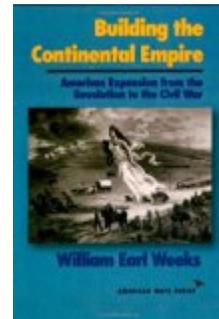


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William Earl Weeks. *Building the Continental Empire: American Expansion from the Revolution to the Civil War*. Chicago, Ill.: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1996. x + 177 pp. \$22.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-135-8.

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In this provocative (in the fullest sense of that word) monograph, William Weeks contends that expansion—the construction of a continental empire—was the *raison d’être* of revolution and then nation-building. So central is this thesis to Weeks’s argument that it shapes his interpretation of virtually every important political event from the colonial era to the sectional crisis of the 1850s. As Weeks has it, British attempts to limit western expansion and eliminate illegal colonial trade in the Caribbean provoked a revolt in 1776 that had as its aim empire as much as independence. Once secured, however, independence issued in no empire. Unable to control much less expand the boundaries and commerce of the nation, the Confederation government proved hopelessly inadequate. Madison, Hamilton, and others therefore determined that only a powerful central authority could ensure union and, more important, promote the physical and economic growth that constituted the nation’s lifeblood. Weeks contends that these “constitutional conspirators,” meeting behind “boarded-up windows,” “pulled off a bloodless coup d’état whose arguable value cannot change the nature of its origins” (pp. 17, 20). In a rare understatement, Weeks concludes that the final product “did little to advance the cause of democratic rule” (p. 19). Perhaps.

The Constitution, however, did much to empower the central government, enabling it to promote territorial aggrandizement and commercial expansion. Hence, diplomatic issues, specifically foreign trade and western expansion, dominated the politics of the early republic. If anything, Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase only whetted Americans’ taste for more land. First the Transcontinental Treaty extended American interests to the Pacific Northwest. Then Monroe’s doctrine secured hemi-

spheric security and circumscribed Europe’s ability to hedge about an expansive American republic. Against this hegemonic backdrop, Weeks logically concludes that Manifest Destiny, though commonly associated with the 1840s, was clearly ascendant by the 1820s. That is, the sentiments that it embraced—virtue, mission, and destiny—were coeval with the creation of the republic and, after the War of 1812, melded into a powerful, if often disingenuous, argument for territorial and commercial growth.

The fruits of Manifest Destiny were plentiful: Florida, Texas, the Oregon territory, and the Mexican cession all became ripe for picking. They were also bitter. Expansion west carried within it the seeds of sectionalism. To switch metaphors, if consensus on expansion initially provided the cement of Union, it came unglued as the nation divided over the extension of slavery. Territorial expansion, which had given rise to and embraced fervent nationalism, now became identified with a sectional agenda. Filibustering expeditions to Cuba and Central America further undermined the coherency of the second-party system and, ultimately, the Union. As one historian has put it, the history of Manifest Destiny in the 1850s is the history of destiny denied. William Weeks might add, it is also the history of destiny transformed.

Weeks clearly demonstrates that empire-building came at a cost. A government sufficient to its ends undermined the democratic process. A peaceful nation of independent, virtuous farmers warred on Seminoles, banished Native Americans from their lands, bullied and lied to European nations (and in the process compromised its own integrity), beat up Mexico, and conspired with fil-

ibusters of all stripes in order to realize its destiny. In a dark irony, these peaceful yeomen, unable to agree on the ends of expansion in the late 1850s, settled the issue by slaughtering each other by the tens of thousands. Unlike Jake and Elwood, United States expansionists were hardly on a mission from God.

If Weeks's story is sordid, and in many ways it is, his argument is also unsatisfying in some respects. Beginning with the conspiracy of 1789, he constructs a government that functions like a machine that directs expansion from the center to promote the interests of the Union (which are assumed and asserted rather than defined and proven). Expansionism, therefore, is a given. The larger political, economic, and social dynamics that defined and drove it are taken for granted. That Hamilton and Madison agreed that a new, more powerful government was in order seems apparent; that they were in accord on the end or purpose of this centralized power is less plausible and the weight of history is against it. One might make the case (and it has been made) that tensions between the periphery and center pushed the nation's boundary outward as Americans moved to an ever-expanding frontier to maintain and extend their personal freedom and liberation.[1] Indeed, the irony seems to be lost on Weeks that the Jeffersonians and Jacksonians, who championed a weak, decentralized government, were the most ardent expansionists in antebellum America and used federal power to promote it. (To be fair, Weeks does recognize Jackson's willingness to use federal muscle to elbow Native Americans off their land.) To the contrary, Federalists, then Whigs, who believed in an activist national government, were always more chary of unbridled expansion. Political conflict over these issues meant that the concept of empire was contested terrain. Thus expansion was not a given, nor was it inevitable. And expansionist initiatives generated political conflict, not widespread consensus among Americans and between parties.

For all of its power and innovation, Weeks's analysis of the demise of manifest destiny is conventional. And therefore, this section is not surprisingly the least satisfactory. Weeks maintains that the expansion of slavery, first hinted at in the Missouri crisis, became increasingly—and fatally—linked to expansionist efforts following the annexation of Texas.[2] This has been the staple of diplomatic historiography since the days of Gog and Magog. Like most diplomatic works before it, *Building a Continental Empire* at once makes too much of slavery by placing it at the center of expansionist debate and too little by considering it solely in its institutional context. If Weeks's larger thesis anticipates—necessitates—

the imperial pretensions of the late nineteenth century, surely his explanation of the end of manifest destiny—sectional conflict over the expansion of the institution—is no less mechanical.

Slavery, however, had multiple meanings for antebellum Americans if not for diplomatic historians. It was the central symbol of American political ideology. As a trope, no less than an institution, slavery negated freedom, undermined equality, and belied self-government. From the colonial era, tensions between the periphery and center reflected the frontier's fear of enthrallment to impersonal eastern political and economic institutions. The desire to maintain and expand personal freedom and liberation, therefore, constituted the ideological rationale and force of expansion. The introduction of Wilmot's proviso, however, initiated a battle between North and South for control of the national government (or center). That is, political conflict between the periphery and center over the shape and power of the national government (which had provided the force of expansionism down to 1846) was replaced by a sectional conflict to shape the character of the *territories* and thus to *control* the national government.

If Weeks's interpretation of expansion would have benefited from a closer look at, and consideration of, the inner workings and forces of domestic politics and antebellum political culture, it would also have been enhanced by looking outside the American experience to place the creation of this continental empire in an international context. As Bradford Perkins has put it in his most recent work, *The Creation of a Republican Empire*, "The driving forces in American foreign policy both are and are not like those of other nations. They include the same emphasis on national self-interest, the same intrusion of the larger culture, the same distortions ... of the view of world events seen through a prism of national but not universal values." [3] Weeks, however, implicitly proposes an American exceptionalism that reflects the presumptions of antebellum Americans North and South while ignoring the national values that structured and gave meaning to expansionist foreign policy. Put in other terms, if John Quincy Adams's defense of Jackson's bloody shenanigans in Florida resulted in an "audacious communique" that "fundamentally misrepresented the actual state of affairs" (pp. 46, 47), could not the same be said of half the correspondence that poured from the foreign ministries of Europe? Nor did Americans invent the wheel when they wrapped their self-interested expansionist efforts in the silks of virtue, progress, and Christianity.

I for one am grateful that Weeks has heeded Kinley Brauer's call to revisit and rethink the diplomatic history of the "Great American Desert." For all of my criticisms, William Weeks's interpretation generates both the heat of passion and the light of analysis—no small accomplishment. It is thought-provoking, lucid, tightly argued, and often revelatory. Antebellum historians working in all bailiwicks will ignore *Building the Continental Empire* at their peril. Weeks has much to say and more to ponder. I suspect that the work will generate considerable thought and discussion on the history and historiography of antebellum expansion. That is the hallmark of a fine book.

[1]. On center and periphery tensions, see for example Jack P. Greene, *Peripheries and Center: Constitutional Development in the Extended Politics of the British Empire and the United States, 1607-1788* (New York, 1986); Peter S. Onuf, "Liberty, Development, and Union: Visions of the West in the 1780s," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 43 (1968): 189-202; Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York, 1968), esp. Part I; and Andrew R. L. Cayton, *The*

Frontier Republic: Ideology and Politics in the Ohio Country, 1780-1825 (Kent, 1986), esp. 21-24.

[2]. Major Wilson has argued that the Missouri issue was less the question of slavery extension than a debate engaging the advocates of two variant types of freedom, each of which rested upon the future shape and power of the government. Major L. Wilson, *Space, Time, and Freedom: The Quest for Nationality and the Irrepressible Conflict, 1815-1861* (Westport, Conn., 1974), chap. 2.

[3]. Bradford Perkins, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*, Vol. I, *The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776-1865* (Cambridge, Eng., 1993), 6. Perkins goes on to suggest that it was the form—"massive expansion into contiguous areas"—that differentiated American expansion from its European counterparts (Russia notwithstanding).

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