Who profits from empire and how does the desire for profit encourage and legitimize expansion? Jeffrey Sommers and contributor Patrick Delices tackle these questions in their case study of the lead-up to the disastrous US military occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934. They demonstrate how a narrow segment of the US business community came to shape a public-private discourse that prompted and sustained the persistent violation of Haitian independence. This discourse, they argue, was based on a confluence of racial stereotypes about Haitians, an emphasis on the capitalist foundations of liberal democracy, and a strategic self-perception of the United States as stabilizing and ordering hegemon in the Western Hemisphere.

Two of book’s five chapters explore the role of popular journals in US perceptions of Haiti throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the antebellum period, southern journals in support of slavery were particularly eager in their critique of the Caribbean nation. By contrast, northern journals regularly praised Haitian developments as an example of successful nation building. However, after the Civil War, those northern attitudes changed as periodicals across the country took on an increasingly critical and racist attitude which questioned the ability of tropical peoples to successfully create independent polities.

Such criticisms were a staple of European and US deliberations on the merits and legitimacy of colonial rule and imperial expansion. The traditional perception of the tropics as both hell and paradise fused determinist ideas about the environment, race, and liberal democratic capitalism. In the United States, such understandings provided important ideological foundations for the nation’s overseas colonial empire in the Caribbean Basin and the Pacific Ocean. The study argues that while these ideational underpinnings of expansion were important, they also obfuscated the commercial and business interests at the heart of the drive for empire.

The book’s second half (chapters 3-5) examines the empirical evidence for the thesis that US business interests were behind the drive for military intervention in Haiti. According to the authors, the *Bulletin of the Pan American Union* emerged as a particularly influential platform for public-private partnerships in the quest for investment opportunities in Haiti. Publications like the *Bulletin* allowed those tasked with US hemispheric policies to collaborate with private business and fielded arguments for a coherent strategy in support of US hemispheric hegemony.
While the study acknowledges the marginal role of US business interests in Haiti, it struggles with the contradiction that such peripheral concerns should have guided the nation’s policies toward military intervention and occupation. The authors suggest that the overall size of investments was less important than the political influence of the respective investors. While largely sideling the fact that even cases with strong business interests did not automatically result in a strategic congruence of private and public foreign policy goals and actions, the book provides insights into the role of individuals in advancing an imperial business agenda. This human scale of US empire building in Haiti is illustrated by Roger L. Farnham, vice president of the National City Bank of New York who would ultimately gain control of the National Bank of Haiti. Farnham was also president of a US railroad project in Haiti. Because of his unlimited access to US military and diplomatic circles, this one man was widely regarded by contemporaries as central to the occupation and administration of the Caribbean nation.

While highly suggestive, the actual mechanics of Farnham’s potential impact on US policies, however, remain murky. The book acknowledges that the intervention and subsequent occupation violated a number of American ideological core convictions about anticolonialism and national self-determination. It argues that those contradictions were ironed out by a powerful discursive consent in which racial and civilizational stereotypes in conjunction with strategic considerations provided the backdrop against which business interests could be elevated to a decisive decision-making factor. As a consequence, this reinterpretation of assumed Haitian ethno-cultural “backwardness” cleared the way for military intervention which was subsequently obfuscated as humanitarian mission. This valuable insight could have been contextualized and strengthened further by relating the Haitian case to the 1898 war in Cuba.

Those deliberations were deeply embedded in a strategic outlook that feared European encroachments in the Caribbean Basin and the hemisphere, linked regional political stability to security concerns about the Panama Canal, and actively sought to displace German and other European influences in the region. The book’s analysis of the perspectives of Rear Admiral William B. Caperton, the commander of the occupation in 1915 and 1916 and that of President Woodrow Wilson confirm the rhetorical importance afforded to order, stability, and civilizational “uplift” among those involved with the intervention.

Not everyone, however, supported empire building in Haiti and subscribed to the agenda advanced by a public-private network of intervention supporters. The 1922 US Senate hearings on US troop conduct in the Caribbean nation and the simultaneous campaign of such magazines as The Nation for Haitian self-determination are briefly discussed. But the book is surprisingly dismissive of the political impact of civic activism and its widespread exposure of the inherent contradictions in US hemispheric policies. Neither the role of such anti-imperial activists as Oswald Garrison Villard, Moorfield Storey, or Charles Garland, nor the role of the Haiti-Santo Domingo Independence Society is explored in the text. Consequently, this provides the misleading impression of a relatively coherent pro-interventionist outlook in the United States.

Such a shortcoming is the result of a narrowed understanding of foreign relations largely limited to views advanced by the State Department, the White House, and military circles. This perspective discounts critical networks of anti-imperialism and civil society and forgoes the opportunity to engage with dissenting opinions even within the business community itself. Equally important, Haitians are afforded little to no agency in the text and are mostly relegated to the role of bystander in this episode of interventionism. The inclusion of Haitian perspectives on US intervention would have strengthened the study’s clear thesis on the importance of business interests to empire building. Finally, this study is marred by numerous grammatical and factual errors as well as frequent repetitions. While the short book has analytical merits, its formal shortcomings seriously undermine its effectiveness as an instructional text.

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