitative, American empire has been selfless, aiming to promote democracy and liberty around the world. "America's imperial goals and *modus operandi* are much more limited and benign than were those of age-old emperors."<sup>61</sup> Whereas European empires suppressed liberty, rights, and democracy, America's empire has been aimed at spreading them. "American imperialists usually moved much more quickly than their European counterparts to transfer power to democratically elected local rulers – as they are attempting to do in Iraq."<sup>62</sup> Traditional exceptionalism represses the word "empire," but this variant of revisionism just proclaims a distinctly American imperialism that ostensibly manifests America's special virtues.

The second variant of revisionism, which might be called "critical revisionism," comes initially from the founding historiography of William A. Williams and harkens back to leftist critiques of imperialism. This approach also insists that the United States has been an empire, but it does not see the American empire as uniquely benign. Rather than praising American empire for its liberal character, it portrays empire as a dangerous exploitative force. How, then, does this critical revisionism reinscribe exceptionalist thought?

<sup>58</sup> Bacevich (2002), p. 243.

<sup>59</sup> This includes the work of Niall Ferguson, Max Boot, and others who have been associated with American neoconservatism under George W. Bush's regime.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Dowd (2003), p. 27. See also Ferguson (2004) and Raustiala (2003).

<sup>61</sup> Ikenberry (2002), p. 59.

<sup>62</sup> Boot (2003), p. 363.

The reinscription involves two steps. The first is to pinpoint American empire's particularity by saying it has taken on a special form. American empire, in this view, has been indirect and less territorial than other empires. This constitutes a special "American way of empire" that is different from other ways of empire, a unique American brand of informal imperialism. The American empire has been distinct from European empires for its noncolonial character, employing nefarious economic or political means falling short of annexation to manipulate other societies. The second move is to then *explain* this difference (and a host of related ones) by reference to classic exceptionalist themes. If the U.S. empire has been informal rather than colonial, this is because of America's uniquely democratic traditions, beliefs, and values that militate against direct colonial rule and usurpations of sovereignty. Economic exploitation or resource extraction is acceptable, but colonialism is not. As one political scientist argues, the "political ethos and structure of the United States inherently militated against any doctrine other than that of national self-government for foreign peoples. . . . Among the Western democracies, the disinterest in foreign rule, and hence the prejudice in favor of the self-government of others, has been particularly pronounced in the United States."<sup>63</sup> The astute historian Anthony Pagden likewise asserts that colonialism "has never been an option for the United States." In order for the United States to be a colonial empire, "as even the British were at the end of the nineteenth century, the United States would have to change radically the nature of its political culture."<sup>64</sup> Others suggest that America has engaged in informal noncolonial imperialism because of its unique "social system," which has no natural "ruling class."<sup>65</sup> Tocqueville's reckonings here resound in revisionist reinscriptions of imperial exceptionalism.

So both neo-revisionism/liberal exceptionalism and critical revisionism would answer our comparative questions with neo-exceptionalist answers. Has the United States been an empire? Yes, but it has been a different empire than others. Why has the American empire been different? Because of America's special national character, institutions, or political culture.

But if revisionists already have an answer to our comparative questions, what is at stake in this book? Why bother with a comparative analysis? The problem is that the revisionist answers (and exceptionalist ones) remain hypotheses at best. To claim that anything is exceptional about the American empire depends on clarifying the "rule" against which the empire is measured; yet too often the rule is presumed rather than examined. Sustained comparative studies are few and far between. Hence, as long as our claims about what is distinct about the U.S. empire are not put into comparative relief, they remain tentative assertions subject to falsification through systematic comparison. We have already seen how a look at Britons' discourse of empire in the mid-nineteenth

<sup>63</sup> Schwabe (1986), p. 30.

<sup>64</sup> Pagden (2005), p. 54–5

<sup>65</sup> Porter (2006), pp. 91–2.

century reveals that the uniqueness of American empire cannot lie in the fact that Americans deny it. And if the specificity of the American empire does not lie in its self-denial, does it actually lie in its so-called reluctance or hesitance to colonize foreign land? Does it lie in the way it exerts power? Furthermore, if there are such differences, can they really be attributable to an exceptional or unique "national character" or special liberal-democratic "values"? Only a comparative investigation can properly answer these questions.

In short, exceptionalism and some brands of revisionism provide one perspective for specifying what is unique about the American empire and for explaining that uniqueness. But they do not validate their claims through comparison. Take an example. As noted, one revisionist argument is that the United States' empire has been distinct because, unlike Britain's empire, it has been informal and noncolonial. Presumably, this is due to America's egalitarian social structure and political culture. Because the United States lacks an aristocratic class predisposed to governing from afar, and because its democratically minded populace has supported the principle of self-determination around the world, the American state has been constrained to exert power over other societies in noncolonial, informal ways.<sup>66</sup> So what is wrong with such an argument? On its face, nothing. It is the case, for instance, that America has not had the same sort of aristocratic class as England. Yet merely pointing out this difference is not sufficient for validating the causal argument that the lack of an aristocratic class leads to a noncolonial strategy. We would have to trace the causal chain connecting the absence of the class to the absence of colonialism. Furthermore, one could think of various reasons for why a state adopts one imperial strategy rather than another. The presence or absence of an aristocratic governing class would constitute only one possible explanation among a range of alternative explanations. So we would need to consider alternative explanations too.

To be sure, alternative explanations can be formulated. For example, some studies of the British empire have shown that much of what the British empire did and the forms it took had to do with conditions in the *periphery* rather than in the metropole.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, some versions of international relations theory explain what states do by reference to the international system, not to the states' internal culture. Mandelbaum's classic study of states' security policy shows that variations between different states' security policies are "created by variations of the international system itself," such that "two states that are similarly situated in the system but have different domestic orders will tend to pursue similar security policies."<sup>68</sup> Both of these approaches offer

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91-2; see also pp. 171-2; Schwabe (1986).

<sup>67</sup> This is the classic "peripheral" or "excentric" theory of imperial expansion first espoused in Robinson (1972).

<sup>68</sup> Mandelbaum (1988), p. 2. Within international relations theory, exceptionalist approaches to United States would be considered distinct from "realist" approaches. The latter approaches assume all states are similar (in that they all pursue similar interests), whereas the former assumes that the United States is a particular type of state because of its special values or

different takes on empire than exceptionalism or even revisionism. Rather than explaining what a state does or what type of empire it is by reference to characteristics intrinsic to the state itself, these approaches invite analysts to consider the characteristics of the periphery or the wider geopolitical field in which the state is embedded. Existing assertions of American exceptionalism do not consider these alternative possible explanations. Therefore, the argument that the American empire's distinctiveness is due to national traits or character remains open to justifiable questioning. Further investigation is necessary.

### Comparing Empires

The comparative investigation in this book aims to overcome these explanatory limitations of existing scholarship. By adopting a comparative approach, it aims to pinpoint similarities and differences between the two empires. It then examines possible explanations for the variations and assesses them against the weight of evidence. But why use Britain as the key point of comparison? And exactly how should the comparison be conducted?

The British empire is particularly useful. First, popular discourse has often conjured the British empire as providing "lessons" for American empire. This is typical of the recent neoconservative discourse on American empire. "Afghanistan and other troubled lands today," wrote Max Boot in 2003, "cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets." But the comparisons in popular discourse reach further back. In 1965, an essay in the *New York Times* asked: "Is America an empire? It is a question which no American cares to ask himself and, if you ask it of him, he returns a hasty negative. 'Imperialism is not in our blood. You are still thinking in terms of the British Empire.'"<sup>69</sup> As popular discourse already thinks of Britain as the key reference point, a systematic comparison enables us to better assess these passing comparative claims.

The second reason for using Britain is that it provides a critical entry into the exceptionalism-revisionist debate and its various assertions. Britain is typically used in these debates as a comparative reference point (even if the comparison is usually made in passing reference). More specifically, the case of Britain is implicitly or explicitly invoked to validate cultural values or "national character" as the primary explanation. Britain's monarchical tradition and its aristocratic values are taken as a counterpoint to America's liberal-democratic and more egalitarian character. Comparison with Britain therefore shows America's exceptionalism. The logic is as follows: (1) Britain has different cultural values, political institutions, and traditions than the United States; (2) Britain (ostensibly) constructed an empire whereas the United States did not (or, in the

national character. For a good discussion of this in relation to the U.S. empire, see Ciriță (2006).

<sup>69</sup> Fairlie (1965).

revisionist variant, the United States constructed a different type of empire; therefore (3) what makes the American empire (or lack thereof) different from Britain are America's exceptional cultural values, institutions, and traditions. These implicit comparisons warrant explicit consideration, which is why Britain is analytically useful here.<sup>70</sup>

The final reason for using Britain as a comparative case to the United States has to do with similarities between the two countries rather than differences. Although Britain and the United States have different cultural values and traditions, they share the fact that, of all states in the past centuries, only they have been *hegemonic*. As noted earlier, hegemony is an economic category to refer to a state's relative preponderance over the world economy. During the history of modern capitalism, only the United States and Britain indisputably fit this category. Britain dominated the world economy in the mid-nineteenth century. It was the banker, baker, and workshop of the world, taking up the largest share of world GDP. The United States in the mid-twentieth century, after the Second World War, then occupied this niche. Of course, their two hegemonies are not exactly the same. There are differences in relative military capacity, economic policies, or the bases of their economic dominance. Yet none of this negates the fact that, when we use measures that scholars use to assess relative economic power in the world, only the United States and Britain have been hegemonic.<sup>71</sup> This similarity is important for adjudicating causal arguments. Working from such similarities, a controlled paired comparison is possible. As political scientist Sidney Tarrow explains, by beginning the comparison with "common foundations," we are less likely to overlook unseen variables that might better explain the outcome under consideration.<sup>72</sup>

To better understand this, consider if we compared the actions of one state with another state. Let's assume that the two states have different "national characters" or cultural values. Let's also say that we happen to find that the states carried out very different imperial strategies. With this sort of comparative method, we might conclude that the difference in imperial strategies can be explained by the different cultural traditions. But consider if the two states differed not just in their cultural values, but also in, say, their hegemonic status: State A dominated the world economy whereas State B did not. If this were the case, it might be that the difference in imperial strategy was not due to cultural difference, but rather to the difference in hegemonic status. Without holding hegemonic status constant – or "controlling" for it, to use social science parlance – it would be more difficult to assess which was the more important

<sup>70</sup> For recent calls to more systematically compare the U.S. empire with the British empire, among others, see Hopkins (2007). For a good overview comparison, see Howe (2003).

<sup>71</sup> For the most systematic assessments of economic dominance using statistical measures, see Maddison (2001) and Chase-Dunn, Jorgenson, Reifer, and Lio (2005). There have been debates about whether the United States or England have *really* been hegemonic (see, for example, Strange (1987), Martel (1991), and Schroeder (1994)). But these debates turn on a much broader definition of "hegemony" than the strict economic one used here.

<sup>72</sup> Tarrow (1999).

explanatory factor, culture or hegemonic status. We would not, in short, be able to validate or invalidate our claim that culture was the driving cause of imperialism.

This comparative fallacy underwrites many of the claims made in exceptionalist historiography and social science. For example, one of the ways in which claims about American exceptionalism have been sustained has been by comparing America's post-World War II foreign policy with Britain's imperialism of the late nineteenth century. By this comparison, we might find that the United States did not acquire colonies, whereas Britain in the late nineteenth century did, such as when it took part in the "scramble for Africa." This comparison could then be taken as evidence for an essential American anti-imperial character: The United States did not take new colonies because of its deeply democratic and liberal values. However, the problem here is with the time periods under comparison. Specifically, comparing America's lack of colonial annexations after World War II with Britain's colonial expansion in the late nineteenth century overlooks the very different situations of the two states. In the late nineteenth century, Britain was experiencing new economic competition after enjoying decades of dominance in the world economy. Economic competitors, such as Germany and the United States, were on the rise. This competition might have motivated Britain to seize new colonies. Acquiring new territory might have been an attempt to regain some economic power or, at the very least, prevent rivals from acquiring territory and thereby help thwart the rivals' competitiveness. The context for the United States after World War II, however, was very different. The United States dominated the world economy and faced very little if no economic competition whatsoever. It was in a hegemonic position. This position, not inherent national values or virtues, could plausibly help explain why the United States did not seize new colonies whereas Britain did. Unlike Britain, the United States dominated the world economy and did not face serious economic rivals. It had less of a need for overseas colonies.

This is not to say that the reason for the difference was in fact economic need. The point is that, by comparing Britain's and America's imperial activities at time periods when the two were differentially positioned in the world economy, we cannot rule out this alternative explanation. And without ruling out this alternative explanation, the exceptionalist explanation is open to serious question. It would be more persuasive to compare American and British actions in respectively similar historical phases so as to enable some rough controls over possibly confounding explanatory factors (like economic competition and/or hegemonic status).

Accordingly, the method in this book is not just to compare the British and American empires, but also to compare them across comparable historical phases. As both Britain and the United States have been hegemonic, they also experienced similar historical phases, and each of these phases has entailed other similarities. First, both Britain and the United States underwent a period of *hegemonic ascendancy* before they respectively reached hegemonic

TABLE I.1. *Phases in Hegemonic Careers: The United States and Britain*

Phase	Britain	US
Hegemonic Ascent*		
(a) long ascent	(a) 1688-1815	(a) 1776-1945
(b) short ascent	(b) 1763-1815	(b) 1873-1945
Hegemonic Maturity	1816-1872	1946-1973
Competition/Decline	1873-1939	1974-present

\* The long ascent is the entire period before the state has reached hegemonic maturity; the short ascent refers to the period within the long ascent when the global system is "multipolar" (i.e., there is no clear hegemon and rivals are battling for hegemony); this period is the same as the "competition/decline" phase.

Sources: Boswell (2004); Chase-Dunn et al. (2005); Wallerstein (1984); Wallerstein (2002b); Wallerstein (1974).

maturity. Britain underwent this phase, roughly, from 1688 to 1815 (and more precisely from 1763 to 1815), and the United States did so from 1776 to 1945 (or from 1873 to 1945). This means that both, although at different times, were similarly positioned in the world system relative to other states. It also means that they shared other characteristics, such as the fact that they were both expanding their economies and internal state capacities. Second, both Britain and the United States then achieved *hegemonic maturity*: Britain from 1815 to 1873 and the United States from 1946 to 1973. In these periods, each state dominated the world's productive capacities (taking up the greatest shares of world GDP). Each also took up the greatest share of military capacities while enjoying relative economic prosperity at home. Finally, both states have experienced *hegemonic decline*: Britain from 1873 to 1939, and the United States from 1974 to the present. This means that both states experienced new economic competition from rivals that they had not experienced during their respective periods of hegemonic maturity. These were also periods, then, when the global system entered a new multipolar or competitive phase (see Table I.1).<sup>73</sup>

By comparing American and British imperial activities during these respective phases, our paired comparison is fulfilled at each step in the analysis. Because hegemony is not defined by imperialism but by relative economic position in the world, the analysis is not circular. Hegemony and empire are not

<sup>73</sup> The dividing line dates typically refer to either world wars, which can be seen as the apex of decline/ascent, or economic events that set off a new economic cycle. The periodization has been worked out by world-systems scholars. See Boswell (2004); Chase-Dunn, Jorgenson, Reifer, and Lio (2005); Wallerstein (1984); Wallerstein (2002b); Wallerstein (1974). The periodization is open to some dispute, but the world-systems literature convincingly demonstrates that if we follow our strict definition of hegemony as preponderance over the world economy, the periodization roughly holds. Other periodizations are available, but these are based on different definitions of hegemony. See, for example, Modelski (1978), Modelski and Thompson (1996).

the same things; hence we can use the former to ground our comparisons of the latter. This, then, is not to presume that hegemonic phase actually determines imperial actions. It is merely to allow for a controlled comparison to better assess which possible factors might explain imperial actions. The point is to be more methodologically conscious about our comparisons and therefore maximize the validity of our claims.

There are obvious limitations to our method. The first is the "small-N" problem. This means that not all explanations can be properly tested. We would need additional cases beyond the United States and Britain in order to adjudicate more explanations. The second problem is that world developments might confound our attempt to control for variation. As we will see, for instance, the global context during America's period of hegemonic maturity (roughly 1946-1970s) was not exactly the same as the global context when Britain was hegemonic (in the mid-nineteenth century). The world system had itself changed, and this is a factor that must be considered when comparing the two states during those time periods. The final problem is that the comparison depends on analytically separating the two empires from each other when, in reality, they were not separated. When the United States was undergoing hegemonic ascent in the early twentieth century, Britain was undergoing hegemonic decline, and we cannot presume that the two processes were disconnected. In fact, as we will see, the U.S. empire made good use of Britain's existing empire to realize some of its ends. The two empires were often intertwined and entangled.

Despite these problems, this book stakes the claim that the comparative approach is still worthwhile. First, there is no doubt that the small-N problem is an endemic weakness of paired comparison. However, this weakness is exchanged for strength on other counts. Comparing many empires rather than just two may help overcome the small-N problem, but makes it more difficult to conduct a detailed concrete analysis. A very wide lens allows one to see more than a small lens, but not always as clearly. Therefore, although comparing Britain and the United States alone has its limitations, it also enables our study "to combine analytical leverage with in-depth knowledge."<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, even this small-N problem can be compensated for by examining not only the two empires at comparable historical phases, but also by bringing in their other historical phases as comparative reference points. For example, we can compare the United States and Britain during their respective periods of hegemonic maturity, and we can also bring into the comparison an analysis of the two states during their other historical periods, such as their respective periods of hegemonic ascent. This expands the comparative cases by comparing across empires *and* across time.

Second, whereas restricting our comparison to specific historical phases between the two states cannot control for world developments across the time periods, we can at least control for some possibly confounding factors where

<sup>74</sup> Tarrow (1999), p. 9. See also Steinmetz (2004).

we would otherwise not be able to. One is economic capacity. States undergoing the hegemonic maturity phase have more economic resources than when they are undergoing the ascendancy phase, which would in turn give the state more resources. This was indeed the case for both Britain and the United States, as we will see. Therefore, by comparing the two states during their respective stages of hegemonic ascendancy, we can control not just for relative position in the world economy, but also the factor of state capacity. In short, although no comparative method would be perfect, our approach offers one way – hitherto underutilized – to better explain whatever variations or similarities in imperial dynamics or forms that we might find.

There is a final value to tracking and comparing imperial activity by hegemonic phase: It offers a systematic way of considering a possible “natural history” of hegemonic empires. As hegemony rises, matures, and declines, what types of imperial activity do they engage in? Are there differences in their imperial practices or modalities depending on phase? And across the two hegemony analyzed here (Britain and the United States), are there common patterns of imperial activity in conjunction with hegemonic phase? Or are there fundamental differences in their imperial careers? Using hegemonic phases as a guide facilitates a properly *historical* analysis that considers sequence and process. This is a critical issue for analyzing empires in general. Any analysis of empires must take history seriously, in the sense that we must not presume a singular entity – for example, the British empire – that remains constant or unchanged over time.<sup>75</sup> Using hegemonic phases as an analytic guide focuses our attention on imperial formations in history – that is, multifaceted entities of power in the process of formation or reformation, disarticulation or dissolution, expansion, stability, or contraction. Whether or not such imperial processes correspond to hegemonic phases is one question we will want to consider.

### What Lies Ahead

The book is organized in loose chronological and comparative fashion. Chapters proceed by comparing British and American imperial activities during their comparable phases of global power (ascent, maturity, decline) with some explanatory sections inserted within and between. Chapter 1, “Imperial Paths to Power,” scrutinizes the two states’ activities during their respective periods of hegemonic ascent: Britain from 1688 to 1815, and the United States from 1776 to 1945. Both states in these periods were economically ascendant. Both, too, developed their state capacities. The chapter shows that these similarities were also concomitant with certain similarities in imperialism that have been too often overlooked in existing scholarship. As both states developed their economies and capacities, both also embarked on territorial expansion. They also crafted similar forms of imperial rule and ideological self-conceptions. In

<sup>75</sup> Lieven (2005), p. 129.

fact, America’s westward expansion entailed colonial rule over new territories that were not only similar to but also modeled on the colonial regimes Britain had previously constructed for the thirteen colonies. The idea of a special liberty-loving American empire was first forged amidst this process, but this had precedents in Britain’s previous settler empire in the Americas. Finally, the United States constructed an overseas colonial empire around the turn of the twentieth century – encompassing such places as Puerto Rico, Hawaii, the Philippines, Guam, Samoa, and the Virgin Islands. This reveals that the United States has not shied away from formal administrative colonialism.

Some exceptionalist narratives might admit that America’s expansion had imperialistic characteristics, but they would then insist that American imperialism was fundamentally different from other types of imperialism. Some exceptionalist commentaries, for instance, acknowledge that the United States took the Philippines as a colony, but they insist that the *way* in which the United States practiced colonialism was unique. Expressed as America’s own exceptional political culture of democracy, U.S. colonialism in the Philippines was a benign form of rule, uniquely aimed at teaching Filipinos the ways of democracy. This renders America’s empire a special empire, unmatched by others for its democratizing tendencies. Chapter 2, “Colonial Rules,” tackles this assertion from the standpoint of comparative colonialisms. Looking at U.S. colonialism in the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and Samoa and comparing it with British colonialism in India and Fiji, the comparison uncovers more similarities with British colonialism than has been disclosed in existing studies. It also shows that America’s “national character” had little to do with the forms of rule the United States enacted in its colonies. America’s colonial regimes – just like Britain’s colonial regimes in Fiji and India – reflected local conditions rather than national values or metropolitan political institutions. This chapter thereby offers a theory of colonial forms, suggesting that colonial policies and institutions are determined not by the characteristics or character of the colonizer but by the complexities and contingencies of the colonial situation.

Chapter 3, “Hegemonies and Empires,” compares the two imperial formations during their respective phases of hegemonic maturity: Britain from 1815 to 1873 and the United States from 1946 to 1973. The chapter shows that whereas the period of ascent was marked by relatively constant territorial expansion, the period of hegemonic maturity was marked by a relative contraction. After the United States seized the former Japanese-mandated territories in the aftermath of World War II, its territorial expansion halted. After the Napoleonic Wars, Britain’s expansion similarly slowed. Direct control over territory became less prominent, and instead informal exercises of power took precedence. Both states preferred indirect nonterritorial rule over peripheral areas, creating empires of clients and subordinated allies. Attendant with both imperial formations, too, were a discourse and partial realization of open trading policies over and against the mercantilism of previous years. The enlargement of commercial space along with informal networks of imperial power thus trumped formal territorial domination. Sporadic military

interventions, the establishment of military outposts, and clientelistic relations with weaker states became the preferred tactics of imperial power.

Whereas previous chapters disclose fundamental similarities across the empires during their respective periods of hegemonic ascent and maturity, Chapter 4, "Imperial Forms, Global Fields," addresses one glaring difference between the U.S. and British empires. That is, whereas Britain mixed both formal and informal imperialism during its period of hegemonic maturity, the United States relied primarily on the informal mode of imperialism after taking the Japanese territories in the wake of World War II. During their respective periods of hegemony, both Britain and the United States *preferred* informal empire, but Britain nonetheless added some territorial holdings amidst its pursuit of informal empire whereas the American state did not. This remains a crucial difference that some existing commentaries have seized upon to show how the United States has been exceptional. The United States, it has been claimed, did not seize colonies after World War II because of its liberal democratic character. However, as we will see in this chapter, the reason why the United States did not in fact expand its territorial holdings had little to do with its exceptional political culture. Instead it had to do with the character of the global field after World War II that differed significantly from the field Britain engaged during its comparable period of hegemony. Whereas Britain faced an open field ripe for colonization, the United States faced a global field populated by allied empires and rising anticolonial nationalism. Only because of these features of the field, not because of America's national character, did the United States turn away from formal territorial rule.

Chapter 5, "Wearry Titans: Declining Powers, New Imperialisms," brings us closer to the current era. It compares Britain's and America's imperial activities amidst their respective periods of hegemonic decline. These are periods when each state, although previously enjoying unqualified dominance over the world economy, faced unprecedented competitors (Britain circa 1873-1939; the United States circa 1973-present). The chapter shows that as both states experienced decline, so too did they intensify and/or extend their imperialistic activity compared with the previous period of hegemony. Both states, in short, embarked on new imperialisms, apparently replaying the imperial follies of their youth. For Britain, this was manifest primarily in its expansion of formal empire; for the United States, it was manifest in a range of new military interventions and temporary occupations (the assaults on Iraq in 1991 and 2003 were only tips of the iceberg: There were other deployments and occupations). Finally, this chapter reveals *why* both states embarked on new imperialisms during their respective periods of economic decline. The chapter will reveal that similarities between the states' imperialistic activities amidst decline are not coincidental but lie in deeper structural forces.

Chapter 6, "The Dynamics of Imperialism," takes a longer view of the two empires. Previous chapters examined specific phases in each imperial state's career, but this chapter puts them all together. It reveals that both empires followed similar historical dynamics over the long *durée*. Specifically, they each

followed a pattern of expansion, abatement, and reassertion constituting distinct waves of imperial aggression. The "new imperialism," in other words, was only one phase in a larger dynamic. The chapter then explains the pattern. It shows that the pattern is best understood by considering global competition. The overarching point is not different from the point of other chapters: In order to understand the two imperial formations, their practices and policies, and modalities and methods, we are better off eschewing exceptionalist explanations that focus on national character and instead consider wider fields of interaction and struggle.

Ultimately, this book compares the U.S. and British empires and interrogates the exceptionalist thesis, but it also carries larger lessons. In particular, it allows us to arrive at a larger theory of empires. The theory is simple enough, but it could be too easily ignored in both scholarship and popular discourse. And its implications are important. That is: Empires, rather than omnipotent powers that easily make and remake their subjects and spaces, and rather than entities shaped from within, must be understood as adaptive dynamic entities that are shaped and reshaped by foreign societies as much as they strive to control them. Empires are defined by power, but the modalities of power are crafted, limited, formed, and re-formed through the very relations of power seeks to harness. This banality of imperial power, as we will see, is a far cry from exceptionalist portrayals of American empire.