

The Territorial Empire

Daniel Immerwahr

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“America has never been an empire,” pronounced George W. Bush in his first foreign policy address. “We may be the only great power that had the chance, and refused—preferring greatness to power and justice to glory.”¹

As presidential sentiments go, this was a cliché. Nearly every president in the twentieth century offered some platitude about how the United States does not covet territory. And yet the United States *has* had an empire, in the sense of possessing overseas territories, stretching from the Arctic to the South China Sea to the Caribbean. They ranged from the large land mass of Alaska to the small island of Guam, from populous territories (the Philippines) to sparse ones (American Samoa). They have been called many things: protectorates, possessions, territories, outlying areas. But at the turn of the twentieth century, when the bulk of them were acquired, there was little doubt what they were. As the leaders of the country put it plainly, they were colonies.

It’s tempting to dismiss such places as small and insignificant. Yet millions lived in them in the first half of the twentieth century. By 1940, the population in the colonies numbered nearly nineteen million, 12.6% of the U.S. population. At that time, the U.S. Empire was the world’s fifth largest by population.² In 1945–46, after the dismantling of Japan’s empire but before the independence of the Philippines, it would briefly rank as the fourth largest.

The inhabited overseas territories of the U.S. Empire:

Alaska	1867–1959 (state thereafter)
Hawai‘i	1898–1959 (state thereafter)
Philippines	1899–1946
Puerto Rico	1899–present
Guam	1899–present
American Samoa	1900–present
U.S. Virgin Islands	1917–present
Northern Mariana Islands	1986–present

To these might be added the Panama Canal Zone (1904–1979), held on an extremely favorable long-term lease granting all the rights a sovereign would have. The United States also administered the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (1947–1986) on behalf of the United Nations. After the expiration of the trust

territory, the Northern Mariana Islands were annexed to the United States and other sections (the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of Palau) became “freely associated states,” independent but nevertheless closely bound to the United States. Further, Washington has claimed hundreds of islands and military bases, such as Wake Island (1899–present) and Guantánamo Bay (1903–present), with no permanent populations but which have hosted its troops.

ACQUIRING THE OVERSEAS EMPIRE

It shouldn’t come as a surprise that the United States has had an overseas empire. Other major powers have, too. And the United States’ imperial career roughly matches theirs, chronologically. The country started acquiring overseas territories in 1857, collecting dozens of uninhabited islands in the Pacific and Caribbean containing guano, a valuable nineteenth-century fertilizer. In 1867 it purchased Alaska. Most of its inhabited colonies it took in 1898–1900, when it added Hawai‘i, American Samoa, Wake Island, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam to its domain. This was precisely when other powerful countries were hastily snapping up colonies. Between 1880 and 1913, the proportion of the world’s colonized land rose from a quarter to more than a half, and the world’s colonized population jumped from 312 million to 554 million.³ So, from a global perspective, the U.S. Empire looks unexceptional.

Yet something distinguished the United States from such rivals as Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Japan. Unlike them, it had until the late nineteenth century focused exclusively on a single form of empire, what scholars call *settler colonialism*. It had grown not by claiming distant lands and ruling them but by acquiring neighboring territory, dispossessing the original inhabitants (often violently), and implanting its own settlers. That was the story of westward expansion, by which the country bought or conquered land all the way to the Pacific Ocean; removed, killed, or simply crowded out Native Americans; and then promoted its new territories to states, on equal footing with the existing ones.

This experience was formative. Rather than conceiving of their polity as an empire, the leaders of the United States learned to see it as a settler nation, with territories as embryonic states. The sorts of spatial hierarchies that the British Empire ran on—one set of laws for Burma, another for England—clashed with this vision. The U.S. ideal was administrative uniformity, treating the land as a homogeneous whole. Though that ideal was never realized (Indian reservations remained a persistent legal anomaly), it was nevertheless deeply held.

The U.S. commitment to filling its territories with white settlers and then upgrading them to states made any deviation into British-style colonialism a fraught proposition. Throughout the nineteenth century, Washington turned

down clear opportunities to annex populated overseas lands, lest their nonwhite inhabitants be incorporated into the polity. The uninhabited guano islands and sparsely populated Alaska were the most it mustered, though even these were controversial (“We do not want . . . Exquimaux fellow citizens,” griped *The Nation*).⁴

The year 1898 marked a break in this pattern. Uprisings in Spain’s colonies, particularly Cuba and the Philippines, had thrown its empire into crisis. As Spain massacred its subjects in Cuba, pressure mounted for Washington to intervene. McKinley moved a warship, the U.S.S. *Maine*, to Havana—a show of force though not an attack. Calls for war grew loud when an insulting letter about McKinley by the Spanish ambassador was discovered and published. They grew louder still when, days later, the *Maine* mysteriously exploded (an accident, it now appears). On April 25, the United States declared war.

It was, indisputably, a war of choice. Nothing obliged the United States to intervene in Spain’s crisis by sending a warship. Nothing obliged it to declare war, given that Spain had neither itself declared war nor even clearly attacked. Nothing obliged it to extend that war to the Pacific, as it did by dispatching Commodore George Dewey’s Asiatic Squadron to Manila. And certainly nothing obliged it to seize, as war spoils, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam, while annexing the non-Spanish lands of Hawai‘i, Wake Island, and American Samoa.

Historians still debate why this happened. Clearly, international affairs played a role. The burst of late-nineteenth-century European annexations spurred U.S. imperialism on in two ways. First, opinion leaders in the United States read European books and knew European thinkers. The taste for empire, including the racial ideology that called for ruling distant peoples (the vaunted “white man’s burden”), was in part an imported one. Second, the scramble for colonies had the character of a land rush. Standing back while rivals scooped up the last available territories might hobble the United States in the great global race.

Domestic factors contributed, too. The United States had become the world’s largest economic power as measured by GDP, yet its growth wasn’t steady. A series of crises, notably the years-long depression following the Panic of 1893, suggested the need for some fix. Economists argued that overseas trade and investment might offer stability. Colonies could also provide safe harbor and resupply stations for commercial ships engaged in a larger international trade, especially across the Pacific to Asia—so went the thinking of the influential naval theorist, Alfred Thayer Mahan.

Layered atop these reasons were vaguer but inarguably powerful cultural urges. The end of the frontier, noted in the 1890 census and publicized by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, suggested that opportunities for settler colonialism had been exhausted and that a new pattern of growth was needed,

overseas empire being one option among others. The champions of war with Spain also quite clearly felt masculinity to be pertinent. Combat and conquest were, in their eyes, required to renew the vigor of a country that, more than thirty years after the Civil War and with the rise of women's participation in politics, had grown dangerously soft.

Conclusively adjudicating between these factors is difficult because they were diffuse and speculative. Taking colonies *might* help the United States compete internationally, promote white civilization, calm its markets, expand its trade, or rekindle the flames of the pioneer spirit and rugged manliness. There were many people who thought many of those things. Yet there were few interest groups that stood to benefit clearly and immediately from colonies. Even as stepping-stones to Asian markets, the colonies offered little immediate advantage, given that China and Japan together comprised less than four percent of foreign trade in 1900.⁵ It's notable that the business leader most involved in the empire debate, Andrew Carnegie, was an *anti-imperialist*; he sought economic expansion but objected strenuously to incorporating nonwhite peoples. Only in Hawai'i was there sufficient extant investment to create a lobby, and that lobby wasn't particularly strong, having failed to secure annexation for decades before 1898.

With few organized groups demanding specific annexations, the imperial splurge of 1898–1900 had an arbitrary aspect. Anti-imperialists passed an amendment to the war declaration blocking the annexation of Cuba, a likely war prize, but they did nothing to prevent the annexation of the nearby Puerto Rico. The McKinley administration seized Guam but not the Micronesian islands around it, also Spanish colonies. The United States took the whole Philippine archipelago rather than, as some had expected, just the large island of Luzon. And it seized two territories that Congress had for decades refused to annex: Hawai'i and American Samoa. In each of these cases, it's easy to imagine an alternate outcome. The 1898 war, a moment of deep historical contingency, might have led to many differently shaped versions of the United States.

MAKING ROOM

“No war ever transformed us quite as the war with Spain transformed us,” wrote Woodrow Wilson shortly after 1898.⁶ It's a striking statement, all the more so when you realize that Wilson had lived through the Civil War.

For a moment, though, it appeared Wilson was right. Many at the turn of the century understood the acquisition of a large overseas empire to be an epochal event, marking the adulthood of their country. It was, for them, a moment to rethink core assumptions about what the United States was.

One such rethinking occurred in law. The new annexations stretched the country's borders over heterogeneous societies that were too distant, populous,

and powerful to be easily absorbed or “settled.” These included Hawai‘i, which until recently had been a monarchy; the feudal household-and-village system of American Samoa; and the slave society of the southern Philippines. What would it mean for these to fall under the ambit of U.S. law? For their inhabitants to be, by the Fourteenth Amendment, U.S. citizens?

Such matters were unresolved at annexation. It took a series of Supreme Court cases, stretching from 1901 to 1922, known as the *Insular Cases*, to settle them. In the *Insular Cases*, the Court ruled that the United States was not a legally homogeneous space. The Constitution, the logic went, applied only to *part* of the country, the “incorporated” part. There was another zone, of “unincorporated” territory, belonging to the country but not fully covered by the Constitution. The Court ruled that western territories such as California had been incorporated, as had the overseas territories that looked most conducive to white settlement, Hawai‘i and Alaska. But American Samoa, the uninhabited islands, and all the colonies taken from Spain were judged unincorporated. Their inhabitants were U.S. nationals but not citizens under the Fourteenth Amendment. If they wanted citizenship, they would have to win it by statute (Puerto Ricans became citizens in 1917, U.S. Virgin Islanders in 1927, Guamanians in 1950, Filipinos and American Samoans never).

As one justice explained the logic, the Constitution was “the supreme law of the land,” but the unincorporated territories were “not part of the ‘land.’”⁷ The ruling turned the United States into a legally partitioned space, and in so doing carved out room for empire.

There were other renovations. Cartographers offered new maps of the country, including the territories alongside the mainland. Textbooks, atlases, and maps that hung on classroom walls showed not just the contiguous part, but the colonies, too, arranged in insets.

Writers wondered if a new name wasn’t in order. Though the official name of the country is *the United States of America*, in the nineteenth century it was common to call it *the United States*, *the Republic*, or *the Union*. None of these, however, accurately described the post-1898 polity, which was quite obviously not a union, not a republic, and not composed exclusively of states or potential states (the prospects of Philippine or Puerto Rican statehood seemed remote and often abhorrent to mainlanders). New books appeared with suggestive titles: *Imperial America* (1898), *The Greater Republic* (1899), *Oriental America and Its Problems* (1903), and *The Greater United States* (1904). Seven books published in the decade after 1898 had titles involving the phrase “Greater America.”⁸

None of those names stuck, but there *was* a more enduring nomenclatural shift. The war with Spain brought the name *America* into fashion. It wasn’t a wholly new name; it had been in some use in the nineteenth century (as in the “Young

America” literary movement), and *Americans* had long been a way to refer to the country’s inhabitants. Yet *America* had usually meant the Americas as whole, and it is striking how rarely it was used to refer to the United States alone. One can search the public messages and papers of the sitting presidents from the founding to 1898 and encounter only eleven unambiguous references to the country as America, about once per decade. None of the patriotic songs common before 1898—“Yankee Doodle,” “Hail to the Chief,” “My Country ’Tis of Thee,” “Dixie,” “The Battle Cry of Freedom,” “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” “Stars and Stripes Forever,” “Columbia,” “Hail, Columbia,” “Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean,” or “The Star-Spangled Banner”—mention America in their lyrics.

That changed abruptly. “For some thirty years prior to 1898, while the adjective ‘American’ has been in general use, the noun ‘America’ has been extremely rare,” a British writer explained. “One might, up to that *annus mirabilis*, have traveled five thousand miles and read a hundred books and newspapers without ever having once come across it; ‘United States’ being almost invariably the term employed by the American for his own country.”⁹ After 1898, though, he noted that “the best speakers and writers” had switched to *America*. Certainly, the presidential record bears this out. Theodore Roosevelt used the term in his first annual message and frequently thereafter. Every president since has used *America* freely. And new anthems—“America the Beautiful” and “God Bless America”—made up for what the old ones lacked.

PACIFYING THE PHILIPPINES

Refurbishing the country assumed, of course, that Washington could hold onto its empire. In Puerto Rico, where the political elite seemed actively enthusiastic about replacing Spain with the United States, this was feasible. It was also feasible in American Samoa and Guam, small colonies easily dominated by the navy. Native Hawaiians vociferously objected to annexation, but by the 1890s white landowners had acquired enough power to ignore such protests. The real problem was the Philippines. Large, far from the mainland, and aflame with the spirit of nationalism, the islands could not just be ruled. They would have to be conquered first.

The United States had entered the Philippines not as a colonizer but as an ally to the revolutionaries. The Philippine Army of Liberation and the U.S. armed forces had defeated Spain together, with the Filipinos doing much of the fighting on land. The leader of the Philippine forces, Emilio Aguinaldo, had expected the war to bring independence (he said he’d been promised this several times by U.S. officials). He thus issued a declaration of independence, drafted a constitution, and hoisted a flag—a red, white, and blue one, representing Filipinos’ debt to the United States.

Aguinaldo was thus surprised when Washington concluded its war with Spain by buying the Philippines and placing the islands under U.S. military rule. In February 1899, a skirmish between some U.S. and Filipino soldiers on the outskirts of Manila turned the tense standoff into combat. Having just defeated Spain together, the Philippine and U.S. armies were now at war with each other.

It was an unbalanced war. The U.S. Army was seasoned from Indian wars, better equipped, and better trained. After nearly a year of one-sided set-piece battles in which Aguinaldo's forces were consistently bested, the Filipinos turned to guerrilla tactics. Banking on knowledge of the ground and the popularity of their cause, Aguinaldo's men hid, launched surprise strikes, and blended easily into the populace.

No war is pleasant, but this one was especially protracted and unseemly, with both sides resorting frequently to torture. The United States sought to win over Filipinos with education, sanitation, and road-building, but it also relied increasingly on harsh tactics: herding Filipinos into garrison towns, destroying food supplies, burning villages suspected of harboring insurgents, and killing indiscriminately. Aguinaldo surrendered in March 1901, but the fighting continued, flaring up in place after place. Worse, the war, hunger, and consequent social disruption spread diseases.

On the Fourth of July, 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt declared the war over. The losses by then had been extraordinary. Though the U.S. military counted only 4,196 of its men dead, Filipino deaths were in the hundreds of thousands. Textbooks usually give the conservative figure of 250,000 dead, but General J. Franklin Bell estimated that the war had killed one-sixth of the population—i.e., roughly 600,000 deaths—on the large island of Luzon alone.¹⁰ The historian Resil Mojares has offered a similar one-in-six estimate, totaling 100,000 deaths, for the smaller island of Cebu.¹¹ The most careful study, by historian Ken De Bevoise, is consistent with these: De Bevoise found that the war killed about 775,000 Filipinos between 1899 and 1903, many dying from disease.¹² If De Bevoise's calculations are right, the Philippine War had claimed more lives than the Civil War.

Nor was the fighting even over. Though Roosevelt's 1902 declaration correctly signaled that much of the archipelago had been pacified, some areas remained under military rule. The less-populated bottom third of the Philippines, called "Moroland" because of the preponderance of Muslims ("Moros") there, fought on. That leg of the war resulted in two of the bloodiest massacres in U.S. history: the Bud Dajo Massacre (1906), in which 600–1,000 Filipinos died, and the Bud Bagsak Massacre (1913), which killed 200–500. Full civilian rule, covering the entire archipelago, was only achieved in 1913, and even still skirmishes in Moroland continued.

The long Philippine War dampened the imperialist ardor of 1898, especially as the torture and massacres became scandals. Even the indefatigable Teddy Roosevelt seemed fatigued. When presented with the prospect of annexing the Dominican Republic, he refused, confiding to a friend in 1904 that he had “about the same desire to annex it as a gorged boa constrictor might have to swallow a porcupine wrong-end to.”¹³ Three years later, he declared the Philippines a “heel of Achilles” and suggested preparing it for independence.¹⁴ Even Aguinaldo, by this time, judged that the United States had started to “sober up.”¹⁵

Yet just as couples can fall out of love but remain married, the United States grew less imperialist but remained an empire. It still had colonies, and some nine million people lived in them.

IMPERIAL GOVERNMENT

Having pacified its territories, what would the United States do with them? Officials charged with managing the empire strove to grab onto some overarching mission, but time and again their fingers grasped only air. In Puerto Rico, officials sought to “Americanize” the colony by replacing Spanish with English (hence Washington’s insistence on spelling it “Porto Rico” for three decades) and orient its market toward the mainland. Yet in American Samoa, the naval government sought to preserve local culture and prevent economic intrusion by outsiders.

The lack of consistent aim was compounded by a blithe attitude. The United States had no powerful colonial office and nothing like the trained cadres of officials who made careers of managing European empires. The men who ran the U.S. territories usually knew little and left quickly. “Phelps, how would you like to be governor of American Samoa?” is how President Harry Truman recruited the territory’s first civilian governor. “Harry, where the hell is it?” was the telling reply.¹⁶ He held the office for barely more than a year. His successor served for four months.

Theodore Roosevelt Jr., who had governed both the Philippines and Puerto Rico, confessed that the United States was not “fitted to carry out any far-range colonial objective.”¹⁷ It was “unsuited to colonial administration,” Rexford Tugwell, the governor of Puerto Rico, agreed.¹⁸

Unprepared though it may have been, the colonial state was not wholly inactive. From the outside, at least, large infrastructural campaigns showcased the promise of U.S. rule. In 1904, the United States acquired a swath of land that cut across the newly established country of Panama. The Panama Canal Zone wasn’t exactly a territory, since technically it was leased rather than annexed. Nevertheless, it became the proving ground for the U.S. ambition to transform the tropics. Not only did the United States dig the massive canal—something that France had previously failed to do—in the process it turned the zone into one of the most intensively governed spots on the planet. Buildings were fumigated, swamps drained, brush cut, diseases beaten back, and workers subjected to military discipline. At enormous expense—opening the canal cost nearly a third of a billion dollars—an obstinate patch of tropical land had been rendered tractable.

The United States achieved something similar in the Philippines at Baguio, a site that the government chose as its summer capital, mainly for the use of mainland officials. From scratch and at the cost of millions, officials built a major modern city with an excellent sewer system, an ice plant, and hydroelectric power. This was all the more impressive considering that Baguio was high in the mountains, accessible only by a treacherous zigzag road.

Less splashy but more consequential were the achievements in public health. U.S. officials leveraged new medical knowledge to launch campaigns against

diseases. Death rates fell by a quarter in Puerto Rico's first decade under U.S. rule as hookworm, yellow fever, and smallpox were brought under control.¹⁹ The U.S. Virgin Islands' rate fell by nearly half in the first decade after the United States purchased the colony from Denmark in 1917.²⁰ Guam's rate fell by 58% from 1905 to 1940.²¹ Although the war in the Philippines was an epidemiological catastrophe, peace brought substantial improvements in health, hygiene, and water supply there, too, most notably to Manila.

Still, infrastructural investment in the colonies was fitful, and health improvements were not accompanied by development writ large. The contiguous United States boasted the world's largest economy, and in the first half of the twentieth century its per-capita GDP leapt by 233%. The territories, however, saw little of this. Philippine per-capita GDP, about one-seventh of that of the mainland in 1900, grew by only 52% in that period.²² Alaska languished till the 1940s—more than seventy years after its annexation—before the government built a road through Canada connecting it to the mainland. The fetid slums in Puerto Rico were a “paralyzing jolt to anyone who believes in American progress and civilization,” wrote a journalist in 1941.²³

An important constraint was funding. The territories, lacking voting representatives in Congress, struggled to win resources within the federal system. Capital investment and economic growth might have provided tax revenues, but here, too, the empire disappointed. Whatever bonanza the imperialists of the 1890s had hoped to reap never came. By 1929, the territories were probably receiving less than one percent of total U.S. investment, domestic and foreign.²⁴ The Philippines, the largest colony, saw only a quarter of the U.S. investment that Cuba did by the early 1940s, and only four percent of what Canada did.²⁵ Colonial trade, constrained somewhat by tariffs, was but a drop in the oceanic U.S. economy.

The major colonial commodity was sugar, grown on plantations in Hawai'i, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Yet by 1930, the mainland imported less sugar, by value, than coffee, crude rubber, or raw silk (none of which came largely from the territories).²⁶ The reason was the growth of mainland sugar production: from cane in the subtropical South and from beets in more temperate climates. In the interwar years, the United States bought more sugar from mainland beet farmers than from any of its territories.²⁷

It would buy a lot more, if those farmers had their way. In the 1930s, beet growers joined with dairymen, cottonseed farmers, cane sugar planters, and West Coast labor unions to deannex the Philippines. They sought to protect mainland agriculture and labor from colonial competition—to throw the Philippines over the tariff wall, as historian H. W. Brands put it.²⁸ What's striking is that mainland investment in the Philippines was so constrained that the weak counterlobby

urging retention was easily overpowered. In 1934, Congress passed the Philippine Independence Act. By its terms, the Philippines would establish a commonwealth and face increased trade and immigration restrictions until, ten years later (in 1946, as the schedule worked out), the Philippines would be free.

ANTI-IMPERIAL ASPIRATIONS

Freedom was a thing many Filipinos sought. But the 1930s, marked by economic crisis and looming war, was an uncomfortable time for it. The retraction of the U.S. economic and military awning would leave the colony dangerously exposed. The Philippine Commonwealth's president, Manuel Quezon, despite being the head of the Nationalist Party, worried about independence in a hostile world. He secretly approached Britain about annexing the Philippines if the United States left.

Quezon's ambivalence is a helpful reminder of the complexity of colonial politics. Today, formal empire is nearly extinct and we inhabit a world of nation-states. But it's easy to mistake this outcome for destiny, to assume independence to be the only path out of the colonial condition. And while many colonized subjects did exit empire through the door marked "independence," others eyed different escapes. In the U.S. Empire, we can identify three important routes out of colonialism: statehood, independence, and commonwealth status.

Statehood, of course, had been the fate of the Western territories, places like Kansas and Montana. Leading political parties in both the Philippines and Puerto Rico set their sights on admission to the union shortly after annexation. It's not hard to see why. With statehood, they hoped, would come citizenship, constitutional protections, voting rights, and unrestricted access to the largest market on the planet. Hawai'i and Alaska became states in 1959, after decades of pushing, and talk of Puerto Rican statehood remained serious throughout the twentieth century.

Independence offered a different bundle of goods. Hawaiians who had seen their kingdom converted into a plantation by white landowners and Filipinos who had seen the violence of colonial rule had reasons for wanting it. Independence promised freedom from cultural incursions, too—from government offices and courts where only European languages were spoken, from schools where local students were taught the colonizers' point of view. The Philippines is the only U.S. territory to have gained independence, though the Panama Canal Zone (not quite a territory) returned to Panama, and there is today substantial continued interest in independence in Alaska, Hawai'i, and Puerto Rico.

Independence was easier to imagine for large and more self-sufficient territories. But in Puerto Rico, an island profoundly dependent on mainland trade, nationalism was consistently tempered by economic fears about separation.

Luis Muñoz Marín, the towering figure of twentieth-century Puerto Rican politics, had initially sought independence but came to feel that full severance from the United States would trigger economic collapse, destroying “all hope of life and civilization.”²⁹ He thus guided the colony down an alternate path: commonwealth status, achieved in 1952. Puerto Rico remained under the U.S. flag, but with some autonomy in local politics and retaining strong cultural differences from the mainland, including linguistic. The Philippines had for eleven years been a commonwealth as well, during its transition to independence, and in 1986 the Northern Mariana Islands would become one.

Anti-imperialists often vacillated between these options—independence, statehood, and commonwealth. It’s telling that the first major local political party in Hawai‘i after annexation called for independence, whereas its counterpart in the Philippines sought statehood. White settlement, the vital ingredient in statehood in the contiguous territories, was never sizable enough to be dispositive in any colony. Hawai‘i and Alaska, the territories with the most whites, still had to overcome serious mainland opposition before gaining admission to the union.

Yet whichever route anti-imperialists chose, their paths were strewn with disappointment. In the first three decades after 1898, no territory was made a state and none was set free. Instead, they seem stalled, politically and economically. The interwar period thus gave rise to a wave of serious protests throughout the empire. American Samoans stopped showing up for work and cooperating with the colonial government for a spell. Guamanians pressed hard for citizenship. Hawai‘i saw a series of militant and racially charged strikes, spreading from the ports to the fields. In the Philippines, thousands of partially armed peasants and workers bent on independence staged the explosive but short-lived Sakdal Rebellion. Protests in the U.S. Virgin Islands led to the beating of police officers and a skull fracture for the police director. In Puerto Rico, the chief of police was killed. The nationalist movement responsible, led by Pedro Albizu Campos, also blew up buildings and shot at the governor.

Though Washington tamped down these flames of rebellion, the embers still glowed. In 1950, the fire rekindled when Puerto Rican nationalists staged a seventy-city uprising, one that raged for days and required air power to put down. While independence fighters on the island stormed government buildings, two on the mainland, Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola, made their way to Blair House, the temporary residence of President Harry Truman, and started shooting. They shot a police officer and two Secret Service agents and came close to hitting Truman himself. When Truman explained, two years later, why he had chosen not to run for re-election, he mentioned the “shooting scrape,” which “has caused us all so much worry and anguish.”³⁰

OFFSTAGE COLONIALISM

Oscar Collazo, one of the attempted assassins, hadn't hated Truman particularly. He was trying, rather, to draw mainlanders' attention to the plight of the island. "How little the American people know of Puerto Rico!" he exclaimed during his trial. "They don't know Puerto Rico is a possession of the United States, even though it has been so for the last fifty-two years."³¹

Collazo's act did little to change that. But he'd put his finger on an important and distinctive fact about the United States' empire: the people of the metropole paid little attention to the colonies. Often they weren't even aware of their existence. "Most people in this country, including educated people, know little or nothing about our overseas possessions," a governmental report noted in the 1940s. "They are convinced that only 'foreigners,' such as the British, have an 'empire.' Americans are sometimes amazed to hear that we, too, have an 'empire.'"³²

This point is worth underscoring, as it cuts across the grain of scholarship on empires. Especially since Edward Said's influential book, *Orientalism* (1978), researchers have explored the ways colonies impinged on the metropolitan psyche, serving as an important "Other" against which Western selves were defined.³³ Western literature, philosophy, and art cannot be fully understood, Said and his followers have argued, without accounting for the ever-present specter of the extra-European world.

The case can be made for the United States with regard to Native Americans. The confrontation between European and Native peoples on the North American continent produced cultural ripples that remain palpable today. Generations grew up reading James Fenimore Cooper and playing cowboys and Indians. More than half the states bear Native names, from Massachusetts to Utah. Even people without any direct contact with Native Americans bore the marks of settler colonialism's legacy.

The overseas colonies, by contrast, carved fewer scratches into the mainland mind. Said himself recognized this and exempted the United States from his diagnosis of *Orientalism*, despite its large Asian colony.³⁴ The reason might have to do with population sizes—unlike its European counterparts, the United States always had far more people in its metropole than its overseas territories. Or it might be that its long experience with settler colonialism ill prepared the United States to reckon with other forms of empire.

Whatever the cause, the effect is clear. Despite the early expectations that empire would transform the United States, the first half of the twentieth century—the heyday of territorial empire—saw very little serious cultural engagement with the colonies. The anthropologist Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) was surely the most prominent literary exploration. Yet Mead wrote of "Samoa,"

the region, not “American Samoa,” the name of the colony, and she gave little hint that the “South Sea island” she was describing bore any relation to the United States.³⁵ And other works of either the stature or popularity of Mead’s are hard to find. In 1930, a representative year, the *New York Times* printed more articles about Poland than the Philippines, more about Albania than Alaska. It ran nearly three times as many articles about Britain’s largest territory, India, as about all U.S. territories combined.³⁶

European empires didn’t work like this. The British had a holiday, Empire Day, to celebrate their imperial holdings. It began in the schools in the early twentieth century and became official in 1916, marked with parades, hymns, and speeches. Coincidentally, the United States also had a patriotic holiday with precisely the same chronology—it started in the schools and became official in 1916. But that holiday, Flag Day, wasn’t designed to celebrate the empire. Rather, it was, as President Woodrow Wilson explained, an occasion for people to “gather together in united demonstration of their feeling as a Nation.”³⁷ The nation, not the empire, was the relevant political unit, and children celebrated the occasion by gazing at the flag, which had a star for every state but no symbol for the territories.

The United States’ failure to engage culturally with its colonies wasn’t just distinctive, it was also consequential. It mattered most after 1931, when Japan’s attack on China portended a larger Pacific war. Guam and the Philippines were the colonies most obviously in Japan’s immediate path, though Alaska, American Samoa, and Hawai‘i were also possible targets (Japan would ultimately attack them all). Fortifying Pacific territories would require serious investment and might provoke Japan, neither of which the apathetic public had much taste for. Polls showed little mainland interest in any military defense west of Hawai‘i, and in early 1940 *Fortune* magazine found that barely more than half the mainland public (55%) supported defending even Hawai‘i.³⁸

In the absence of public pressure, military planners did little in a time of pinched budgets to prepare the Pacific colonies for war. Instead, they envisioned stationing a fleet at Hawai‘i or on the West Coast and leaving only small forces in the westernmost territories. Japan would surely take those territories if it attacked, but the hope was that the United States could eventually win them back. The plan, in other words, was to sacrifice the western colonies, at least temporarily.

Washington revisited its policy in mid 1941, in response to looming war and to British demands that the United States defend Asia. But this attempt to fortify its Pacific territories came late, and, more importantly, it was undercut by the countervailing strategic commitment the United States had made to prioritize the European theater over the Pacific one. As a result, the hastily built defenses in the Pacific territories proved unable to repel Japan’s attack in December 1941.

THE PACIFIC WAR

That attack is usually remembered as a strike on the Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawai'i. Pearl Harbor was "the only piece of American territory that suffered directly from enemy attack in World War II," is how Richard Nixon put it.³⁹ Yet Nixon left out the other targets Japan hit. Within a span of hours, it attacked the U.S. territories of Midway, Wake Island, Guam, Hawai'i, and the Philippines; the British colonies of Malaya and Hong Kong; and independent Thailand. Some attacks occurred on December 7th, 1941 and some on December 8th, but only because Japan's maneuver crossed the international date line. The event known as "Pearl Harbor" was in fact a near-simultaneous strike on the Allies' Pacific holdings.

Hawai'i was not the first target hit; Malaya was. Nor was it clearly the one where Japan inflicted the greatest damage. The U.S. Army's official history of the war rates the strike on the Philippines as just as harmful as that on Pearl Harbor.⁴⁰ In Hawai'i, the Japanese hobbled the United States' Pacific fleet. In the Philippines, they took out its largest concentration of warplanes outside North America—the foundation of the Allied Pacific defense. Moreover, whereas the attack on Pearl Harbor was a single strike, the initial air raid on the Philippines was followed by more raids, then by invasion and conquest. Wake Island (where a large contingent of servicemen and workers had been posted) and Guam also fell to Japan. Months later, the western tip of Alaska did, too.

The war threw the colonies into crisis. Hawai'i was placed under martial law until 1944. Puerto Rico and Alaska were threatened with martial law, too, and civilian officials managed to fend it off only by deferring to military commanders—essentially enacting military rule informally. Alaska Natives inhabiting the island bridge that stretched toward Japan were interned inland, where they lingered in wretched camps for years.

The crisis was particularly acute for the more than sixteen million U.S. nationals (mostly Filipinos) falling under the Japanese flag. This raised important questions of allegiance. Japan framed its war as a revolt against white rule. It promised to replace white empires with a collaborative regional order, a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." To this end, in 1943 Japan did something that the United States had promised but never done: granted the Philippines independence. The country remained under *de facto* Japanese control but, technically, it was sovereign for the first time in four centuries.

Yet Japan's promise of "Asia for the Asiatics" was undercut by its need to ransack its territories to feed its war economy. Japan's officers confiscated goods, doled out summary justice, forced laborers to work, tortured suspected dissidents, and staged public beheadings. Japan imprisoned the entirety of the conquered populations in western Alaska and on Wake Island.

Japan's conquered subjects responded in varied ways. Some joined the Japanese government, many kept their heads down, and some actively resisted. It is the last action that is the most intriguing, since it was so evidently costly. On Guam, locals aided and refused to reveal the location of mainland soldiers, despite being threatened with execution. On the Philippines, guerrilla armies formed and received aid from the populace.

In 1943, the United States recaptured its lost Alaskan territory—the battle over Attu Island took thousands of lives. In 1944, the U.S. armed forces moved to reclaim the Philippines and Guam. Both invasions were marked by widespread destruction, as the United States bombed Japanese-held structures and as the Japanese military turned on the civilians. Agana, Guam's capital, was ruined. So were large parts of Manila, the Philippine capital—then the sixth-largest city in the United States.

The destruction was general. "We levelled entire cities with our bombs and shell fire," admitted the high commissioner of the Philippines.⁴¹ After the war, Filipinos submitted claims to the government on behalf of 1,111,938 deaths. Add Japanese (518,000) and mainlander fatalities (the army counted slightly more than 10,000) and the total climbs to more than 1.6 million.⁴² Such numbers are regrettably imprecise, but it's nevertheless clear that the Second World War in the Philippines was the bloodiest event ever to take place on U.S. soil.

PARTIAL DECOLONIZATION

In 1934, the U.S. Congress had passed legislation to provisionally grant the Philippines independence after a transitional period. This was predicated on the commonwealth government protecting life and property and showing itself capable of repaying the Philippine debt that the federal government had incurred. Neither these preconditions was met: the government had been forced into exile as a million lives were lost and more than ten percent of the colony's buildings were destroyed, and the war left no hope of repaying the debt. Nevertheless, the White House refused to consider delaying or canceling independence. On July 4, 1946, for the second time in three years, the Philippines was set free.

Congress had put the Philippines on the path to independence in 1934 out of protectionist self-interest. But by the 1940s, the old reasons no longer held—the threat that the decimated Philippines would swamp the booming mainland with its produce or workers had evaporated. Instead, new reasons had arisen. The war had catapulted the United States into the position of the global hegemon, giving it substantial interests throughout the world. Letting the Philippines go supplied much-sought legitimacy in rapidly decolonizing Asia.

The more empires unraveled and newly independent countries joined the international system, the greater the pressure grew for the United States to

decolonize, especially as the Soviet Union took up the issue of empire as a cudgel. It was in response to such pressures, as well as to pressures within its territories, that Washington made Puerto Rico a commonwealth in 1952, a status that changed little in terms of actual authority but struck the island off the United Nations' list of non-self-governing territories. The United States got Alaska and Hawai'i off that list, too, in 1959, by making them states. Hawai'i became the first state admitted to the union not under the firm political control of whites; it immediately elected Congress's first Chinese-American senator and Japanese-American representative.

The decolonization of the United States, however, was incomplete. For one, Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, and the U.S. Virgin Islands remained territories, even if Puerto Rico had received a new status. For another, the period after World War II brought new acquisitions that partly offset decolonization. In 1945, Truman declared that U.S. borders extended to the oceanic continental shelf, a decision that added 760,000 submerged square miles (nearly the size of the Louisiana Purchase) to the country's area. In 1947, the United States took over administration of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, the UN territory in Micronesia, which had some 50,000 inhabitants. Washington had been keen to control this land because it offered unparalleled base sites. And though the United States had let its largest colony go, it held onto many of the bases it had claimed during the war. It maintained a system of hundreds of foreign bases, which it keeps to this day.

The United States, in other words, remains a territorial empire. Yet the inattention that marked colonial affairs in the first half of the twentieth century has not much changed. Though today between three and four million people live in U.S. territories and hundreds of foreign bases dot the globe, the United States hews to its self-conception as a nation-state.

George W. Bush's confident declaration, "America has never been an empire," is not true. But what it represents—the United States' failure to reconcile with its colonies—has been enduring and powerful, with consequences for mainland and territories alike.

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