The U.S. Empire

History 492–20
Tues: 2:00pm–4:50pm
L40 Harris Hall
Graduate Seminar

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Course Description

It is a much-cherished piece of national mythology that the United States is exceptional for having been a world power without having had a substantial empire. And debunking that particular myth has been a favorite pastime of historians of U.S. foreign relations since the late 1950s at least. This course does not propose to settle the issue, which pretty much boils down to a question of what you mean by the word “empire.” Rather, it seeks to better understand the particular ways in which the United States has projected its power abroad from the nineteenth century through the present. How has the United States gained influence globally through settler colonialism, territorial government, military interventions, counterinsurgency, the rule of experts, military bases, and U.S. global markets? How did the United States ascend to international hegemony after World War II and how did it maintain that position? How were its norms and institutions taken up, rejected, or modified within its imperial domain? And how have its attempts to dominate the world (or parts of it) shaped the domestic history of the United States? Questions such as these will animate our tour through the burgeoning scholarly literature on the United States’ empire.

This is not a survey of U.S. diplomatic relations nor is it a class that will dwell for long on the Cold War. It is also not a course that focuses at length on the experience of the colonized. It is, rather, a study of power and its various forms. Particular emphasis will be placed on a topic that is not often singled out for attention: the U.S. overseas territories. But regional coverage will be broad, including the U.S. West, Latin America, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and Western Europe. This class is most appropriate for students of U.S. history or students of other areas who are interested in considering empire from a comparative perspective.

Workload, grading, and assignments

The main activities of this course will be reading and discussing books, generally on the order of one long book per week or the equivalent. Weekly reading assignments will run to as much as 500 pages and I will expect you to do all of the reading. The upside—if avoiding work counts as an “upside” (a dubious proposition in graduate school)—is that I will ask relatively little from you in terms of additional work for the course. There will be no research requirement and, in fact, relatively little occasion for any outside reading. The workload for this course will not crescendo toward the end of the quarter, as most courses do.

This course is meant to prepare you to take qualifying exams on this topic and the forms of assessment for the course will all be geared toward that goal. You will be graded on four items: participation in discussion, weekly reading responses, an oral examination administered at the end of the term, and an undergraduate lecture. With the exception of the lecture, which will be graded separately, your grades will be cumulative in the following sense. Each of the first three tasks—the participation, reading responses, and oral exam—is a way of assessing the same thing: whether you have done the readings well and developed interesting thoughts about them. If you manage to show through your reading responses that you are on top of the ball, then I won’t care as much if you take a back seat during the class discussion. The same holds for the exam. Technically, you could participate very little in class, send in lackluster reading responses, and then come into the oral exam at the end of term and blow me away with your deep familiar-
ty with the readings and unspeakably clever insights, and walk out with an A. But I wouldn’t recommend trying that.

*Grade breakdown*

Participation, responses, and oral exam: 75%
Lecture: 25%

*Class participation*

The goal here is to advance an intelligent conversation from which we all learn. The most obvious way to do that is to say smart things and say them clearly. But that is not the only meaningful way to participate. Asking a question, connecting something already on the table to another thing, clarifying something that someone else has said, and offering evidence from the text under discussion are also all valuable. Bonus points are awarded for contributions that draw on what others have said. Other things to keep in mind: aim for clarity, keep in mind the value of an amicable classroom environment, and try not to monopolize the conversation.

*Reading responses*

Please send to me, ideally by 11pm the evening before class, a reading response offering a summary of the readings and any preliminary thoughts or questions you have. Give about a page per book and a paragraph per article. The main purposes of the reading response are to allow you to collect your thoughts before your discussion and to give you something that you’ll have to rely on as you do future work or prepare for exams in the field. So as you are figuring out what you want to write and how you want your response to be structured, keep the point of this exercise in mind and make whatever choice will allow you to get the most out of the assignment. The secondary purposes of the reading assignment are to help me prepare for class and to assess your progress. In terms of evaluation, your responses are considered as warm-ups for class participation. So I will acknowledge all responses that I get before the deadline and I’ll try to make any comments that I think might be helpful, but I may not reply in full, especially if your responses come in after the deadline. If they are deficient in any remarkable way, however, I’ll let you know.

*Oral exam*

At the end of the term, we’ll schedule a time for you come by and talk with me for 20–40 minutes about the reading and what you got out of the class. This is not intended to be something to dread, but rather an occasion for you to show me what you know and especially to talk about things that you didn’t get a chance to address during the class. It will also be a dry run for qualifying exams. All readings will be on the table for this discussion but as we schedule the exams I’ll ask you if there are any texts or issues that you particularly want to talk about. I will try to ask you at least one question to which you do not know the answer—that is to test the bounds of your knowledge—but the point of this is to find out what you do know, not what you don’t know.

*Lecture, due 12/7 by 4pm*

Instead of a research paper, your end-of-term written assessment will be an hour-length undergraduate lecture on a specific topic within the general area of this class. You may write the entire lecture out or submit a full outline (containing all the points you will make, if not the exact sentences in which they would be expressed). You are also encouraged to submit PowerPoint or Prezi files designed to accompany the talk.
The object of the exercise is not to show off your command of historiographical nuance or to cram your lecture with as much information as possible but to reflect upon the big picture and figure out a way to communicate that to an undergraduate audience. That will involve having a clear argument and finding a way to present it simply and dramatically, in a way that undergraduates will be able to remember. The requirements of a lecture are different from those of an academic paper. I would strongly advise that you avoid walking your imagined audience through the ins and outs of the existing literature on the topic. In fact, do not drop scholars’ names at all unless you feel that doing so serves some pedagogical function. Do not do anything in this lecture that does not serve a pedagogical function. Other things to be wary of: taxonomies, lists, lengthy “background” sections, and ground-covering of any sort. The ideal lecture is an aerodynamic machine, with a comprehensible main argument, a clear structure, just the right amount of detail (be especially careful to avoid laying it on too thick, Goldilocks), narrative hooks, and a strict subordination of auxiliary material to the main points. Your audience should know, at every point in the lecture, why they are hearing what they are hearing and how it fits into the larger structure. Feel free to signpost like crazy (e.g., “That story I just told you was a way of illustrating x. Now I’m going to argue y. Remember: these both relate to my big point A in the following way…”).

Another important distinction between the lecture and the academic paper is the requirements for originality in each. When you write an academic paper, you are asked to produce an original analysis and expected to rigorously document any words, facts, or ideas that you have taken from others. The lecture, however, is essentially a derivative genre and you are encouraged to take others’ ideas, anecdotes, narrative devices, main theses, and categorical distinctions without cluing your students into where you got it all from (unless that attribution serves a pedagogical function). As a lecturer, you are not performing your original compositions, but covering the classic songbook and adding your own flourishes to your favorite tunes. The limit here, beyond which above-board borrowing shades into “Let’s sit down and talk about plagiarism” territory, is the use of other scholars’ sentences without attribution. If you want to use other scholars’ words but you don’t want to bother talking about why with your students, just enclose them in quotation marks and add a footnote below—imagine that anything in the footnotes will be read by me but not heard by your undergraduate audience.

One recommendation: I’ve had students before who treated this as a research assignment and set out to lecture on something they didn’t know about, often a highly specific topic (“The Transition from Keynesianism to Neoliberalism in Southeast Asia”). You are of course welcome to do any outside reading you that you need to do, but please keep in mind that the purpose of this assignment is not to break new ground for the field but to synthesize findings within it. It may thus be easier for you to take this as an opportunity to consolidate rather than to extend your knowledge base, to use books you have already read (especially ones for this course) as the basis for your lecture, and to try to weave them together into something coherent. At any rate, I would be fine with that.

Please turn in, with your lecture, an account of where you got your material and why you made the choices that you did about how to present it. Here, as in the footnotes, your audience is not a classroom of imagined undergraduates but me, and you are welcome to go into any historiographical details you want to (e.g., “Author G has a nice description of the Bretton Woods conference but tells it as the story of an international community reaching a consensus. I took a lot of G’s material but repurposed it as a story about conflicting personalities, because I wanted the students to understand that . . .”). I don’t need a sentence-by-sentence account of where you got what from, but this short essay should indicate main sources and what you got from each. It should be at least a page in length.
Remember all of those lectures you’ve heard that made you want to die from boredom? Don’t write one of those! Remember the lecture that made you want to go to grad school? Write that lecture.

Books

The following books are available for purchase from the campus bookstore in the Norris Center. There have also been placed on reserve at the library, so do not feel obliged to purchase them. All other readings are available through the course reader, which is on sale at the campus bookstore.


* = a book for which only specific chapters have been assigned.

Schedule of Readings

Readings for every week are listed in the order in which it is recommended that you do them. Particularly heavy reading weeks are denoted with the skull and crossbones: 🕷

Oct. 2: Introduction

Oct. 9: Overview

Oct. 16: Continental empire

Oct. 23: Puerto Rico and the Insular Cases

Oct. 30: The Philippines
• Daniel Immerwahr, “Everything You Always Wanted to Know about the Philippines But Were Afraid to Ask”
• Luis H. Francia, A History of the Philippines: From Indios Bravos to Filipinos (New York: The Overlook Press, 2010), chaps. 3–5

Nov. 6: Imperial Return
• Alfred W. McCoy, Policing America’s Empire: The United States, the Philippines and the Rise of the Surveillance State (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009)

Nov. 13: Latin America

Nov. 20: Soft Power
• Victoria de Grazia, Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005)

Nov. 27: The Cold War
• Campbell Craig and Frederik Logevall, America’s Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009)
Dec. 4: Pax Americana and Informal Empire


**Recommended readings**

You do not have to do these readings for this course. But it may be helpful to you, when doing further research, when writing your lecture, or when preparing lists for your comp to have a sense of other important works in this field. So here are books that I was considering putting on the syllabus, or that other scholars recommended. I haven’t read them all myself. The groupings, as you’ll see, are somewhat arbitrary.

**Overview**


**Continental Empire**


U.S Territories and Occupied Zones

- Bruce Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997)
- Maria Höhn and Seungsook Moon, eds., *Over There: Living with the U.S. Military Empire from World War Two to the Present* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010)
Latin America

The Cold War Era

**Globalization, Economy, and the New Empire**
- Bruce Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009)

**Black anti-imperialism—Note, this topic was not covered in this course, but it is an important one about which much good writing has been done.**