

CHAPTER 1

THREE CRISES AND AN OUTCOME

THE CHOICE AMONG ALTERNATIVES

Every generation gets the history it needs. Fashions come and go; some reappear, suitably restyled, long after their original incarnation has been forgotten. The historiographical record indicates that previous trends have boomed for a decade or so before subsiding. The branch of the subject that deals with imperial and global history illustrates the oscillations of the last half century with particular clarity. Modernization theory, which was profoundly ahistorical, gave way to the dependency thesis, which tempted social scientists to embrace the past with unguarded passion. Marxism corrected the over-flexible radicalism of the dependency thesis by reasserting the paramountcy of production over exchange. Postmodernism inverted the prevailing hierarchy of causes by elevating the ideal over the material. Today, historians have resurrected the “totalizing project” and are busily globalizing continents, empires, and islands.

The changing mood of the profession obliges scholars to find their place among shifting priorities. If they fail to move with the times, they risk being trapped, as Marxists used to say, in an “outdated problematic.” If they follow fashion, they are in danger of losing their individuality. Those who buy stock at the outset do well. Those who join when the market is at its peak suffer in the collapse that follows. Each fashion appeals because it offers a seemingly comprehensive response to a pressing current issue. Each ends when it is laid low by contrary evidence or is beaten into submission by incessant repetition. After the event, it becomes clear that the issue of the day was not, after all, the riddle of the ages.

The ability to anticipate the next phase of historical studies would greatly ease the difficulty of choosing priorities. Unfortunately, past performance, as financial advisors are obliged to say, does not guarantee future returns.¹ Nevertheless, historians can still use their knowledge of

previous and current priorities to help configure their work. It would be unwise, for example, to assign globalization a central place in the interpretation advanced in the present book without recognizing that the term now has a prominent, indeed almost mandatory, place in publications written by historians.² Similarly, empire studies have enjoyed a revival that has been stimulated by the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the further rise of the United States, which commentators regard as the superpower of the day, notwithstanding the sudden appearance of China.³ Accordingly, there is now a danger of repeating a message that has already been received. Once the boredom threshold is crossed, the latest approach becomes redundant. There is a risk, too, of being caught handling an outdated problematic when the mood of the moment changes. If hostility toward globalization gathers momentum, scholars may shift their attention to alternatives, such as nation-states. At this point, however, it is necessary to keep a steady hand, recalling, with Oscar Wilde, that “it is only the modern that ever becomes old-fashioned.”⁴

Appearances to the contrary, however, the current problematic has not yet passed its sell-by date. Although the “global turn” has attracted the attention of scholars, it has made only a limited impression on the curriculum, which remains resolutely national.⁵ Moreover, publications that respond to the demands of fashion often have more appeal than substance. Some authors have inserted “global” in the titles of books and articles to achieve topicality and add theoretical weight to otherwise orthodox empirical narratives. Others have raised the term to macro-levels that are superficial rather than insightful. As yet, few historians have connected their work to the relevant analytical literature in ways that command the attention of other social scientists.

Despite these weaknesses, which are common to all historiographical trends, there have also been significant advances. Pioneering work during the last decade has established a powerful case for enlarging standard treatments of U.S. history by supplying it with an international context.⁶ Research on the non-Western world has shown that globalization had multicentered origins, and was not simply another long chapter in the story of the Rise of the West. Similarly, the realization that globalization can create heterogeneity as well as homogeneity has had the dual effect of showing how localities contributed to global processes and how supranational influences shaped diverse national histories.⁷ Other work has opened routes to the past that have yet to be explored. One key question is whether the history of globalization is the record of a process that has grown larger with the passage of time without fundamentally changing its character, or whether it is more accurate to see it as the evolution

of different types in successive sequences.⁸ The latter position provides the overarching context for the interpretation advanced in this study, which identifies three phases of globalization and explores the dialectical interactions that transformed them.

The renaissance of empire studies has also left some central questions unresolved. Historians have wrestled with the problem of defining an empire for so long that it is unlikely they will ever agree on a formula that commands majority assent. Contributions to the literature by other commentators have now widened the application of the term to the extent that exchanges are often at cross-purposes. Comparisons are particularly vulnerable to definitional differences. If the term “empire” is used in a very broad sense to refer to great states that exercised extensive international powers, numerous comparisons can be made through time and across space. However, if the characteristics of the units chosen for comparison differ in their essentials, conclusions about commonalities are likely to be invalid. If the definition is narrowed to suit a particular purpose, potential comparators may fail to qualify, and the resulting study treats singularities without also being able to identify similarities. The definition adopted here, and discussed later in this chapter, tries to steer a course between these pitfalls. The hypothesis that empires were globalizing forces provides a basis for establishing their common purpose. The argument that globalization has passed through different historical phases anchors the process in time and suggests how the history of the United States can be joined to the history of Western Europe, and indeed the world.

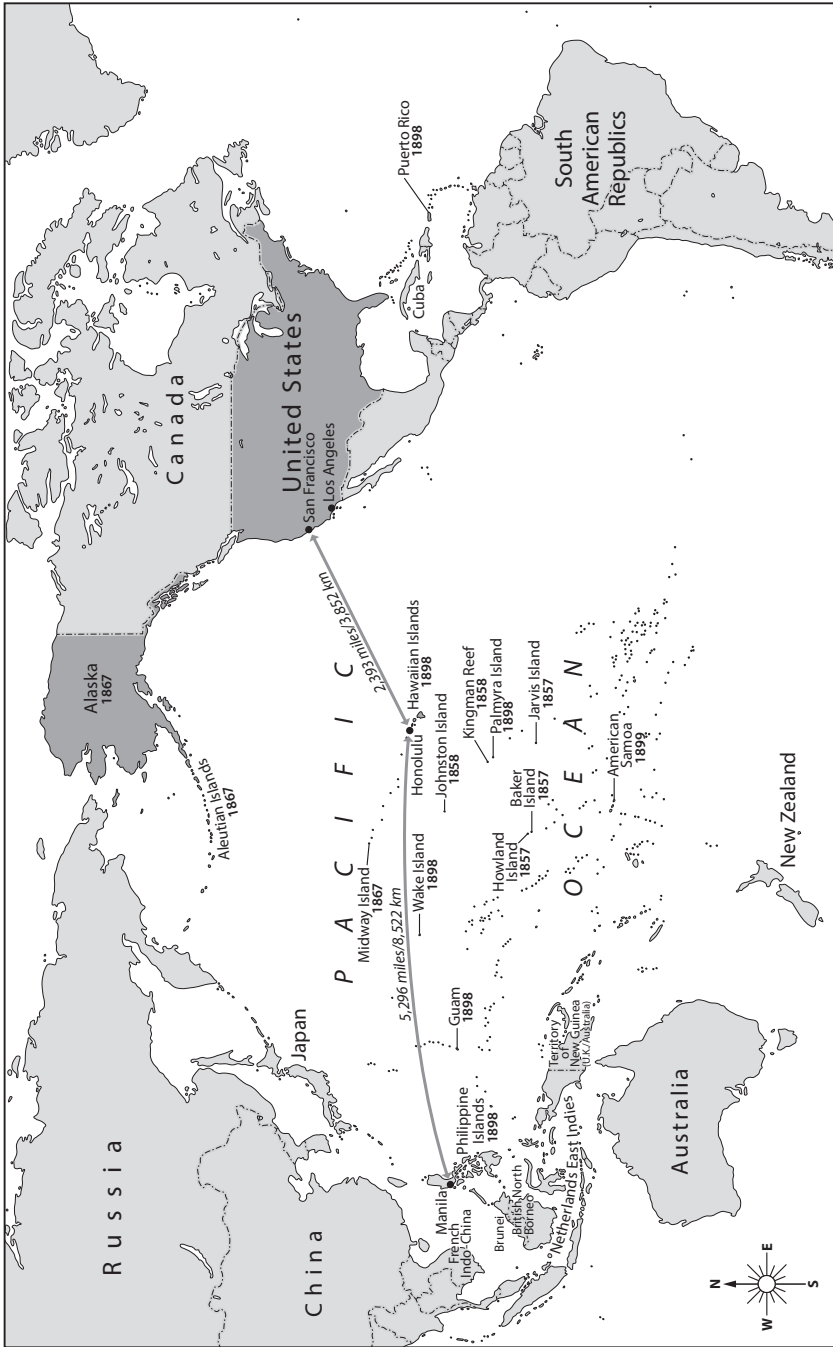
The current interest in globalization has had the unanticipated benefit of allowing economic history to re-enter the discussion of key historical issues. Postmodernism and the linguistic “turn” gave historians a new and welcome focus on cultural influences but also reduced their interest in the material world. Today, there is a renewed awareness of the relevance of economic history, but a shortage of practitioners.⁹ By reintegrating economic themes, the present book hopes to alert a new generation of researchers to the prospects for contributing to aspects of the past that have been neglected in recent decades. This is not to say that economics should be regarded as the predominant cause of great historical events, as specialists can easily assume. As conceived here, globalization is a process that also incorporates political, social, and cultural change. This comprehensive approach to the subject underlies the interpretation of the present study and the chronology derived from it.

A consideration of empires as transmitters of globalizing impulses reveals a further dimension of the past that recent versions of imperial history have yet to incorporate, namely indigenous perspectives on the

intrusive Western world.¹⁰ With the rise of Area Studies in the 1960s, the old-style imperial history with its focus on white settlers and rulers gave way to new priorities, which concentrated on recovering the indigenous history of parts of the world that had recently gained political independence. Although this work has continued its remarkable advance, it has done so principally by creating separate regional specialisms. The new imperial history, on the other hand, has tended to take a centrist view of empire-building, while exploring topics such as the expansion of the Anglo-world, the creation of racial stereotypes, and the formation of gender roles. The position taken here seeks to integrate the standpoint of the recipients of colonial rule. It will become apparent that the story is not simply one of “challenge and response” but of interactions among interests that were drawn together by the absorptive power of global processes. Globalizing impulses were multicentered. Islands, including those colonized by the United States, were not merely backwaters serving as minor recipients of much larger influences, but cosmopolitan centers that connected entire continents with flows of goods, people, and ideas.¹¹ They were both turnstiles and manufacturers of globalization. What entered was often processed and altered before it exited. This degree of creativity ought not to be surprising. Borderlands and islands are typically more fluid and often more innovative than established centers, where hierarchy predominates and controls are more readily exercised.

This study combines global, imperial, and insular approaches to compose a history of the United States that builds on, but also differs from, those currently on offer, principally by describing a view from the outside in, rather than, as is more usual, from the inside out.¹² As large claims readily confound those who make them, it is wise to take insurance against the possibility of misfortune. One exclusion clause covers the scope of the book, which does not deal with the totality of U.S. history but with those features judged to be most pertinent to empire-building and decolonization. Accordingly, domestic politics feature principally at the federal level in the nineteenth century, when external influences, especially those from Britain, made themselves felt, but only to a limited extent in the twentieth century, when the United States had gained full control of its own affairs. Other important themes, such as Native American history and the history of borderlands, appear only in relation to issues that directly pertain to the subject examined in this study. Fortunately, these topics and others not mentioned here are being given the prominence they deserve in new accounts of the national story.

A further limit concerns the recipients of U.S. imperialism. The empire considered here is the insular empire acquired after 1898. In 1940,



MAP 1.1. The U.S. Insular Empire.

the U.S. Bureau of the Census listed thirteen inhabited overseas territories, which, with Alaska, had a population of 18,883,023.¹³ The great majority were islands in the Pacific and Caribbean. Almost 99 percent of the total population was located in the Philippines (16,356,000), Puerto Rico (1,869, 255), and Hawai'i (423,330). These three islands, together with Cuba, form the basis of the U.S. territorial empire considered here. Cuba, which had a population of 4,291,100 in 1940, has been included as an example of a protectorate. The Open Door and dollar diplomacy are not explored in detail, though they undoubtedly merit further examination. One problem arises from the amorphous character of informal influence and the difficulty of tracking it geographically and chronologically. A more prosaic obstacle is that the space required to treat the subject adequately would turn a large study into a forbidding one. On the other hand, the restricted treatment of this theme in the early twentieth century has allowed room for a discussion of U.S. power in the world after 1945, when the debate on informal empire and hegemony imposes itself in a manner that is so weighty as to be unavoidable.

BEYOND “THE NATIONAL IDEOLOGY OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM”¹⁴

The emphasis placed here on the global setting requires a reappraisal of the strong national tradition that has long formed the basis of historical studies in the United States, as it has in other independent states. National traditions of historical study arose in the nineteenth century to accompany (and legitimate) new nation-states, and they remain entrenched today in programs of research and teaching throughout the world. The tradition has many admirable qualities that need to be preserved. However, it no longer reflects the world of the twenty-first century, which is shaped increasingly by supranational influences. The national bias can also produce distortions, which are expressed most evidently in the belief that what is distinctive is also exceptional rather than particular. The conviction that the United States had, and has, a unique providential mission has helped to form the character of American nationalism and the content of U.S. history. What the literature refers to as exceptionalism retains a strong grip on popular opinion and continues to influence foreign policy, as it has done since the nineteenth century.¹⁵

The persistence of a historiographical tradition that is still largely insular ensures that the case for American exceptionalism is largely self-referencing.¹⁶ The consequence is a failure to recognize that distinctiveness is a quality claimed by all countries. Some form of providentialism

invariably accompanies states with large ambitions. A sense of mission produces a misplaced sense of uniqueness, which, when allied to material power, translates readily into assumptions of privilege and superiority.

Comparisons, as Marc Bloch pointed out in a classic essay, supply a more convincing means of testing historical arguments than do single case studies.¹⁷ The claim that a particular nation is “exceptional” is demonstrated, not by compiling self-descriptions of the nation in question, but by showing that other nations do not think of themselves in the same way. The common procedure, however, is to ignore competing claims as far as possible and, if challenged, to assert the principle of ideological supremacy.

Yet, Russia’s rulers have long attributed semi-divine status to the state and assumed that their purpose is to deliver a special message to the world.¹⁸ The French believe that they are the chosen guardians of a revolutionary, republican tradition. For the historian and patriot, Jules Michelet, the revolution that made France was itself a religion.¹⁹ The concept of *l’exception française* endowed *la grande nation* with the duty of carrying *la mission civilisatrice* to the rest of the world.²⁰ The poet and philosopher Paul Valéry considered that “the French distinguish themselves by thinking they are universal.”²¹ They were not alone in this belief, even if Valéry was unaware of the competition. Spanish writers have long discussed their version of *excepcionalismo*. Scholars have traced Japan’s sense of distinct cultural identity, *Nihonjinron*, to the eighteenth century, and discovered elements of it long before then. German theorists devised “*den deutschen Sonderweg*” in the late nineteenth century to describe their own country’s special path to modernity.²² The British, unsurprisingly, had no doubt who had reached the summit of civilization first. “Remember that you are an Englishman,” Cecil Rhodes advised a young compatriot, “and have consequently won first prize in the lottery of life.”²³

It needs to be said at once that few professional historians, as opposed to members of the public, still subscribe to an undiluted notion of exceptionalism. As some historians have made progress in placing U.S. history in a comparative context, so others have amplified and qualified the founding national saga by exploring every conceivable sub-branch of the subject.²⁴ It should be acknowledged, too, that an alternative tradition, beginning with Charles Beard and the Progressives, has long challenged the assumption that the United States was an exceptional nation with a unique and unifying providential mission. Skeptics attacked the so-called consensus school, drew attention instead to internal conflicts, and viewed the United States as an expanding power from the outset,

first across the continent and then overseas.²⁵ This perspective was highly influential in the 1960s, following the rise of the New Left and the Wisconsin School.²⁶ Stimulating new interpretations emphasized the continuous nature of expansion, and viewed the war with Spain in 1898 not as an aberration but as a systemic crisis of capitalism.²⁷ What followed, according to this interpretation, was not isolationism but informal expansion. A similar approach to the period after 1945 traced U.S. expansion to its culmination in the formation of an empire that, despite outward differences, shared with the European empires it was beginning to replace a desire for global domination.

Radical alternatives, however, have lost visibility since the 1970s and currently remain a minority taste among the present generation of young researchers. The last comprehensive synthesis of U.S. history written from a radical “left” position appeared in 1980.²⁸ Widespread criticism of its formulaic argument and numerous exaggerations has failed to dent its popularity or its sales, which currently stand at more than two million copies. Despite its manifold weaknesses, this lone work evidently offers successive generations of students a fresh and inspiring approach to U.S. history and meets a need that standard college texts cannot satisfy. The success of *A People’s History* is a comment less on the merits of the book than on current orthodoxy, which passes the tests of scholarship but is often safe rather than subversive.

This summary undoubtedly spreads injustice across a vast body of distinguished scholarship. Innovative studies of the highest quality address particular periods, episodes, and themes, but are scattered across an immense and constantly expanding literature. The global turn has yet to become a revolution. Important features of the established historiography remain in place. The result, which can be seen in mainstream texts and syntheses, is a qualified and highly cultivated version of original exceptionalist assumptions.²⁹ Writing in 1919, the distinguished historian Charles Andrews observed that the “events and persons” of the Revolutionary era “have become in a measure sacrosanct, the objects of an almost idolatrous veneration.”³⁰ What has been called “founders’ chic” remains a fashion for all seasons.³¹ Heavyweight biographies of the Founding Fathers, which adapt Carlyle’s notion of the hero to the needs of a republic, command an insatiable readership.³² A glance at the titles of authoritative studies of the nineteenth century shows that the theme of liberty and democracy, the presumed outcome of the Revolution, continues to captivate authors and their readership. Historians who chart the swelling role of the United States in international affairs in the twentieth century often find it hard to free themselves from the sense that an

expansionist teleology is being fulfilled, even though they may also be critical of its consequences.

The exceptionalist tradition has had a strong influence on the definition and treatment of what is referred to here as the American Empire. Standard histories use the term to refer to two periods covering a half century or longer. The first encompasses the years between 1607 and 1783, when the mainland colonies were part of the British Empire in the New World. All parties accept, minimally, that a formal colonial empire existed during this period. The founding myth emphasizes features that stand in opposition to European, and specifically British, characteristics, notably monarchy, hierarchy, and imperialism, and accentuates qualities of liberty and individualism that are held to distinguish the new republic from the Old World. Although modern research has presented different layers of understanding of the cause and consequences of the Revolution, a new consensus remains elusive and the promising alternatives on offer at present have yet to drive competitors out of circulation.

The second period runs from World War II to the present, and traces the rise of the United States to superpower status. The idea that the United States created an empire in the second half of the twentieth century jars with the notion of exceptionalism and has caused practitioners and scholars to search for ways of squaring the circle. Some theorists of international relations have dealt with the difficulty by applying an alternative term, hegemon, or leader. Other scholars have endowed the language of empire with benign qualities that sought to reconcile global expansion with the principles of liberty and democracy. One influential view portrayed the United States as achieving dominance “by invitation.”³³ Another argued, in terms that are familiar today, that the United States possessed an unacknowledged empire that needed both reviving, to protect national interests, and expanding, to realize its potential power.³⁴ This was the “empire in denial” that ought to reveal itself and embrace what is now termed “offensive realism.”³⁵ Another group, writing from a radical standpoint, applied the term to register their hostility to imperialism. By 1988, “the shelf of recent books devoted to analyzing the post-war American Empire as a successor to other Great Empires of the past” had expanded “at an astonishing rate.”³⁶ Much of this literature remains consistent with the national epic in emphasizing the need to defend and then spread the benefits of political and economic freedom. When the demands of the Cold War called, academia responded by demonstrating that it was not lacking in patriotism.

Between these two periods lies uncertainty. Orthodox accounts of U.S. history after 1783 focus on the expanding national story. Some histori-

ans have adopted the epithet “empire” to describe continental expansion during this period, but the application of the term in this context needs careful consideration, as chapter 5 will suggest. External relations receive episodic treatment until 1898, when the United States went to war with Spain and annexed the remnants of her empire. From the standpoint of imperial history, however, the conventional approach is anomalous. Not even the most exceptional states achieved effective independence overnight, and Anglo-settler states typically retained enduring ties with the “mother country.”³⁷ As seen from the perspective adopted here, the nineteenth century can be divided into two parts: between 1783 and 1861, the United States remained dependent on British influence across a range of important material and cultural aspects of life; after 1865, effective independence became an increasing reality, and was sealed and celebrated in 1898. Accordingly, the nineteenth century as a whole merits inclusion in this study as the first important example of a newly decolonized state grappling with continuing imperial influences before eventually shedding them.

The concept of effective independence is indicative rather than precise, but is nevertheless a marked improvement on the alternative, which assumes, by default, that formal independence devolves full control over state sovereignty. Studies of decolonization commonly attempt to distinguish between the two. The formal transfer of power is heralded by official pronouncements and constitutional changes, and is immediate and highly visible; effective devolution traces the typically protracted and fraught process by which political, economic, and cultural links with the ex-colonial power were uncoupled or significantly modified. In a globalized world, the transfer of power is rarely complete: integration inevitably qualifies national sovereignty to some degree, while embedded institutions and established foreign relations have qualities of persistence that carry them forward, even when they are unwanted. The term “neocolonialism” is often applied to cases where the appearance of power, but not its substance, has been transferred. Complete sovereignty, on the other hand, is an exceptional state and not always a desirable one because, in the form of autarchy, it is often associated with poverty rather than with affluence. As applied in this text, the concept of effective independence occupies the generous space between these extremes.

The war with Spain in 1898 used to be seen as a “great aberration” that briefly interrupted the steady growth of republican ideals.³⁸ Revisionist research has abandoned this explanation, but has yet to weld the many different accounts now available into a coherent alternative. Moreover, although historians have studied the Spanish-American War

in considerable detail, their interest flags with the peace settlement. “Normal service” resumes after 1900, when the large themes of domestic history again command attention. It is not until World War I that leading texts begin to allot substantial space to international relations, and only after World War II that a new type of American “empire” comes into view. Meanwhile, a different set of historians has produced a remarkable array of detailed studies of the islands that fell under U.S. rule, though these have yet to be coordinated and made accessible to a wider audience.³⁹

It is worth pausing to consider the significance of these omissions. Despite contributions from Progressives and their successors, several generations of historians have either marginalized the insular empire created in 1898 or disguised it by referring to “expansionism.”⁴⁰ Books on the subject are few in number and have rarely achieved popularity; the exceptions have fitted into the national epic either by identifying the “mystique of freedom” as the central theme of America’s “experience with dependencies,” or by acknowledging that any sins committed in the course of colonial rule were redeemed subsequently by good works.⁴¹ Most of the early studies of the period of colonial rule have suffered the ultimate scholarly fate of death by neglect, and are now entombed in the lowest reaches of university libraries. Nevertheless, the literature includes pioneering work that deserves credit for opening the subject for inspection, even if historians subsequently decided to look in other directions.⁴²

In 1926, Parker T. Moon produced the first comprehensive scholarly account of the imperial systems that arose at the close of the nineteenth century. Moon reflected the prevailing wisdom of the day in assuming that the United States was an exceptional power whose motives and performance set standards that other colonial states were unlikely to match. He judged that the record of the United States as a “non-aggressive nation” was superior to that of the European powers in advancing education and preparing the way to self-government.⁴³ Julius Pratt, reflecting in 1951 on the period of U.S. colonial rule, took a similar view, claiming that, in general, American imperialism had been “benevolent,” and that “those who have fallen under the guardianship of the United States have fared well in the main.”⁴⁴ Although Pratt’s study lacked the incisiveness of his earlier, innovative book, *Expansionists of 1898* (1936), it offered an admirably clear account of all the subordinate territories of the United States. Whitney Perkins’s weighty survey of colonial policy and management, published in 1962, made little impression at the time, perhaps because his approach did not reflect the mood of the moment, but it was

packed with carefully researched information that remains invaluable today.⁴⁵ Extraordinary though it may seem, more than half a century later this book remains the last attempt to produce a comprehensive assessment of U.S. colonial rule in the twentieth century.

Dissenters also made their voices heard. In 1925, the remarkable Scott Nearing offered a broad interpretation of American imperialism in *Dollar Diplomacy* that gave scholarly currency to the phrase first used by President William H. Taft.⁴⁶ Nearing anticipated many of the findings of later scholars, especially those associated with the New Left, in emphasizing the interplay of “military power and economic advantage” and the paramountcy of financial interests in creating an empire that was both formal and invisible.⁴⁷ He drew attention, too, to continuities in American imperialism, notably Westward expansion and the subjugation of Native American peoples, which historians of imperialism have only recently rediscovered. Leland Jenks, writing with characteristic verve and insight about Cuba in 1928, had little time for what he called “the selective perceptions of idealists,” and took a hard-headed view of American purposes.⁴⁸ For him, the story was one of “excellent intentions, of ineptitude and misunderstanding, of meddling helpfulness, and of a somewhat pettifogging support of American ‘interests’ on the part of Washington.”⁴⁹

At this point, it is worth referring to the exclusion clause cited earlier: the present study lacks the scope, and the author the ability and authority, to offer a new master narrative of U.S. history. The foregoing historiographical sketch serves a more limited function. The discussion of the exceptionalist tradition and its offshoots is not a preface to yet another extended criticism of its failings, but is intended to establish a starting point for the more challenging task of offering an alternative reading of themes that fall under the broad heading “American Empire.” The question immediately arises as to whether it is possible to integrate different eras and themes in a coherent explanation of this subject that is consistent with its many particularities. This question, however, leads to another that has a prior claim: the need to grapple with the problem of defining the term “empire.”

EMPIRE: “A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME . . .”?

A rose will indeed smell as sweet if given another name. Sweetness, however, is an insufficient definition of a rose. Some roses have little scent; some flowers of a different species may smell just as sweet as a rose. As with roses, so with empires: a common feature may be insufficient to

distinguish empires from other types of polity, or one type of empire from another. Historians, however, cannot define empires with the precision that botanists can name plants. A general characteristic of empires that identifies their expansive, multiethnic qualities may be sufficient to separate them from compact, homogeneous states, but still groups together too many flowers that are not roses. At this point, the search for an acceptable definition can easily end in frustration. One response is to assert that “it makes very little difference” whether a dominant state is called an empire, a hegemon, or something else.⁵⁰ The conclusion has the attraction of allowing commentators to escape further intellectual torment. It is also unsafe because the choice of terms has a crucial influence on the way arguments are framed and, where relevant, on the policy recommendations derived from them.

At one time, historians thought they knew what an empire was. Down to the eighteenth century, “empire” referred to rule over extensive territory; in the second half of the century, and thereafter, the term was applied to a collection of possessions united by command rather than community.⁵¹ The belief that Britain was an empire gave way to the idea that it had an empire.⁵² The boundaries of this empire were defined by the constitutional relationship that joined the component territories to a central authority. Admittedly, the relationship varied, and in the British case covered numerous possibilities, from dominions to protectorates. Moreover, the emphasis on formality bypassed the question of how far official authority translated into effective control. Nevertheless, scholars could take reassurance from opening a map and seeing at a glance exactly how far the imperial writ extended.

The age of innocence ended abruptly in 1953, when a now celebrated essay introduced the concept of informal empire.⁵³ The idea itself was not new: some scholars had already referred to an “invisible” empire; Lenin had included “semi-colonies” in his theory of capitalist imperialism.⁵⁴ In 1953, however, a new generation received the history it needed to understand the novelties of the time. By then, the United States had imprinted itself on Britain to an extent that was unprecedented and unexpected. Between 1941 and 1945, Britain’s new ally gave a demonstration of its shattering military power that was both comforting and unsettling. The ex-colony was coming back, if not striking back. The former periphery was beginning to influence the center in ways that, arguably, constituted an incursion into national sovereignty. It was a moment to rethink established approaches to the history of empire.

The rethinking that occurred permanently changed the course of imperial studies. According to the new interpretation, empires were not

only visible constitutional entities, but could also be invisible spheres of influence that might also qualify for a new status, that of informal empire. Two important innovations followed this insight. One caused scholars to rearrange the chronology of imperialism. Orthodox accounts had long divided imperial history into two main stages: an era of mercantilist empires, which ended in the late eighteenth century, and a sudden burst of “new” imperialism at the close of the nineteenth century. In between lay a period of imperial quiescence. The notion of informal empire bridged the gap. Constitutional definitions obscured the fact that imperial expansion had a continuous history. Far from resting between engagements, imperialism was operating informally in ways that previous observers had failed to see. The other innovation redrew the map of empire. New research into examples of informal empire incorporated large parts of the world that had previously been excluded from the study of nineteenth-century imperialism. Latin America, the Middle East, and China entered the stage—and have never left it.

The voluminous debate stimulated by this transformative interpretation continues, though in a more stately fashion than it did at the outset. Among the unresolved issues, the problem of defining informal empire is particularly relevant to the present discussion. Gallagher and Robinson deployed a method that might be termed “scientific hyperbole” to establish their claim that informal empire deserved to rank with its formal complement. Having launched the idea, however, they did not spend much time refining it. Large areas of uncertainty quickly opened up. In some applications, informal influence appeared as a junior associate of assertive imperialism; in others, it became synonymous with the status of informal empire. The stronger claim remains elusive. The proposition that imperialism involves the exercise of power in international relations to diminish the sovereignty of independent states requires an assessment of the components of sovereignty and some measurement of the extent to which outside influences have been able to compromise them. Historians have struggled to meet these conditions. They accept that the concept of empire is no longer confined by constitutional certainties, but are aware, too, that its new, enlarged boundaries remain imprecise.

Ambiguities of terminology multiplied after the traumatic events of 9/11 and the subsequent invasion of Iraq, when the term “empire” made a dramatic entry into the public domain. A special edition of *The National Interest*, published in the heady spring of 2003, made the point particularly clearly. James Kurth declared in the opening essay that “today, there is only one empire—the global empire of the United States.”⁵⁵ Philip Zelikow was equally forthright in the article that followed: “let

us stop talking of American empire, for there is no such thing.”⁵⁶ Other contributors represented more nuanced positions. Jack Snyder used the term “empire” to refer mainly to informal control; Stephen Peter Rosen drew attention to the ambiguities involved in applying the term to the United States, but applied it nevertheless.⁵⁷ The judgments of this selection of notable social scientists are representative of innumerable similar statements covering a wide range of possible definitions. As empire became the buzzword of the day, a legion of new experts, bearing the gift of instant authority, pronounced on the subject without burdening their readers with definitional difficulties.⁵⁸

Historians whose interests lay in the United States also grappled with the problem of definition. Niall Ferguson and Bernard Porter agreed, from very different perspectives, that the United States was an empire that ought to acknowledge its status.⁵⁹ Porter took the definition to its limits by claiming that the United States was a “super-empire” that “exceeds any previous empires the world has ever seen.”⁶⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, referring to the Cold War, concluded that the United States was an empire because, as a single state, it was able to influence the behavior of other states, whether by coercion or persuasion.⁶¹ Paul Kennedy, though more circumspect, considered the United States in 2002 to be “an empire in formation.”⁶² Against this position, Arthur Schlesinger was adamant that the United States failed to meet the standards required for imperial status because it did not exercise “political control” over the “domestic and foreign policies of weaker countries”; informal influence, in his view, was an insufficient qualification.⁶³ Anthony Pagden was equally convinced that the term was a misnomer and that analogies between the United States and previous empires were misplaced.⁶⁴ Michael Hunt suggested that “empire” failed to capture the full extent of U.S. power and that “hegemony” might be a more accurate description.⁶⁵ Charles Maier surveyed various possible definitions and concluded with an ambiguity of his own, namely that “the United States reveals many, but not all . . . of the traits that have distinguished empires.”⁶⁶ Dane Kennedy used the term but recognized the significant differences between British and American “empires” and the need to match terms to circumstances.⁶⁷

Variations of this order, when applied to the same phenomenon, are invitations to misunderstanding. To refer to the United States as a quasi-empire, a virtual empire, a super-empire, or an empire of an unprecedented kind is to expand the original formulation while simultaneously amplifying its imprecision. Commentators who begin with very general or very different definitions have no difficulty finding weighty reasons for validating or vilifying the state in question. British authorities reached

back to the classical world to cull attributes that justified the Pax Britannica.⁶⁸ The Victorians admired Greece for its creativity and colonies of settlement; they turned to Rome for lessons on how to govern subject peoples.⁶⁹ These twin towers of Western civilization achieved unrivaled positions in the thinking of the time. As Sir Henry Maine, the distinguished jurist, put it, in a phrase long quoted with approval, “except the blind forces of nature, nothing moves in this world which is not Greek in its origin.”⁷⁰

Contemporary American commentators, on the other hand, cited classical sources to contrast Britain’s empire of brutality with the consensual extension of liberty across the United States.⁷¹ They used the same sources in the twentieth century to endorse the Pax Americana. The events of 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq that followed produced a veritable frenzy of comparisons.⁷² Commentators of various persuasions delivered the Rome of military steel and stern purpose (the Pentagon’s Rome), the Rome of a strong state (Roosevelt’s or Bush’s Rome, according to taste), the Rome of privatization (Reagan’s Rome), the Rome of inward-looking myopia addled by corruption (the Rome of a Congress enamored of earmarks and add-ons), and, inevitably, the Rome of pride followed by the Rome of imperial overstretch, ruin, and retribution. All these Romes, freshly laundered, were pressed enthusiastically into political and polemical service.⁷³ Greece, the smaller, less assertive power, stood in the wings, awaiting the call to deliver democracy, the gift of the gods, to the world.

The infinite malleability of analogies with the classical world should induce skepticism about their value. An established procedure reconstructs the history of Greece and Rome by applying the language and approaches devised for studying modern empires, and then treats the results as independent confirmation of the present.⁷⁴ The concepts of Hellenization and Romanization, for example, derive from the nineteenth-century notion of the civilizing mission, which assumes the superiority of the colonizing power and, conversely, the inferiority of those subjected to it. The comparisons typically drawn between classical and modern empires are therefore far less independent than their advocates believe. The methodology guarantees gratifying results, but at the price of abandoning claims to objectivity.

GLOBALIZATION AND EMPIRES

No matter how it is viewed, “empire” is a term that frays at the edges. Imprecision, however, is an inescapable characteristic of all holistic terms, such as state and class, as well as empire. Commentators have defined

empires in different ways since classical times partly because empires have changed their structure and function.⁷⁵ Accordingly, there is no prospect of reaching an agreed definition that fits all cases, except at the highest level of generalization, which is helpful only for the broadest of purposes. The only reasonable requirements are that definitions are aligned with the purpose of a particular enquiry, and that ideological and other presuppositions are acknowledged, so that, as Hobson put it, “masked words” do not conceal “brute facts.”⁷⁶ The interpretation advanced in the present study does not depend on a judgment about the malign or benign consequences of empire. The purpose of the terms adopted here is solely to group properties that identify different types of empire and distinguish empires from hegemons.⁷⁷

The same comments apply to the more recent term, “globalization.”⁷⁸ Definitions abound; all of them are open to criticism. There is general agreement that globalization involves the increase and extension of the flows and velocity of goods, people, and ideas across the world, but continuing uncertainty about how the process can be measured satisfactorily and fitted to an appropriate chronology.⁷⁹ Economists have made the most progress in this regard. By tracing the convergence of factor and commodity prices in world markets, they are able to date the decisive advance of globalization to the mid-nineteenth century.⁸⁰ They note, too, that the expansion of trade and other flows is an insufficient measure: integration has to have a transforming effect by, for example, raising living standards. The principal drawback of this approach is that it excludes noneconomic considerations. Other means of achieving increasing integration can also have transformative consequences. Imperialism can bring far-reaching political changes; movements of people, whether as free settlers or slaves, create new societies as well as develop new economies; flows of ideas, whether spiritual or secular, can convert belief systems and alter aspirations. Globalization is applied here in this wider, comprehensive sense. Accordingly, the analysis that follows lacks the precision that might accompany a more specialized inquiry. On the other hand, it has the potential to encompass larger developments that might otherwise be seen imperfectly or not at all. This conception treats globalization as a process that can produce different outcomes. Unlike modernization theory or the dependency thesis, it is not a theory that claims predictability, which is why it has been attached, with equal conviction, to conflicting views of its consequences.

As a process, globalization needs an impulse to give it a trajectory. The evolution of empires, specifically Western empires, is the impulse that best fits the historical evolution considered here. Empires were not,

of course, exclusive agents of globalization. They shared the role with diaspora, mercantile networks, and universal systems of belief, such as Islam, in ways that were both complementary and competitive. Nevertheless, the British Empire, the greatest of the modern empires, gave globalization unrivaled impetus by annexing territory throughout the world and extending its influence informally into Latin America, the Ottoman Empire, and China. Its all-embracing character serves as a template for the definition that follows, and is further justified by its acknowledged importance in the history of the United States. Admittedly, empires could be restrictive as well as expansive, and their writ did not cover all parts of the globe. Yet, it is as well to remember that, even in the twenty-first century, national governments continue to restrict the free flow of goods, people, and services, and large swaths of territory remain insulated from globalizing influences.⁸¹ Accordingly, the incomplete character of the process is not a disqualification: empires can still serve as exceptionally valuable means of reconstructing the history of globalization since the eighteenth century. In doing so, they also offer a way of drawing the United States into the story of the transformations that changed the world.

In the most general terms, an empire is a species of the genus expansion. An expanding state or society is not necessarily an imperialist one: goods, people, and ideas can flow across borders without one state seeking to dominate or subordinate another. Imperialism, however, expresses an intention to dominate other states or peoples. It joins expansion to empire but can subsist without it.⁸² Successful imperialism, where an imperialism of intent becomes an imperialism of result, has three possible outcomes. One is the creation of a formal empire, whereby the dominant power annexes territory by force or negotiation and abolishes the constitutional independence of the polity concerned. Subordination enables the dominant power to manage the internal and external policies of the dependency to ensure, as far as possible, that they reflect its own priorities. The second outcome is the creation of informal influence or possibly even informal empire, whereby the constitutional independence of the satellite is untouched but the dominant power is able to diminish or reshape other elements of sovereignty, again within limits, to suit its own interests. The third possibility is that imperialist actions lead to the incorporation of territory and the assimilation of its people on a basis of equality, in which case the outcome is a unitary state or a nation-state.

Formal empires were extensive, multiethnic polities dominated by one state or *ethnie* that ruled separate, subordinate states, provinces, or peoples. Empires of this type exercised integrative functions that

distinguished them from assertive states that conquered rivals and then either withdrew or failed to establish permanent control. Radial lines joined the imperial power to its satellites and became channels for flows of goods, people, and ideas that reflected the priorities of the center. Integration was not the work of a moment, which explains why empires had to be sufficiently durable to acquire the name. Formal empires used force to annex territory and manage subordinates. They also deployed the negotiating skills needed to maintain allies and secure obedience over diverse and distant subjects. Toleration of diversity was the necessary price central authority paid to achieve the degree of integration that met its needs.⁸³

The resulting relationship between the imperial center and its colonies was mutual but unequal. Without a degree of cooperation, empires would have been ungovernable. Without constitutional inequality, they would have become states with citizens enjoying equal rights rather than states with subjects held in conditions of subordination. The degree of mutuality or congruence varied from colony to colony and through time. A high degree of mutuality encouraged collaborative techniques of control based on the use of strategically placed intermediaries; a low degree of mutuality obliged the imperial power to rely to a greater extent on coercion. Empires ended when intermediaries ceased to cooperate or when the costs of coercion proved too burdensome. Visible manifestations of decline were reflections of underlying changes in the conditions that had brought the imperial state into being.

Two additional features of empires are central to the argument that follows and need identifying at this point. The first emphasizes the territorial character of formal empires: the imperial authority claimed ownership as well as use of the lands it acquired.⁸⁴ The “maritime empires” were not set on ceaseless circumnavigation. Oceanic voyages were a means of reaching land, securing bases, and prospecting inland, where it was possible to do so. Technology, not ambition, set the limits to their achievements. By the eighteenth century, the acquisition of large tracts of territory beyond Europe had become a prominent and enduring feature of Western empires. New property rights attracted settlers from Europe by opening the way for permanent land transfers. Until the late nineteenth century, most commentators still thought of colonies in the classical sense, as being settlements of people.⁸⁵ Settlers were powerful agents of integration, and their presence, even as minorities, greatly influenced economic development, political relations, racial attitudes, and legislation in what became known as colonies of settlement. Territorial control grew in importance in the nineteenth century in parts of the

imperial world where colonial policy limited white settlement and confirmed the property rights of indigenous people. Colonial governments there were heavily involved in clarifying land law, encouraging export crops, overseeing mining operations, managing labor supplies, and constructing roads and railroads. They promoted a degree of cultural assimilation, through missionaries and education, and set about introducing political institutions that would encourage local elites to cooperate with their foreign rulers.

It could be argued that the means by which authority is established are secondary to the fact that imperialism traces the exercise of asymmetrical power in international relations. The means of applying power, however, provide a key to the character of an empire and its place in history. The Western states that created, managed, and eventually dissolved empires between the mid-eighteenth century and the mid-twentieth century established territorial empires because they fitted their stage of development. The ensuing pattern of integration amounted to a development plan for the world. The “civilizing mission” that followed was an unprecedented exercise in social engineering that could be undertaken only after a significant measure of territorial control had been established.

The second feature concerns the role of empires in supplying public goods (externalities). The concept of public goods refers to a wide range of services, such as administration, security, infrastructure, and the provision of legal, educational, and monetary systems. Public goods are inclusive (“non-excludable,” in economists’ terms) because they confer benefits that can be enjoyed by those who do not contribute to the cost of provision, as well as by those who do. They are also noncompetitive (“non-rivalrous”) in that benefits are realized not only by those who pay for them but also by those who do not. National defense benefits everyone, whether or not they pay taxes. Governments provide public goods because private enterprise is unable or unwilling to do so. Accordingly, the supply of public goods involves taxation, subsidies, and, in some cases, changes in property rights. The East India Company, for example, provided public goods while Britain’s interest in India was limited, but was brought under government control once the task exceeded its capacity. The Industrial Revolution and the rise of nation-states increased the demand for public goods—and with it the importance of governments.

States of all kinds supply public goods. Empires, however, had a distinctive role in this regard. As leading agents of globalization, they spanned diverse regions and continents, and extended public goods across existing boundaries. Technological advances encouraged the idea

that world trade could increase and development could become cumulative. The benefits of what became known as progress, however, depended on the provision of public goods. Seen from this perspective, imperialism was a form of enforced globalization that sought to increase international integration by delivering public goods to newly colonized regions. Empires enjoyed advantages of economies of scale in providing some public goods, notably protection. They mobilized formidable military power, possessed bases across the world, and could call upon accumulated managerial experience. On the other hand, the cost of protection and other services had to be met without causing disaffection at home or, ultimately, in the dependencies. This imperial dilemma shaped the trajectory of the Western empires from their rise to their demise.

A final consideration concerns the relationship between empires, as defined here, and hegemon, as defined in the literature on international relations.⁸⁶ The Greek concept of *hegemonia* established itself as the most influential alternative in the 1970s, since which time specialists in international relations have used the term to refer to political and other forms of leadership exercised by a single state.⁸⁷ The theory holds that a hegemon is an essential guarantor of international order. Its exceptional ability to supply public goods enables it to deploy powers of direction and persuasion throughout the world.⁸⁸ Moreover, in pursuing its own priorities, a hegemon bestows wider benefits that confer moral legitimacy on its leadership and ensure that its actions are not dictatorial. Without a hegemon, the argument runs, the world would lapse into disorder.

This justification has the special advantage of presenting hegemony as the smiling face of dominance. If justice, or even gratitude, existed in international affairs, the prize of eternal life would reward the hegemon's benevolence. In reality, the hegemon suffers a fate that is appropriately Greek in its tragedy. As charity spreads abroad, it drains the hegemon of resources and energy, and creates opportunities for other states to emerge as rivals. If the hegemon continues to promote liberal policies, the gains may accrue disproportionately to competing powers. If the hegemon retreats into protectionism, the liberal international order as a whole is likely to suffer. When the system fragments, disorder follows; ultimately, war may bring the hegemon's reign to a cataclysmic conclusion. Altruism brings heavy burdens.

This dispiriting sequence raises the question of whether the potentially suicidal consequences of success can be avoided, and, if so, how.⁸⁹ Although theorists of international relations have devoted a great deal of energy to finding the answer, their solutions have fallen short of the scientific certitude they have sought.⁹⁰ Critics have attacked both the

assumptions underlying the theory and its application.⁹¹ Some analysts have revised standard interpretations of Thucydides, which treat *The History of the Peloponnesian War* as a founding text of almost biblical stature.⁹² Thucydides, it now appears, was not establishing timeless principles of international relations, but offering a rich description and a sense of the contingency of explanatory variables that are closer to the historian's art than to the theorist's science. Given that Thucydides saw himself as a historian, this finding aligns revisionist thinking with his self-description. The notion that the international system is inherently "anarchic" has also been contested because it understates cooperative inclinations among states and elevates the importance of the hegemon as the presumed guarantor of order.⁹³ Empirical studies of the life cycles of Britain and the United States have failed to deliver convincing recommendations about the causes of hegemonic stability and decline.⁹⁴ Some scholars deny that Britain qualified for hegemonic status in the nineteenth century, despite managing a vast empire.⁹⁵ Others have argued that peace in the nineteenth century was preserved by strong coalitions rather than by single hegemons, which in any case were not noted for benevolence and could be disruptive rather than stabilizing influences.⁹⁶ The flaws in the theory, like the quest for scientific certainty, derive ultimately from its purpose, which in retrospect can be seen to have been a sustained attempt to objectify the global role of the United States during the Cold War.⁹⁷

Shorn of this particular application, however, the term "hegemony" still has a place in the language of international relations. As agents of globalization, hegemons and empires seek to manage the "rules of the game" that other states are expected to follow in the international arena.⁹⁸ Both possess impressive economic and military power, but exercise it in different ways. Hegemons are leaders, not rulers, and hope to achieve legitimacy through persuasion, though they may resort to coercion.⁹⁹ They supply public goods, but possess little territory beyond their own borders. They aim to influence the external policy of other states but have only a limited interest in directing internal policy. Britain, among other Western states, had a territorial empire and exercised managerial powers over domestic politics. Whether or not the British Empire was also hegemonic does not affect the argument advanced here, and is a question that can be left to specialists in international relations who first raised it.

It follows from the definition used here, however, that the United States also had an empire between 1898 and 1959. This is the long forgotten insular empire, which is featured in the second half of this study. After 1945, the United States became a world power without having

extensive territorial possessions. It ceased to be an empire, even though commentators, impressed by its economic and military might, attached the imperial label to it during this period.¹⁰⁰ From that point onward, the United States is better described as a hegemon, or more accurately an aspiring hegemon, a leading power that aimed to achieve the degree of dominance that met its priorities. As the next section will show, fundamental changes in the global order underlay these semantic differences and shaped the possibilities open to the two dominant powers: Britain built an empire; the United States sought hegemony.

TIME AND MOTION

It is now evident that globalization sprang from multiple centers of origin and had roots that antedated the twentieth century.¹⁰¹ As yet, however, agreement on the longevity of the process has not been matched by a discussion of periodization that is sufficiently detailed to represent different phases in its trajectory. The analysis advanced here identifies three overlapping sequences, termed proto-globalization, modern globalization, and postcolonial globalization, which encompass the last three centuries.¹⁰² The terms and the periodization relate primarily to Western Europe and the United States, the regions covered by this study, though with some chronological adjustments the categories could also be applied to other parts of the world. Each phase advanced through a dialectical process: successful expansion created countervailing or competing forces; the struggle between them culminated in successive crises, which occurred in the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries, and the mid-twentieth century. These were transformative events. Each ushered in a new phase that resolved one major conflict before eventually giving rise to another.

Montesquieu provided a fundamental insight into the dynamic involved in this dialectic when he formulated the principle that changes in the scale of institutions required corresponding changes in their structure.¹⁰³ Montesquieu shared with other political philosophers of his age a concern with the problem of reconciling liberty and security in ways that avoided the extremes of anarchy and authoritarianism.¹⁰⁴ Small states, in his view, were particularly well suited to nurturing republican civic virtues, which flourished in conditions that allowed personal relations to predominate. States of moderate size tended to be both hierarchical and monarchical but could nevertheless preserve the liberty of their citizens, providing that their constitutions were designed to control the abuse of power. The larger a state became, however, the more it was

inclined to develop despotic tendencies. Its composition became more diverse, interpersonal relations weakened, and private interests took precedence over the public good. The merits of small states were offset by their inability to ward off external predators. Large states, on the other hand, bought security at the cost of liberty and were liable to be brought down by internal corruption or excessive military expenditure. Montesquieu concluded that states of moderate size, of which Britain was the prime exemplar, were those best fitted to achieve the optimum balance between liberty and order. The ramifications of this argument had particular relevance for the United States. Montesquieu suggested that the dangers associated with large states might be controlled by adopting a federal rather than a unitary form of government and by inserting checks and balances to prevent the growth of autocracy.¹⁰⁵ These ideas, mediated by Hume and taken up by Madison, influenced the shape of the Constitution the United States adopted in 1788.¹⁰⁶

Montesquieu classified empires among the large states with tendencies toward despotism. He distinguished, however, between territorial and maritime empires. He considered that the former, which included Rome and Spain, were predatory and oppressive, whereas the latter, such as Britain, had positive qualities because of their commercial potential.¹⁰⁷ Montesquieu also allowed for the possibility that expansive republics could be both durable and progressive, which helps to explain why his work was so influential among the founders of the United States.¹⁰⁸ His optimism about the benefits of trade placed him with subsequent advocates of *laissez-faire*, notably François Quesnay and Adam Smith, though, like them, Montesquieu thought that government regulation had its place, especially in upholding the security of the state.¹⁰⁹ Empires, like other states, had dynamic as well as organic qualities. Fluctuating fortunes followed from unanticipated and often uncontrollable shifts in size or structure. The consequences were diverse, sometimes ambiguous, and rarely predictable with any degree of precision.

Montesquieu's most famous work, *The Spirit of the Laws*, was published in 1748, shortly before his death in 1755. The Seven Years' War, the first global battle for empire, had yet to take place; Britain had still to annex extensive territory in India; the mainland colonies remained modest settlements nestling on the east coast. Still further ahead lay a world of towns, industries, and nation-states. Montesquieu's basic insight joining size and structure retains its value, but needs to be related to novel circumstances that not even a thinker of his perspicacity could have envisaged. The interpretation advanced here offers one possible template for developments that appeared after the transformation of the

world Montesquieu was familiar with. The signposts that follow identify the three crises that form the core of the book and provide an abbreviated guide to the argument laid out in detail in the chapters that follow. In one form or another, these crises are familiar entries in histories of the period concerned. The analysis offered here seeks to place them in a wider context than the one they habitually occupy and to suggest some fresh ways of looking at their causes and consequences.

The term “proto-globalization,” which is discussed in chapter 2, is used here principally to refer to military-fiscal states in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These were dynastic states dominated by landed elites who drew their wealth and position from economies that were based primarily on agriculture but had also sprouted substantial market sectors that included handicrafts as well as food products. Military imperatives encouraged expansion and centralization to secure and administer the growing revenue needs of the state. These ambitions acquired a maritime dimension as technological improvements carried oceanic exploration across the globe. Proto-globalization reached its highest stage of development in the second half of the eighteenth century, when a series of wars among the leading military-fiscal states reverberated around the world and ended in large-scale mutual destruction. What followed, however, was not simply the story of the “rise of liberalism.” After 1815, the victors made strenuous efforts to restore the prewar order. The first half of the nineteenth century was characterized by an intense and continuing struggle between conservatives and reformers. By 1848, moreover, conservative forces were in the ascendant nearly everywhere, with the partial exception of Britain. Even in Britain, political reform arrived late and did not disturb the dominance of the landed interest. Similarly, it was not until the adoption of free trade in 1846 that international economic policy broke decisively with the mercantilist system.

The crisis of the late eighteenth century was essentially fiscal in origin. Fiscal imperatives arising from a costly arms race and related expenditure on public goods intensified the search for new and increased taxes. European governments treated imperial possessions as key contributors to pressing revenue needs. Increased tax demands at home and abroad, however, provoked discontent that was subsequently converted into political claims for government accountability and reform. Adam Smith observed the dialectical process at work in the mainland colonies. As chapter 3 shows, mercantilism helped the fledgling settlements to increase in size and wealth in the course of the century. The success of the colonizing venture, however, not only raised the revenue potential of the colonies, but also uplifted the aspirations of the settlers and provided

them with the means of realizing them. The home government could control discontent in its inner provinces, including Scotland and Ireland, but struggled to manage distant settlements across the Atlantic. What followed in 1776 was a revolution of falling expectations. It was a protest against both the unexpected increase in revenue demands and the unwelcome imposition of controls on the expansion of inland settlement. This argument joins developments in Britain to those in the colonies, and revives an interest in material explanations of the Revolution, which in recent years have received less attention than intellectual and cultural considerations. Events in the mainland colonies need to be seen in a European and global context. The British government's struggle to impose its will on the mainland colonies and the decision to advance into India were both products of the imperative that joined fiscal needs to the stability of the state.

After 1783, historians of empire hand the study of the United States to a new set of specialists, who tell the national story. By all accounts, the American Empire had come to an end. Yet, formal decolonization does not necessarily signify the passing of imperial influence. The evidence presented in chapter 4 suggests that the United States had still to attain effective independence by the time the Civil War began in 1861. British influence in particular featured prominently in the economic, political, and cultural life of the new Republic. Standard approaches to the period that focus on nation-building may miss wider considerations. Seen from an imperial perspective, the United States appears in a new guise as the first important exemplar of Britain's emerging global informal influence and also the first to devise and dispute strategies for achieving genuine independence. The mounting quarrel between North and South over the character of the new state reflected the contest between progressive and conservative forces in Europe after 1815. Northern interests advocated ideas of development that ranged from tariff protection to ambitions for attaining cultural independence. The political dominance of Southern interests, however, entrenched a dependent free-trading relationship with Britain and a matching sense of cultural affiliation.

Continental expansion, as chapter 5 recounts, is best understood in the context of the expansion of settler societies in other parts of the world. The westward movement gave vent to the demand for land that Britain had attempted to curtail, but also increased competition between Northern and Southern interests. The Civil War, the culmination of these tensions, was a secessionist movement that foreshadowed similar episodes that were to mark the history of many other newly independent states. Cotton was to the South what oil was to Biafra. The war

also echoed the conflicts in Europe that erupted in the revolutions of 1848 and the military campaigns that assembled Germany and Italy in the 1860s. Self-determination and individual rights were watchwords on both sides of the Atlantic. The Civil War broke a state to build a nation.

The second great crisis, which struck in the late nineteenth century, and is the subject of Part II, arose from what is termed here “modern globalization,” which was the product of two well-known processes: the spread of industrialization and the creation of nation-states. Military-fiscal states battled on, in some cases down to World War I, but lost ground to forces that aimed to reshape the economy, society, and the state itself. Nation-states sought fiscal unity to raise the revenues needed to bind new social groups together. Warfare states added welfare to their mandate; parliamentary government replaced dynastic control of revenues and policy.

Chapter 6 traces the process of uneven development that manifested itself in the contrast between Britain, which had become an industrial power with an unmatched financial and service sector, and states in continental Europe such as Italy and Spain, which remained largely rural. Political development was similarly uneven: Britain had a well-developed sense of nationality and had moved slowly but significantly in the direction of political reform; a number of other countries were recent creations in which provincial loyalties remained dominant and traditional political hierarchies, though increasingly challenged, still held power. The transition to modern globalization, as the name implies, was associated with increasing global integration as technological improvements cut the costs of production, distribution, and coercion. Britain again led the process by expanding world trade, encouraging international specialization, advertising preferred forms of constitutional government, and raising aspirations. The British Empire became the principal mechanism for managing multilateral exchanges, policing financial flows, and enforcing order on the high seas. Free trade carried Britain’s empire of influence well beyond the formal empire. As the century advanced, influences that had already penetrated the United States extended to the Ottoman Empire, Latin America, and East Asia.

The conversion of military-fiscal states to liberal constitutions and modern economies was a stressful process that swept the European states into major crises in the late nineteenth century. Industrializing states grappled with large-scale class conflict for the first time; rural states faced new competition from imported agricultural products. The strains of the transition were exacerbated by a long period of deflation, which depressed expectations and increased unemployment during the

last quarter of the century. These pressures tested the unity of the embryonic nation-state. Politicians charged with the duty of upholding civil order and maintaining social cohesion experimented with a range of possible solutions, including welfare reform, repression, and imperialism. Chapter 6 concludes by setting out a typology that links uneven development in Europe to the dramatic imperial ventures that ended in the occupation and annexation of large parts of the world at the close of the century. Imperialism, formal and informal, was the leading globalizing agent of its time.

These developments are integral to an understanding of the history of the United States after 1865, and are not merely background information to a wholly different story of the rise of an independent republic. Chapter 7 argues that the Civil War was followed by a determined effort to construct a nation out of the wreckage of the federal union. Nation-building at home was undertaken at the same time as Germany and Italy were being united; Austria, France, and Japan were being restructured; and Britain was extending the franchise and contemplating the feasibility of creating an imperial federation. Similarly, rapid economic development in the United States from the 1870s, exacerbated by sudden downturns and deflation, produced conflicts between capital and labor, generated unprecedented problems of urban unemployment, and stimulated instances of violent anarchism. Simultaneously, rural distress arising from the loss of foreign markets and deflation fed into a large-scale populist movement that challenged the power and policies of the dominant Republican Party. Although the United States had achieved an exceptional degree of effective independence by the close of the century, the postwar settlement that underpinned it was threatened from within. The success of the forces that had transformed the old structures had in turn created new challenges.

After a short war with Spain in 1898, the United States acquired a territorial empire, consisting primarily of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and a protectorate in Cuba, and annexed the independent state of Hawai'i. Although the war itself has been the subject of innumerable studies, few historians place the event in the wider setting formed by "new imperialism," even though the imperial expansion of the United States occurred at the same time as the European powers were occupying extensive territories in Africa and Asia. Chapter 8 advances an explanation that places the United States in the typology of uneven development offered in chapter 6. In the United States, imperialism was part of the process of nation-building. It sealed the unity of the Republic at a moment when it was again under threat, and in doing so celebrated the achievement of

effective independence. Internal tensions were calmed; capitalism was saved from its own excesses.

Chapter 9 offers an insular view of imperialist encroachments. The analysis, though preliminary, shows how the islands had become entangled in the process of globalization and how the consequences contributed to their loss of independence. Although this perspective has long been a standard part of assessments of the partition and occupation of other parts of the world, studies of the war of 1898 rarely give it the importance it merits. Historians of the United States focus on events within the Republic. Historians of European imperialism leave the insular possessions to historians of the United States. Specialized research examines the islands in detail but generally treats them as separate entities. The account offered here should enable historians of nineteenth-century imperialism to add the islands acquired by the United States to their standard list of illustrations.

After 1898, the insular empire disappears from view, though this is the moment when the real American Empire, the tangible territorial empire, was established. Chapters 10–14 attempt to resuscitate a subject that has been left to wither from neglect. Chapter 10 complements chapters 2 and 6 in setting the scene for the more specialized chapters that follow. The discussion of the international order emphasizes the continuing importance of Britain, and to a lesser extent France, as the leading imperial powers, and disputes claims that an “American Century” arose before Henry Luce envisaged it in 1941. Instead, the argument stresses the continuities rather than the contrasts in the periods before and after World War I. The peace settlement confirmed imperial borders and endorsed the imperial mission. The classic exchange of manufactures for raw materials remained the basis of colonial development. Racial prejudice continued to guide colonial policy. Politicians regarded the possibility of transferring colonial territories from one power to another as a wholly acceptable feature of diplomacy, as it was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Nevertheless, intimations of changes that were to produce a third phase, postcolonial globalization, appeared during the interwar period. A rash of nationalist demonstrations erupted during and immediately after World War I. A more significant challenge arose in the 1930s. The world slump provoked major protests throughout the Western empires; new political movements arose to organize discontent and direct it against colonial rule. The imperial dialectic arising from globalization had again turned success into failure. The expansion of export crops, which colonial rule had encouraged, had jeopardized living standards and subsistence.

Colonial subjects translated liberal advertisements for the civilizing mission into demands for political progress. World War II brought more disruption but in the short run helped to postpone decolonization until the late 1950s. Unexpected help came from the United States, which finally emerged as the leader of the Free World and in this capacity acted to restore the imperial order as a bulwark against the expansion of communism and what later became known as the “Evil Empire.”

Chapters 11, 12, and 13 place the interpretation presented in chapter 10 against the record of U.S. rule in the insular empire. Chapter 11 views the imperial world from Washington, draws comparisons with the policies of other Western imperial powers, and compiles an agenda to assist future research. Chapters 12 and 13 underline the diversity and individuality of the islands and direct attention to local agency. Here, too, the argument is no more than a preliminary attempt to sketch the comparative context, which other scholars with appropriate skills will be able to develop.

The American Empire undoubtedly had a number of distinctive features, notably the lack of a bipartisan policy and the insignificant place of the islands in the deliberations of Congress and in the U.S. economy. Nevertheless, the history of U.S. colonial rule, far from being exceptional, provides a faithful illustration of the general argument advanced in chapter 10. Despite their modest size, the islands represented all the types of colony found in the British and French empires. Colonial administrators adopted direct and indirect methods of rule, and experimented with policies of assimilation and association. Racial prejudices, embedded by long experience of “Indian Wars” and Southern slavery, ensured that policy was infused with paternalism and stiffened with coercion. The orthodox assumptions of development policy, which relied on the expansion of export crops—especially sugar—and cheap labor, continued to prevail. Tariff policy remained the tool of rival lobbies whose mandate was to represent domestic interests in Washington. Contradictory policies espoused by Democrats and Republicans, lack of money, and lack of interest frustrated long-term plans for achieving economic and political progress. The trajectory of the U.S. Empire closely followed that of the European empires, culminating in widespread anti-colonial demonstrations in the 1930s. Viability and democracy, the slogans of the day, were never translated into reality. In the 1940s and 1950s, when Washington devised ways of transferring responsibility while retaining influence, the mission was still unaccomplished.

Decolonization, which is discussed in chapter 14, resulted from the transition from modern to postcolonial globalization. An imperial

dialectic was again in operation: global integration of the kind that had fitted the needs of national-industrial states since 1850 had served its purpose. It had also ceased to be feasible. In 1945, however, policy-makers in Washington and London saw a different future. Following the war, the victorious allies reconstructed the imperial order, as they had done after 1918. The mission was reaffirmed; opposition was forcefully suppressed. After the mid-1950s, however, empires lost legitimacy. Imperial policy was obliged to adapt to changing circumstances: shifts in the world economy; the needs of the Cold War; the costs of holding on; the demands for self-determination. The literature allows the United States scarcely any role in this drama, apart from prosecuting the Cold War and contributing to the decolonization of other Western empires. Yet, the United States decolonized its own insular empire at exactly the same time as the European powers were uncoupling their colonies. In doing so, the Republic went through the same sequence of repression and concession. The United States, moreover, had the additional problem of managing internal decolonization. After World War II, Washington could no longer ignore increased pressure from African Americans and Native Americans for improved civil rights.¹¹⁰ Federal and state governments responded, as in the case of the insular empire, first by suppressing “agitators” and then by giving ground. By the 1970s, it was clear that the era of great empires had passed, even if the Soviet Empire had yet to fall. It should be apparent, too, that the role of the United States in this process ought to be recast to give full weight to its own experience as an imperial power.

The outcome, the spread of postcolonial globalization, is discussed in chapter 15.¹¹¹ In the 1950s, the established pattern of colonial exchange, which traded manufactured goods for raw materials, started to fragment. Alternative forms of specialization and integration made their appearance. Inter-industry trade drew advanced economies together; finance and commercial services displaced old manufacturing occupations; manufacturing clusters arose in former colonies in Asia. World trade no longer radiated from imperial centers but formed new regional connections. Supranational commercial and political organizations with the potential to challenge the sovereignty of the nation-state appeared. The belief in white supremacy that had justified imperialism and facilitated colonial rule began to dissolve. Ideas of racial equality spread. Self-confidence accompanied self-determination. By the 1960s, the conditions that had favored the creation of territorial empires had receded. Power in international relations had to be exercised in other ways. Strategy had to be realigned to fit new structures, as Montesquieu had

observed. The United States was neither a new Rome nor a new Britain. After 1945, the Republic was an aspiring hegemon, not a territorial imperial power. Failure to see, and act on, the distinction has provided a fresh setting for the performance of a timeless Greek tragedy.

**“THE GROWING LABOURS OF
THE LENGTHEN’D WAY”¹¹²**

This study has stretched the author and it may well stretch the reader, too. This is partly because the history that follows this introductory chapter covers nearly three hundred years and extends across the Atlantic and into the Pacific, and also because it seeks to unite two sets of literature that have yet to be integrated systematically: the history of the United States and the history of other Western empires. Historians of the United States will be asked to engage with three substantial chapters dealing with developments outside the United States, as well as tolerate a synthesis and reinterpretation of themes they will be familiar with. Historians of empire face the task of finding their way through a selection of the many intricacies of U.S. history, while also reappraising some well-known features of European imperialism. Stereotyped or unduly shortened versions of history will not serve the purpose, which requires sufficient detail to support large claims about the trajectory of the leading Western powers from the eighteenth century onward. If a supranational world is to have a supranational history, specialists who are separated by time and place need to give parity to other regions if they are to avoid the danger of attaching them to an amplified version of the existing national story. The history offered here does not presume to meet this goal. It does attempt, however, to point in the right direction.

All authors are obliged to make claims that justify their efforts. If they fly too high, ambition may bring them down. If they keep their eyes on the ground, caution prevents them from seeing the stars. Ambition can be tempered by recognizing that the size of the problem far exceeds the skill of any single author, and by acknowledging the achievements of previous scholars.¹¹³ Caution can be adjusted to fit Longfellow’s advice on the art of composition:

If you would hit the mark, you must aim a little above it;
Every arrow that flies feels the attraction of earth.