



Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006)

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A reader takes up this book with high anticipation. Charles Maier is a distinguished scholar with a reputation for dispassion and a long track record of interpreting twentieth-century Europe and the U.S. relationship with Europe. The notes are a tribute to his reading in an impressive range of scholarship on empire. Almost every page of the text is dotted with insights extracted from that scholarship. (One paragraph alone invokes six distinct imperial cases to make a point.)

The timeliness of Maier's intervention adds to the anticipation. Not since the New Left made the case for an American empire some four decades ago has that topic commanded such attention. Then the argument for empire was greeted with widespread professional skepticism and patriotic consternation. How things have changed! In the late 1990s authors with quite distinct points of view – Patrick Buchanan, Max Boot, Andrew Bacevich, and Chalmers Johnson – revived the conversation on empire.¹ The post-9/11 upheaval in U.S. foreign policy added edge to the discussion and drew in historians in increasing numbers. Some endorsed the virtues of an American imperial mission modeled on the British enterprise.² Others questioned the frequently invoked parallels between the British and U.S. cases.³ Still others drew attention to regional

¹ Patrick J. Buchanan, *A Republic, Not an Empire: Reclaiming America's Destiny* (Washington: Regnery, 1999); Chalmers A. Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000); Max Boot, *Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); and Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002). Johnson soon returned to the imperial theme in *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

² Most notably Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004). Ferguson provides a summary of his argument in "The unconscious colossus: limits of (and alternatives to) American empire," *Daedalus* 134 (Spring 2005): 18-33.

³ Most clearly Bernard Porter, *Empire and Superempire: Britain, America and the World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006). Porter summarizes his position in "British and American 'Imperialisms' Compared," 26 June 2006, available on the History News Network website (<http://hnn.us/articles/27021.html> [accessed 24 July 2006]). See also on the British-U.S. comparison Patrick Karl O'Brien, "The Pax Britannica and American Hegemony: Precedent, Antecedent or Just Another History?" and John M. Hobson, "Two Hegemonies or One? A Historical-Sociological Critique of Hegemonic Stability Theory," both in *Two Hegemonies: Britain 1846-1914 and the United States 1941-2001*, ed Patrick Karl O'Brien and Armand Cleese (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2002), 3-64 and 305-325. See also Niall Ferguson's response to Two Hegemonies in "Hegemony or Empire?" *Foreign Affairs* 82 (September/October 2003): 154-61.

manifestations of imperial activity even as they lamented its effects.⁴ A field so well prepared offered someone of Maier's caliber a wonderful opportunity to push the discussion forward.

The sensible strategy guiding this intervention is conveyed at once by the title *Among Empires*. Maier is intent on developing a comparative framework in which to place the U.S. case. The plan is sensible and admirably straightforward; begin with a definition of empire based on the historical record, proceed to sketch the main features of U.S. dominance, and then pronounce on how well the U.S. case fits the definition.

For this reader at least, high hopes gave way to mounting disappointment. The first worrisome signs appeared in the introduction. Rather than helping with the terms of the argument, it instead proved perplexing with its confusing discussion of U.S. exceptionalism, its debatable distinction between being and having an empire, its rapidly shifting focus, its surfeit of questions, and its studied ambiguity on whether the United States qualified as an empire.⁵ The first major section (roughly half of the book) is given over to a definition of empire. Maier makes much of three distinguishing features of empire: contested frontiers (or border regimes), cooperation between imperial and subordinate elites, and empire's impact on societal arrangements. But none of the three receives crisp, systematic development. Moreover, the discussion is unclear on a pair of definitional issues critical to any consideration of the U.S. case. Is empire exclusively territorial, or does it also involve the exercise of significant power transcending territorial limits and having broad, diffuse effects on the international order? (Maier emphasis on frontiers would suggest the centrality of territorial control, but his interchangeable use here of hegemony and empire and his later discussion of the trans-national nature of U.S. power points in the other direction.) Closely related is the issue of whether empire is limited to instances of formal control. Can informal rule also be an expression of empire? (Maier fails to come down flatfootedly on this issue even though the Roman case, which is most frequently cited in this first half of the study, testifies to heavy reliance on low cost, culturally accommodating alternatives to direct domination.)

The problems created by this fuzzy, arguably incomplete definition is compounded in the second half of *Among Empires* by the narrowly cast treatment of the U.S. case. Here Maier seems to stick to topics that he has worked out in his earlier scholarship. Chronologically he concentrates on post-1945 developments. U.S. dominance seems to take hold with war's end as the imperial succession passes from the British, who receive special emphasis in this part of the book. Despite his emphasis on this remarkable emergence, Maier does not pause to consider a key comparative point: what other empire had found its calling with such speed and imposed its grip over such a broad expanse in such a short time? The problem of course disappears if the

⁴ See especially Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006); and Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

⁵ On the ambiguity regarding the U.S. case, compare *Among Empires*, p. 3 with p. 14. Maier perpetuates the straddle, for example, by declaring the United States "quasi-imperial" at one point (p. 107) and then still further on by describing the United States and the Soviet Union as "imperial systems" (p. 188).

postwar period is treated not as the beginning of empire but a new phase in the history of a well-established one.

Geographically, Europe looms inordinately large. Restricting an overview of the Roman empire to Gaul or the British empire to India would make no sense. So why concentrate on Europe and give but the briefest of nods to the creation of client regimes in the postwar Philippines, South Korea, Japan, Iran, or Guatemala? Juxtaposing Europe with case studies from the extensive, diverse non-European portion of the American empire would provide an opportunity to consider the general features of empire laid out in the first part of this study: the long frontier extending in the U.S. case across central Europe, through the Middle East and East Asia, and around much of Latin America; the various kinds of inter-elite arrangements that kept scattered parts of empire in the U.S. orbit; and the social restructuring resulting from the exercise of U.S. influence all along the periphery (not just in Europe).

Finally, *Among Empires* approaches the United States in a thematically constricted way, giving heavy emphasis at the outset of postwar power to Fordist industrial principles and nuclear weapons. The attention devoted to the latter is particularly puzzling. How did nuclear weapons, which Maier notes were politically troublesome and of limited military utility, help create U.S. dominance? Conventional expeditionary forces, conventional bombing, and covert operations would seem to loom larger in creating and maintaining an empire.

Out of this narrow treatment of the U.S. position emerges an interesting if problematic narrative. The rapid-fire initiatives of the immediate postwar created what Maier repeatedly refers to as “an empire of production” dedicated to the spread of “mass industrial capacities” (191). However, within a quarter century that empire of production was giving way to an increasingly troubled “empire of consumption.” The defense of consumer prerogatives at home led to endemic fiscal indiscipline and other pathologies. In a brilliantly observed passage on “the political economy of ‘market democracy,’” Maier describes “the energetic and contradictory mixture developed in the United States of vigorous local government and national plebiscites increasingly contested by candidates of great wealth, of powerful media influences often built on the cult of celebrity status, technological inventiveness and mass access to electronically facilitated culture and consumption, and the touching commitment to family rites asserted alongside the constant discussion of permissive sexual mores” (292). Maier appears to be saying that an empire so strong at its origins that it was able to impose its political economy on Europe suffered from a deepening malaise at home that put its ultimate survival in question.

This reader at least was left confused by the idiosyncratic use here of the productionist and consumerist labels. The consumer republic as it is conventionally understood by historians was well established by the interwar years. Why see it emerging only as a late twentieth-century post-productionist phenomenon? Why not incorporate the extraordinary appeal that U.S. consumer society had already come to exercise well before 1945 and that found free scope in the wake of the war (the burden of Victoria de Grazia’s recent, telling titled *Irresistible Empire*).⁶

⁶ Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Why not an empire built after the war on consumerist as well as productionist foundations?
What is gained by keeping productionist-consumerist stages distinct?

The conclusion does nothing to resolve the questions at the heart of the volume: Is there an American empire? Maier opens with a mystifying meditation on “the vase of Uruk” lost in Iraq as Americans marched into a region itself shaped by a procession of empires across millennia. Through the balance of conclusion he remains reticent on the question of whether the United States is in fact an empire, keeping his reader befuddled by using “empire,” “imperial system,” “productionist empire,” “hegemony,” “ascendancy,” and “supremacy” interchangeably in referring to the United States as though the very labels employed in this case are not central to terminological clarity and thus essential to the success of this interpretive enterprise.

These problems with *Among Empires* are in part the product of prose that tends to obscure the very notions that a volume of this sort aims to clarify. Comparative history requires a rigorous, systematic development of the argument, ideally in accessible terms critical to reaching beyond a specialist readership. Instead we get here paragraphs of daunting length (some as long as two pages), often dense and frequently fractured in their focus. Chapters tend to open with a weak articulation of the argument, to unfold in loosely related sections, and to conclude on terms that compound rather than diminish the reader’s perplexity. Chapter three offers a telling example. It devotes its opening four pages to Tacitus; not until page 5 does the reader get a sense of where the chapter is going or why this particular reading of Tacitus may be pertinent. The chapter continues with a discussion of what Maier calls “paradigmatic narratives of violence” (127) and ends on an inconclusive note.

Is dealing with the United States in relation to empire really such an intractable task? Is it not possible to formulate a basic working definition of empire and to stick with it? Suppose for the sake of argument that we define empire in terms of process: a centrally directed political enterprise in which coercion (violence or at least the threat of violence) is used to subjugate a territorially delimited area. Once created, empire acquires other structural features. Maintaining control depends on collaboration between elites (with each exercising disproportionate influence within their own societies) supplemented by a variety of other mechanisms from proximate military bases to a class of imperial administrators to ideological orthodoxies that rationalize dominance at home as well as abroad.⁷

This rough definition would suggest that the United States has been an empire for a long time and in several guises. It began as a continental empire (a form of settler colonialism); it turned to formal overseas empire for a time at the end of the nineteenth century leading to

⁷ I have found especially instructive on definition Porter, *Empire and Superempire*; O’Brien, “The Pax Britannica and American Hegemony”; and David Cannadine, “‘Big Tent’ Historiography: Transatlantic Obstacles and Opportunities in Writing the History of Empire,” *Common Knowledge* 11 (Fall 2005): 375-92. Insights offered by my Roman history colleague, Richard Talbert, have further emboldened me to generalize here. Even with empire defined in this way, the issue remains of its relationship to hegemony. My own view is that empire fails to fully capture the impressive reach of the United States in the post-1945 period and thus the historian has to tackle hegemony as a somewhat separate problem. But that case is better left to the conclusion of my forthcoming study *The American Ascendancy: How the United States Gained and Wielded Global Dominance* (University of North Carolina Press). See also David C. Hendrickson’s thoughtful “The Curious Case of American Hegemony: Imperial Aspirations and National Decline,” *World Policy Journal* 22 (Summer 2005): 1-22.

control over Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines; and it created an informal empire which it has possessed across the twentieth century and into the twenty first. A list of countries incorporated within that informal empire for substantial periods of time would include large hunks of Central America and the Caribbean (Nicaragua, Panama, Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba); a broad swath of maritime East Asia (South Korea, Japan, South Vietnam, Taiwan), and a loose assemblage of western Asian clients (Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan). To this list should be added arguably western Europe in the early Cold War. Justified by Manifest Destiny, the Monroe doctrine, the containment doctrine, or the war on terrorism, control over territorially defined units issued from Washington and involved notable accommodation by local elites backed by U.S.-sponsored armies, distributing U.S.-provided aid, supervised by U.S. proconsuls, and in extremis policed by U.S. military forces. Taken all in all, this system of control managed with some sophistication and persistence down to the present has shown itself broad and flexible enough to do any empire proud.

The peculiar aspect of this empire is that many Americans regard it with an awkward distaste rather than pride. It's an old story of pleasant imperial dreams repeatedly triggering imperial nightmares. An enthusiasm for empire guided the Jefferson/Jackson/Polk line of policymakers in their pursuit of continental control, and it reemerged with McKinley's call for overseas possessions. In our own time neo-conservative intellectuals have revived the claim that the American empire was special in its beneficence ("an empire of liberty") and in its alignment with profound historical trends. Each imperial thrust has evoked a response that empire was bad (or at least inconvenient) inspired by three sources. One was the conviction on the part of classically-trained American leaders that empire was a fundamental threat to republican survival. Their conviction gave rise to sharp disputes in the 1840s and after 1898 when they saw the executive conducting an aggressive war and concentrating a dangerous degree of power. This fear for the fragility of republican government persisted into the twentieth century and marks the pages of such current authors as Buchanan and Johnson. A second source of anti-imperial sentiment was the consumer republic that arose during the twentieth century. Consumer-citizens loath to make sacrifices for distant, dirty wars obstructed military campaigns in Korea, Vietnam, and Central American as well as now in Iraq. Finally, doubts about empire flowed from wartime propaganda. Beginning with World War I, continuing with World War II, and recurring with the Cold War, Washington sought to draw a clear line between the United States as the champion of liberation and an enemy bent on empire. George W. Bush echoed Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Ronald Reagan when in 2001 he reminded his fellow citizens that they were "a power that went into the world to protect but not possess, to defend but not to conquer."⁸ How could the United States be what it had repeatedly professed to oppose?

The widespread, persistent conviction that empire was un-American has helped generate domestic dissent, hobbled imperial projects, and thrown policymakers on the defensive. To calm anti-imperial sentiment, U.S. leaders have played up the national commitment to promoting freedom and democracy. But this response, however effective at home, has had the perverse effect abroad of giving legitimacy to ideas of decolonization and self-determination subversive of the very control Americans sought to exercise. The problem of justifying and managing this

⁸ Bush Inaugural Address, 20 January 2001, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush*, 2001, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2001), 1.

“empire of liberty” was nicely captured by Patrick Buchanan in 2002 amid the debate over “regime change” in Iraq. He asked rhetorically what’s wrong with empire. “Only this. It is a century too late. Jefferson’s idea, that ‘all just powers come from the consent of the governed,’ and Wilson’s idea of the self-determination of peoples have taken root in the souls of men.”⁹

Given empire’s tendency to tangle issues of national identity and set ideological alarm bells ringing, little wonder a public schooled in an exceptionalist U.S. history of great men and great deeds resists the insights offered by comparative history. Maier himself some quarter century ago impressed on me the way a comparative history of empire might unsettle nationalist certitudes and remove nationalist blinders. It might, I suggested then, help us “to arrive at a greater awareness of how deeply rooted in the American experience is the sense of mastery” and “to realize that we are not the first to exalt in our power or wrestle with the material and human costs and the psychological frustrations of holding far-flung imperial commitments.”¹⁰ Bringing our sense of self and our international role into some kind of coherent relationship is more than ever a matter of urgency. All the more the pity that Maier’s considerable talents applied here did not do more to advance the urgent task of clarification.

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⁹ Patrick J. Buchanan, “USA is not wanted in Iraq,” editorial in *USA Today*, 14 November 2002, available online at http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2002-11-14-edit-oppose_x.htm (accessed 19 April 2006).

¹⁰ My comment appears in *Diplomatic History* 5 (Fall 1981): 358 as part of a set of responses to the searching critique in Charles S. Maier, “Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations,” in *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 355-87.