

TAKE THREE: THE MOON LANDING

Twilight of Empire

Daniel Immerwahr

“The whole world knows that we covet no territory,” announced Herbert Hoover. Or was it Dwight Eisenhower who said that? (“The United States does not covet a single acre of land that belongs to another.”) Or perhaps John F. Kennedy (“This nation does not covet the territory of any people”), Lyndon Johnson (“We threaten no regime and covet no territory”), Gerald Ford (“America covets no one else’s land”), or Ronald Reagan (“We Americans covet no foreign territory”? The disavowing of territorial ambitions is a hallowed, bipartisan presidential tradition, like pardoning a turkey at Thanksgiving or hosting the annual Easter egg roll.¹

Still, it is curious, given the blare of high-volume non-covetousness that has emanated from the White House since the late nineteenth century, how many of the most iconic photographs in U.S. history depict men plunging flags into foreign soil. Think of Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders standing proudly atop Kettle Hill in Cuba, where they planted Old Glory in 1898 (Figure 1). Or Joe Rosenthal’s photograph of U.S. Marines raising the flag over Iwo Jima in 1945 (Figure 2). And then, of course, there’s the moon landing: Neil Armstrong’s photograph of Buzz Aldrin saluting a star-spangled banner sticking out from the Sea of Tranquility in 1969 (Figure 3).

What can we make of this? One interpretation is that the resonance of these photographs, in spite of the official disavowals of empire, exposes a buried vein of imperialist ambition. The people of the United States may pose as liberators, but deep down they long to conquer. The influential Wisconsin School historian William Appleman Williams, thinking along these lines, diagnosed the United States with a case of “imperial anticolonialism.” Even when it declined to take colonies, Williams argued, the United States was an empire through and through.²

Such an interpretation is not demonstrably wrong, but it is static, attributing to the United States an unchanging national character. Yet when it comes to formal empire—to planting flags and claiming land—U.S. policies and attitudes changed dramatically over the course of the twentieth century. At the start of the century the United States was a buoyantly expansionist power. By the end, it had entirely renounced its territorial ambitions. The photographs capture moments along that arc, and the ones taken on the moon serve as an end point.

The Apollo missions took place at a time when the United States was fighting a vicious war in Vietnam and had no lack of designs on other lands. Yet it didn’t annex any of them. Indeed, a closer look at the moon landing vividly illustrates how thoroughly territorial empire had been expunged from the nation’s repertoire by the late 1960s.

¹Hoover, *Addresses upon the American Road* (New York, 1941), 35; Eisenhower, Address before a Joint Session of the National Congress of Uruguay, March 2, 1960, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1960–61* (Washington, DC, 1999), 267–271, here 268; Eisenhower and Kennedy, Joint Statement by the President and President-Elect Kennedy, Dec. 6, 1960, *The American Presidency Project*, ed. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, www.presidency.ucsb.edu (hereafter *APP*); Johnson, Statement by the President on Vietnam, March 25, 1965, *APP*; Ford, Remarks in Indianapolis at the Annual Convention of the United States Jaycees, June 22, 1976, *APP*; Reagan, Remarks at the Annual Convention of the American Legion in Seattle, March 23, 1983, *APP*.

²William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, rev. ed. (New York, 1962), 17. See also William Appleman Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life* (Oxford, 1980).



Figure 1. Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders on Kettle Hill in 1898. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Figure 2. Flag Raising on Iwo Jima in 1945. National Archives at College Park.

But first, the other photographs. The shot of Roosevelt standing atop Kettle Hill is a textbook favorite, and rightly so. It shows the future president, and the nation, in a moment of exultant triumph. The United States didn't annex Cuba, where Roosevelt fought, after the 1898 war with Spain, but it did take the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the non-Spanish territories of Hawai'i and American Samoa. And it had already claimed dozens of "guano islands" starting in the 1850s and Alaska in 1867. What the photograph of Roosevelt captures is the great official *pride* taken in such feats. The eight million newly colonized subjects who saluted the stars and stripes after the war of 1898 were, in the eyes of many, a testament to the greatness of the United States, which now extended from the Caribbean to the Arctic to the far side of the Pacific. Martial prowess, territorial conquest, and national grandeur fit neatly together.

The formal empire continued to grow through new annexations (U.S. Virgin Islands, other scattered islands) and population increase. In 1940, Undersecretary of State Adolf Berle



Figure 3. Flag planting and moonwalk in 1969. NASA.

predicted that the approaching war would turn the United States into “an imperial power greater than the world has ever seen.”³ Indeed, in 1945, the United States became the fourth-most populous empire on the planet. And if its occupations are added to the count—Japan, South Korea, zones in Germany and Austria, and various Pacific islands—the country contained slightly more people living under colonial or occupation rule than it did living in states.⁴ The men who planted the flag on Iwo Jima weren’t just winning a battle, they were claiming territory. The United States wouldn’t leave Iwo Jima until 1968.

Yet from its imperial apex, the United States swiftly began to do what every other major empire did in the postwar period. It decolonized. The Philippines became independent in 1946. Hawai‘i and Alaska got statehood, after some congressional resistance from segregationists, in 1959. Puerto Rico achieved the nebulous status of “commonwealth” in 1952, which meant that it was no longer classified as a “non-self-governing territory” by the United Nations. The occupations ended without turning into annexations, as they might have done.

The United States empire did not entirely vanish or even stop growing. But its expansions were carefully designed to avoid colonizing people. In 1945, Truman declared that U.S. sovereignty extended over the oceanic continental shelf—adding 760,000 submerged square miles and countless fish to the country, though no humans. Two years later, the United States took charge of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, which granted it control of an oceanic expanse the size of the entire continental United States but a population of only around 100,000. U.S. military bases dotted the globe, but these pinprick enclaves encompassed relatively little land and, in theory, no colonized subjects. If at the end of 1945, one in two people under U.S. jurisdiction lived outside of the states, by 1960 it was around one in fifty, where it has roughly remained.⁵

Immediately after the two territories of Hawai‘i and Alaska became states, the moon rose high on the horizon of U.S. ambitions. For President Kennedy, who proposed a landing, it was a “new frontier.”⁶ In fact, from the perspective of empire, it was a frontier like none before—large, uninhabited, rich in minerals, and newly accessible. This is exactly the sort of thing that would have set old-school empire-builders trembling with anticipation. “I would annex the planets if I could,” the British arch-imperialist Cecil Rhodes had once mused.⁷

Annexing the moon, however, would only make sense if it had value and if it could sustain cities, bases, or mining operations. Could it?

It is tempting to assume that settling space was never more than a science fiction fantasy. But that’s a retrospective judgment. One has to appreciate the wrenching technological transformations that the leaders of the United States had already experienced in their lifetimes. Dwight Eisenhower was born into a world containing a countable number of cars, where light bulbs were still a novelty. Yet he lived to see television, computers, nuclear bombs, supersonic jets, and satellite communication. Though he initially treated space exploration as a punchline, by 1958 Eisenhower felt compelled to admit that “a great many of us here will live to see things that today look just like Buck Rogers in the funny papers. That, I am sure of.”⁸

³Quoted in Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2011), 103.

⁴Daniel Immerwahr, “The Greater United States: Territory and Empire in U.S. History,” *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 3 (2016): 373–391 (here 388).

⁵*Ibid.*, 389.

⁶State of the Union, January 11, 1962. *APP*.

⁷Quoted in W. T. Stead, ed., *The Last Will and Testament of Cecil John Rhodes* (London: “Review of Reviews” Office, 1902), 190.

⁸Radio and Newsreel Panel Discussion, Chicago, Oct. 22, 1958, *APP*.

Eisenhower died in 1969, the year that—just like the spaceman hero Buck Rogers—astronauts touched down on the moon. Five years later, the *New York Times* ran a front-page story reporting that not only did respectable scientists believe space colonization to be possible, but that they had a plan for it.⁹ “We can colonize space,” announced a prominent Princeton physicist in *Physics Today*. He predicted that the first community would be in space before 2005.¹⁰ In 1975, NASA convened a study group on space settlement, which judged it to be both “technically feasible” and “desirable.”¹¹ Carl Sagan, Buckminster Fuller, Lynn Margulis, Stewart Brand, and Jacques Cousteau all approved. Space colonies were “not a question of whether,” announced Jerry Brown, the governor of California, “only when and how.”¹²

The talk of “frontiers” was not merely symbolic, in other words. Space colonization was a graspable future, or so it seemed to serious-minded thinkers at the time. The moon was thus a territory of great potential value—rich in titanium and strategically positioned. And, as the Princeton physicist noted with relish, it could be taken “without shooting any Indians.”¹³

But the United States did not annex the moon. There was no lunar scramble. Instead, government officials deliberately distanced themselves from even the hint of imperialism. On the international stage, the Johnson administration took the lead in crafting the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, which declared that no nation could claim sovereignty over outer space. Then, once it seemed likely that the Apollo missions would succeed, NASA appointed a Committee on Symbolic Activities for the First Lunar Landing and instructed its members to avoid giving the impression that the United States was “taking possession of the moon.” The committee seriously considered planting the United Nations flag instead of the stars and stripes, or perhaps small flags for every country.¹⁴

In the end, the committee opted for a modest U.S. flag, three feet by five, made of nylon, and purchased (according to one account) at Sears.¹⁵ It accompanied that flag-planting with a legal declaration explaining that the flag was simply “a symbolic gesture of national pride” and “not to be construed as a declaration of national appropriation.”¹⁶ The astronauts also took small flags for every member country of the United Nations, to be distributed upon return. They carried medals that had been given to dead Soviet cosmonauts, to place on the moon in their honor. And they left a conspicuously internationalist plaque, which described them as “men from planet Earth” rather than Americans and showed a map of the world rather than that of the United States. “We came in peace for all mankind,” it read.

President Richard Nixon planned a world tour to coincide with the astronauts’ re-entry. He was on the recovery ship that collected the men after they splashed down about nine hundred miles southwest of Hawai‘i, and then he continued on to Asia where he emphasized the

⁹Walter Sullivan, “Proposal for Human Colonies in Space Is Hailed by Scientists as Feasible Now,” *New York Times*, May 13, 1974, 1, 23.

¹⁰Gerard K. O’Neill, “The Colonization of Space,” *Physics Today*, Sept. 1974, 32–40 (here 32); Gerard K. O’Neill, *The High Frontier: Human Colonies in Space* (New York, 1977), 17.

¹¹Richard D. Johnson and Charles Holbrow, eds., *Space Settlements: A Design Study* (Washington, DC, 1977), 1, 181.

¹²Quoted in Stewart Brand, ed., *Space Colonies* (New York, 1977), 146. The opinions of Sagan, Fuller, Margulis, Brand, and Cousteau are also reported in *Space Colonies*. A pre-moon landing assessment of space colonization, also optimistic, is Dandridge M. Cole and Donald W. Cox, *Islands in Space* (Philadelphia, 1964). An excellent overview is W. Patrick McCray, *The Visioneers: How a Group of Elite Scientists Pursued Space Colonies, Nanotechnologies, and a Limitless Future* (Princeton, NJ, 2012). It should be noted that the most detailed visions for space colonization made use of the moon and its minerals but imagined actual settlement taking place on space stations or modified asteroids.

¹³O’Neill, quoted in Sullivan, “Proposal for Human Colonies.”

¹⁴Described in Anne M. Platoff, “Where No Flag Has Gone Before: Political and Technical Aspects of Placing a Flag on the Moon,” NASA Contractor Report 188251, <http://www.jsc.nasa.gov/history/flag/flag.htm>.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 7n10.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 6.

international nature of the Apollo mission. “The men who went to the moon could have been Thais,” Nixon announced in Bangkok. “They happened to be Americans” but represented “a spirit that is bigger than the United States.”¹⁷

In India, Nixon told an audience that he was proud of the achievement but “not in any simply nationalistic sense.” He quoted the message of the plaque: We came in peace for all mankind. “Mahatma Gandhi came in peace to all mankind,” Nixon continued, awkwardly tying the Apollo mission in with India’s legacy of anticolonialism. He then called for “peace that values diversity and respects the right of different peoples to live by different systems—and freely to choose the systems they live by.”¹⁸

You can almost hear the corpse of Cecil Rhodes rotating furiously in its grave. The world’s most powerful nation had broken free of the surface of the earth and reached a vast new territory of enormous potential value. Yet how did the president—the prime exemplar of the so-called “imperial presidency”—react? He told the people of Thailand that this was as much their achievement as his, blew a kiss to Gandhi, offered a paean to cultural diversity, and left it there. The moon went unclaimed. The age of empire was over.

Daniel Immerwahr is an associate professor of history at Northwestern University. His first book, *Thinking Small* (Harvard, 2015) offers a critical account of the United States’ pursuit of grassroots development at home and abroad. It won the Merle Curti award from the Organization of American Historians and the Annual Book Prize from the Society for U.S. Intellectual History. Immerwahr is currently writing a book about the U.S. overseas territories, tentatively titled *How to Hide an Empire* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). He has received an Andrew Carnegie Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, and the Stuart L. Bernath Lecture Prize from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations.

¹⁷Remarks at a Reception at Government House, Bangkok, July 29, 1969, *APP*.

¹⁸Remarks on Arrival in New Delhi, July 31, 1969, and Toasts of the President and Acting President Hidayatullah in New Delhi, July 31, 1969, *APP*.