Beginning in the late 1950s, historian William Appleman Williams and his students began challenging the conventional wisdom on the history of the United States in world affairs. This conventional wisdom held that American imperialism, particularly in the Philippines after the Spanish-American War of 1898, remained a brief aberration. The United States liquidated this empire after the Second World War. Americans did this because they opposed imperialism, fought only defensive wars on behalf of liberal democracy, and were an exceptional nation and people in global history.\[1\]

Williams and his students opposed the United States’ Cold War position, particularly in Vietnam. In place of the conventional wisdom, they argued that the United States had purposefully and systematically built an empire as the Industrial Revolution transformed much of the world in the decades following the Civil War. This represented the natural culmination of American history and not an aberration. The United States selfishly pursued this imperial project, often resorting to aggressive warfare and lesser forms of intervention in the Caribbean, Mexico, and China, well into the twentieth century. Political scientist Chalmers Johnson (\textit{The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic [2004]}), historian Rashid Khalidi (\textit{Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America’s Perilous Path in the Middle East [2004]}), and anthropologist David Vine (\textit{Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World [2017]}), among many others, spurred by opposition to American intervention in the Middle East after 9/11, have published books that have pushed the origins of American imperialism back to the independence era while advancing the interpretation into the twenty-first century. Historian Victor Bulmer-Thomas’s \textit{Empire in Retreat: The Past, Present, and Future of the United States} represents the latest iteration of this trend.\[2\]

Bulmer-Thomas divides his survey into three chronologically organized parts that reconstruct the history of American imperialism. Then he offers his estimate of how and when it will come to an end. The first part, “Territorial Empire,” starts with US expansion into Louisiana, Florida, Texas, and the Southwest before launching into the acquisition of Liberia, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Alaska, Hawaii, the Philippines, and Guam. By the end of the nineteenth century, an American territorial empire, enforced by a growing network of military and naval bases, gave the United States control over lands and sea lines of communication reaching across North America and into Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific.

The United States’ methods changed around the turn of the century, Bulmer-Thomas continues, but its objectives remained the same. The second part, “Semi-Global Empire,” explains how this unfolded. Americans understood that they could not rule the entire planet directly, so they constructed institutions that would enable them to do it indirectly, beginning in the Western Hemisphere. The Pan-American system that led to the Organization of American States (OAS) was the prototype for what followed, from the League of Nations and the United Nations (UN) to the Bretton Woods agreements, the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and others after the Second World War. These and other international agreements and organi-
zations ensured US hegemony and nuclear supremacy while guaranteeing that American interests would receive priority and be accorded more weight than others.

The Soviet Union (USSR), the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and their allies and clients thwarted the full realization of US ambitions in the postwar era, and thus, the American empire achieved no more than semi-global status during the Cold War. The United States created new institutions, including the containment doctrine, the Marshall Plan, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and an even larger network of military and naval bases, now operating worldwide, to deal with the USSR and the others. This positioned Americans to exploit the end of the Cold War and reach for a truly global empire from the 1990s into the 2010s. But the imperial project had started to unravel by then.

The third part, “Empire in Retreat,” shows how this unraveling continues to occur while suggesting where it is leading. According to Bulmer-Thomas, the United States’ imperial project was supported by favorable conditions and a consensus of interests that included a strong national economy; nonstate actors, such as transnational corporations, missionaries, Hollywood, radio, and the press; nongovernmental organizations like the Council on Foreign Relations and the Carnegie, Rockefeller, Ford, Hoover, and Gates foundations; decisive American leadership in world affairs; and a US political, military, economic, social, and cultural presence in such regions as Europe, Latin America, East Asia, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa.

Bulmer-Thomas cites polling data and the election of President Donald Trump (2017-present) to identify the rising influence of nationalism, anti-exceptionalism, anti-militarism, anti-interventionism, and anti-globalization when concluding that “the American empire is now in retreat, and much of this has to do with internal forces” (p. 249). Further, transnational corporations have tended to pursue interests at variance with the imperial project and the US economy has steadily declined since the 1970s. Americans have begun forfeiting decisive leadership in world affairs as their ability to influence outcomes in such regions as Eastern Europe and in nations like Syria, as Russian, Chinese, and other spoilers arise, including a wave of leftist governments in Latin America. And US domestic politics remain dysfunctional and in disarray, which may only worsen as the imperial project further unravels over time.

In Bulmer-Thomas’s estimation, the American empire will have become a shadow of its former self by the 2030s, and it will have ceased to exist by the 2080s. The United States, like the United Kingdom, will have become a mere nation-state by then. He advises Americans “to embrace what is becoming inevitable. The hardest part will be shedding the imperial mindset, acquired over many generations. Yet, as other countries have shown, it can be done, and young people in the United States are leading the way” (p. 365).

Bulmer-Thomas’s discussion carries great import today, particularly in the era of the Trump administration, where confusion and uncertainty about the United States in world affairs prevails. Are contemporary global affairs best defined by the Industrial Revolution, the emergence of modern capitalism, and all of its promise and problems; by the rise of modern nations and the search for international order; or by a succession of empires and great powers that have sought to dominate the world since the Neolithic period? How does the United States fit into these scenarios? What is the nature of American foreign relations, particularly US relations with international organizations like the UN, the WTO, and NATO, and with such regions as Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia and the Pacific? Bulmer-Thomas does not explore these questions as much as he recites the history of American empire and imperialism in a narrative that anyone who has read Johnson, Khalidi, Vine—or former Soviet ambassador Nikolai Novikov’s interpretation of the United States’ postwar intentions, for that matter—will already know.

Bulmer-Thomas also chooses not to take those who offer alternative interpretations seriously or engage them in his book. Indeed, he sweeps aside “empire deniers”— singling out Kennedy administration (1961-63) advisor Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld (2001-6)—in his introduction and never looks back. Yet not only public officials but also thoughtful historians have advanced other interpretations that Bulmer-Thomas might have acknowledged and responded to, complicating his account, making it more nuanced, and rendering it less predictable.

To take the example of the inter-American community, Bulmer-Thomas reduces the OAS to “a crude instrument of American empire” (p. 138). This ignores nearly a century of scholarship on the evolution of the inter-American system, scholarship that derives from a well-documented history of active and imaginative Latin American contributions. Indeed, such Latin Americans as the liberator Simón Bolívar, Chilean jurist Andrés Bello, and Colombian foreign minister Eustancio Santa
Maria, among many others, often led the process that ultimately resulted in the reification of the OAS. This was hardly something the United States accomplished on its own or even directed unilaterally from Washington. Latin Americans contributed to this because they recognized that it served their interests as nations and as an emerging region within the larger international community and they agreed with American and European voices who wanted the same. There clearly remains more to know about this history than that which we can learn from the lens of US empire and imperialism. Thus, Bulmer-Thomas’s account, while valuable to historians of American foreign relations and theorists of international relations, should not stand alone.[5]

Notes


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