

**Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman.** *American Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. 442 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-05547-6.



**Reviewed by** Gregg French

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**Commissioned by** Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

Since the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, American politicians have debated the role that the United States has played on the world stage. However, it took academics, such as William Appleman Williams and Walter LaFeber, until the late 1950s to begin to debate the same topic. Even then, it took an additional thirty-plus years for academics to shift away from the belief in American exceptionalism and to integrate the history of both the United States and the American Empire into a global narrative.[1] Since the early 1990s, academics such as Amy Kaplan, Paul Kramer, Anne L. Foster, and Julian Go have worked to remove the belief in American exceptionalism from the American historical narrative by examining the history of the United States and the American Empire from the perspective of both cultural history and transnational history. In turn, these academics have presented the United States as an imperial power that encountered many of the same issues as previous empires.

In *American Empire*, Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman offers a survey-style analysis of the history of

both the United States and the country's foreign policies towards the outside world. Within the work, Cobbs Hoffman presents a revisionist approach to the narratives that were discussed by the cultural and transnational historians who emerged during the early 1990s. In an attempt to shift the conversation away from the discussion of US imperial history, Cobbs Hoffman counters the anti-exceptional narratives offered by Kaplan, Kramer, Foster, Go, as well as a multitude of other academics, by arguing that the American Empire only existed from 1898 to 1946 and that the United States was "the pivot" that led the shift away from empires towards the existence of modern nation-states (pp. 13, 3). Cobbs Hoffman goes on to argue that rather than being an "empire," a term which she believes does not adequately describe the role of the United States on the world stage, the United States has acted as the world's "umpire," allowing "access to opportunity, arbitration of disputes, and transparency in government and business" to the people and nation-states of the world through a shift towards democratic capital-

ism (pp. 3, 6). Although Cobbs Hoffman admits that the term “umpire” is not “a perfect metaphor,” she believes that “umpire” describes the actions taken by America’s foreign policy more adequately than “empire” (p. 3). Cobbs Hoffman goes on to argue that the United States has, at times, acted as both a “player” as well as an umpire, and that this “player-umpire” status places the United States in a position in which it cannot be victorious. Therefore, despite the fact that having the United States act as the world’s player-umpire may not be “completely fair to anyone,” Cobbs Hoffman concludes her work by arguing that “it is often better than having no ump at all” (p. 352).

Cobbs Hoffman begins the first chapter of her book by arguing that the founders of the Constitution drew from ideologies associated with other former nations and former empires to create a “hybrid” political entity (p. 21). She goes on to argue that this conscious creation of a “hybrid” federal constitution, a founding document that would allow individuals to be both citizens of a state and of the nation, led the American government toward the position of umpire within the United States. Cobbs Hoffman also believes that the creation of the Constitution, and the document’s status as an umpire, influenced the founding documents of the United Nations and the European Union, both of which allow individuals to be dual citizens of their nation and an international governing body. As Cobbs Hoffman writes, “They recognized the importance of an umpire, first for themselves in their domestic arrangements, and then in their international relationships”—a statement that reinforces the exceptionalist narrative that Cobbs Hoffman is creating within her work (p. 22).

The problem that I have with the argument that the US Constitution allowed Americans to be both citizens of a state and of the nation is that it tends to hide more than it reveals; and in turn, it reinforces the belief in American exceptionalism.

Ignoring the fact that racial minorities, women, and a significant portion of white males were not allowed to vote when the Constitution was passed in 1789, Cobbs Hoffman also fails to acknowledge the fact that the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 was an imperialistic doctrine that legalized the establishment of America’s transcontinental empire and the advent of American settler colonialism throughout the nineteenth century. Rather than automatically creating states in the areas outside of the thirteen states that initially made up the United States, the Northwest Ordinance allowed for the creation of territorial governments that were directly under the control of the US Congress. In turn, individuals living in these areas, assuming they could acquire voting rates in a state that was included in the American Union, were not citizens of their own state. The precedent that was established by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 was also used by Thomas Jefferson following the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Rather than automatically admitting the area as a collection of states into the American Union, some areas remained under the direct control of Congress until the twentieth century. Therefore, Cobbs Hoffman’s belief that the Constitution allowed Americans to be both citizens of a state and of the nation, as well as that the Northwest Ordinance was “anti-imperial,” which appears later in her work, establishes a weak base for her argument (p. 119).

Cobbs Hoffman also argues that throughout the nineteenth century, the United States preferred to extend its “home territory” with treaties, rather than through wars, and that these newly acquired areas entered the Union “on a basis of political equality” (p. 117). In turn, Cobbs Hoffman believes that these actions continued to develop America’s role as an umpire rather than empire. Much like her argument regarding the Constitution, Cobbs Hoffman’s argument hides more than it presents. To begin with, the assumption that the western portion of the continent of North America was America’s “home territory” reinforces the belief in American exceptionalism and fails to ad-

dress the existence of Indian nations in America's transcontinental empire. Also, Cobbs Hoffman's statement that "the United States accomplished six of its seven formal territorial acquisitions by diplomacy or purchase" during the first seven decades of the nineteenth century, fails to address the nearly continual military conflict between citizen militia units or the US Army and Indian tribes throughout Florida and the western portion of the continent of North America during the time period under discussion (p. 96). However, Cobbs Hoffman does state that she is not "applaud[ing]" the acquisition of Indian lands through diplomacy and purchase, but she then goes on to argue that it was also being done by the Spanish and the British. I doubt that this line of thinking supports Cobbs Hoffman's argument that America was preparing to be the world's umpire.

Organized in a chronological fashion, the book shifts from the antebellum and post-antebellum period to the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century by the fifth chapter. Within the chapter, Cobbs Hoffman is forced to encounter the undeniable existence of the American Empire following the War of 1898 and the United States' acquisition of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the overseas territory that she fails to adequately acknowledge, Cuba. She begins the chapter by arguing that prior to 1898, "Ruling over subject peoples from different ethnic backgrounds was routine for imperial nations across the global" but that the United States showed "ambivalence about exercising power in foreign arenas" (p. 138). Here, Cobbs Hoffman attempts to reinforce the belief in American exceptionalism by making the United States appear unlike the European empires of the period. This is another example of her failure to address the creation and the existence of America's transcontinental empire during the nineteenth century, as well as the inter-imperial exchanges that were occurring between agents of the American empire and European powers during the period.

Shifting to America's overseas empire, Cobbs Hoffman continues to reinforce the belief in American exceptionalism by arguing, "It [the United States] backed into imperialism and then turned around and backed out" and that "the empire of 1898 was not planned" (p. 153). This claim goes against the historiography of US imperialism that has developed over the past twenty-five years, and denials such as these are a major reason why the American Empire is allowed to continue to exist. Far from acting as an umpire, or accidentally becoming an empire and then acting as a liberator, America's actions during the War of 1898 and the following decades prove that the United States actively created a formal and an informal empire throughout Latin America and the Pacific--a reality that Cobbs Hoffman fails to acknowledge within her work.

The balance of Cobbs Hoffman's work continues to reinforce the belief in American exceptionalism. By arguing that "the United States had stumbled into World War II" and that the country had "stood aloof from international crisis management" from 1776 to 1917, Cobbs Hoffman continues to ignore evidence of the American Empire as she advances her contention that the United States was not an empire but an umpire (pp. 266, 271). In the concluding chapter of the body portion of her work, Cobbs Hoffman does admit that America's foreign policy often meant that "Americans woke up many days with egg on their face--or worse," which is an accurate statement (p. 294). However, it was America's actions as a formal and informal empire, not as an umpire, that caused this.

Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman's *American Umpire* has provoked a great deal of debate among both academics and foreign policy experts and will continue to do so. The work would undoubtedly be an interesting text for upper-year undergraduate students, as well as graduate students, assuming it is juxtaposed with a work that argues in favor of the anti-exceptional narrative. This being

stated, works such as *American Umpire*, which reinforce the belief in American exceptionalism and deny the continued existence of the American Empire, can have ramifications outside of university campuses and academic conferences. For example, such works fail to address the existence of second-class citizens who still live in America's overseas empire, and can serve to normalize the existence of areas such as Guantanamo Bay.

The existence of the American Empire is an undeniable fact and characterizing the nation as an umpire can overshadow the continued existence of this empire. Therefore, although Cobbs Hoffman believes that the United States has acted as an umpire, I would imagine that an individual of indigenous descent who lived in a territory in America's transcontinental empire during the nineteenth century, or a current resident of Puerto Rico, Guam, or one of America's other overseas possessions, might argue against the beliefs presented by Cobbs Hoffman in *American Umpire*.

#### Note

[1]. Amy Kaplan, "Left Alone with America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

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