

A Roundtable on Andrew Priest, *Designs on Empire: America's Rise to Power*

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Introduction

Paul Kramer

The historical study of connections, encounters and exchanges between the U. S. and other imperial states is now entering its third decade, and only picking up steam. Admittedly, the earliest call for inquiries into the ways that U. S. empire was entangled—and unexceptional—in a larger, globalizing world of competing and interacting empires arrived much, much earlier. Writing in 1900, Alfred Thayer Mahan warned that the study of U. S. “expansion” would be “very imperfect if it failed clearly to recognize... that it is but one phase of a sentiment that has swept over the whole civilized European world within the last few decades.”¹ Writing in 1906, W. E. B. DuBois recast Jim Crow as the United States’ unexceptional segment of a worldwide “belt” of racist, colonial-imperial regimes. In words strikingly similar to Mahan’s—and radically at odds with them politically—DuBois reframed what white Americans called the “Negro problem” as “but a local phase of a world problem.” For DuBois, the “color line” was not narrowly American, but inter-imperial; it “enters into European imperial politics and floods our continents from Alaska to Patagonia.”² But for a long time, historians mostly failed to heed Mahan’s caution or DuBois’ cartography.³ There were two main culprits here. The first was the durable, defining power of methodological nationalism in the writing of U. S. history, which largely ascribed the United States’ development to “internal” factors and the writ of “national character.” Artificially cropping U. S. history in the wrong places, methodological nationalism effectively erased historical worlds of inter-imperial commonality and exchange, including ones in which Mahan and DuBois were deeply enmeshed.⁴

A second perpetrator—a co-conspirator with the first—was U. S. national exceptionalism. A fully realized inter-imperial history of the United States was stymied for decades by an exceptionalist insistence that the United States was not or did not have an “empire”; or if it had one, it had been minimal, accidental, and short-lived. To be sure, there were numerous studies of the United States’ relationships with European imperial states, especially in diplomatic, military and intellectual histories that took place across transatlantic space. But these were not and could not be inter-imperial histories, because they only involved one imperial state; the term “empire” cleaved exclusively to great powers elsewhere. In the context of the nationalist mobilizations of World War II and the Cold War, with their profound and durable effects on historical thought and

scholarship, the United States was cast as exceptionally different, typologically separate from a homogenized world of “real” empires. Sometimes this exceptionalism employed apologetic adjectives: U. S. empire as “reluctant,” “ambivalent,” “democratic,” “informal,” “invited” or “non-territorial,” for example. Sometimes it used euphemistic nouns: the U. S. as “world leader” or “superpower.” Both exceptionalist modes effectively misaligned the United States and other imperial states in ways that made their commonalities and interactions as empires difficult if not impossible to see, and non-exceptionalist comparisons between their histories hard to realize.⁵

Thankfully, by the end of the 20th century, both these structures were beginning to give way to fresh, new, illuminating perspectives. First, there was the slow, uneven and contested, but ultimately successful renewal of “empire” as applied to U. S. history, beginning in many respects with Amy Kaplan’s resonant call to study the imperial dimensions of U. S. culture, the cultural dimensions of U. S. empire, and U. S. empire in the larger, global context of empires. This last summons in some ways resembled earlier calls to see U. S. empire as “but one phase” of a broader set of global, imperial processes, advanced here with a powerful, DuBoisian spirit and a critical, non-Mahanian edge.⁶ Second, there were various announcements, between the early and late 1990s, of a “transnational” or “internationalized” U. S. history which called on scholars to study the United States’ similarities, interactions and exchanges with other nations. Scholarship written in this vein reconstructed cross-border migrations, commodity chains, transportation systems, information linkages, activist networks, and cultural and institutional transfers in ways that mapped the United States’ multi-directional engagements with wider worlds, in ways that self-consciously challenged national exceptionalism.⁷

By the early 2000s, these two developments—each a complex work-in-progress, each facing serious headwinds, and each largely disconnected from the other—began to converge, as historians began to frame the United States’ transnational past as the history of an empire among empires. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given both the depth of Anglo-American historical connections and the strong foundation of existing scholarship on British-U. S. ties, Americans’ perceptions of and interactions with British imperial power came into view earliest, drawing strength from a revitalized, post-colonial historiography of the British empire. My 2002 essay in the *Journal of American History*, “Empires, Exceptions and Anglo-Saxons,” called for the historical study of interconnected empires, and reconstructed U. S. visions of the British empire and British imaginaries of U. S. empire between the 1880s and early

1900s. Elizabeth Kelly Gray's scholarship from the same period richly explored Americans' perceptions of British imperial power in the context of early-to-mid-19th century debates about republicanism, slavery and continental empire. Harvey Neptune's *Caliban and the Yankees* brought to vivid light the ways Trinidadians' everyday engagements with U. S. military occupation in the 1940s transformed the meanings of Trinidadian identity and British colonial rule in the domains of music, sexuality, race, and labor. The essays in Julian Go's and Anne Foster's edited volume *The American Colonial State in the Philippines* approached the United States' largest overseas colony in self-consciously connected, comparative and non-exceptionalist ways. Foster's *Projections of Power* widened the horizons of U. S.-Southeast Asian history by connecting Philippine-American colonialism to European colonial empires in Southeast Asia from which they had long been detached. So, too, did Mark Bradley's *Imagining Vietnam and America*, with its striking account of the ways French colonial ideologies informed Americans' perceptions of Vietnamese society in the interwar years.⁸

In many ways this early period's most fully-realized monograph crafted in an explicitly inter-imperial mode was Dirk Bönker's magisterial 2012 *Militarism in a Global Age*, which carefully reconstructed German and U. S. navalists' transatlantic dialogues, mutual perceptions and institutional and ideological borrowings on matters of military-imperial power, capitalist political economy, expert rule and moral-political order. In doing so, the book provided new periodizations and geographies of the U. S. warfare state, even as it demolished persistent accounts of an exceptionalist German "militarism" from which U. S. institutions and political culture had somehow been immune. Most recently, A. G. Hopkins' monumental *American Empire* reinterpreted U. S. imperial history by emphasizing the endurance of British influence and parallels between British and U. S. approaches to empire-building. And consolidating this development, and poised to inspire its next generation, Kristin Hoganson's and Jay Sexton's recent edited volume, *Crossing Empires: Taking U. S. History Transimperial Terrain* gathers together compelling works by leading scholars that explore histories of U. S. empire as similar to, interacting with, and borrowing from other imperial states.⁹

In this context, Andrew Priest's *Designs on Empire* represents a valuable contribution. The book explores a still under-studied era in U. S. foreign relations history, between the early 1860s and the mid-1880s, revealing the many ways that Americans' understandings of the meanings of empire, the United States' actual and aspirational place in the world, and the United States' similarities and differences with respect to other imperial states were shaped by their engagements with other empires. Specifically, Priest shows that Americans' interactions with European colonial projects—the Spanish suppression of Cuban rebellion, British indirect rule in Egypt, the short-lived French imposition of a monarchical regime in Mexico, and the Berlin Conference on the colonial division of Africa—had significant impacts on Americans' self-understandings as nation and empire. In doing so, he demonstrates the interpretive value of an imperial history framework. Traditional approaches would likely have partitioned each of these case studies into its own conventionally regionalized bin, rather than bringing them together in a single volume. By contrast, Priest is able to see them as participating in a common history of U. S. inter-imperial interaction and engagement, similarity and contrast across

geographies, even as he keeps their regionally distinctive dynamics in view.

Priest's historical cases of inter-imperial encounter are varied and well-chosen: two involve zones of primary U. S. geopolitical interest in the Western Hemisphere and two are based in Africa, where U. S. involvement in this period was more limited. He begins before the Civil War, with influential Americans' rejection of European imperialism as monarchical, tyrannical, backward-looking and antithetical to the United States' virtuous "empire of liberty" across North America. These reflections built the supposed otherness of European empire into the formative meanings of the settler-colonial project that was at the heart of U. S. national and imperial identity. The book then turns to four distinct episodes in the history of U. S. involvements with European imperialism. It first looks at France's invasion of Mexico and installation of Maximilian as ruler in the 1860s; here U. S. policymakers balanced wariness about a European power's violation of the Monroe Doctrine, fear of French intervention against the Union in the Civil War, and perceptions of Mexicans as racially unfit for republican self-government. The book then explores U. S. policy during Cuba's revolt against Spanish colonialism in the Ten Years' War between 1868-78. U. S. officials had long hoped to annex the island or prevent its transfer to another power. Despite concerns about the

Monroe Doctrine, and some sympathy for the Cuban struggle—especially among Black leaders allied with Afro-Cuban struggles for freedom and independence—racist anxiety about the possibility of self-liberated Cuba as "another Haiti," and Spain's promises of emancipation encouraged American policymakers to limit U. S. involvement.

The book then shifts to Egypt and, specifically, to emerging forms of indirect British rule. In the wake of an uprising against the influence of an Anglo-French consortium, Britain invaded and installed a protectorate anchored in its military and naval presence, control of the Suez Canal, and

loan agreements with local elites. Americans, entranced with the region for Biblical and Orientalist reasons, varied in their stances towards British rule: some sympathized with Egyptians' struggles, while others embraced British control as a stabilizing and civilizing response to Egyptian decadence and decline. Importantly, these developments provided some Americans inspiring models of imperial power defined in terms of capitalist exploitation and trade, without the costs and risks of direct military conquest and colonial administration. Finally, the book takes up the United States' involvements in the 1884-5 Berlin Conference on Africa, in which a dozen imperial powers convened to discuss European control over the continent and prospects for an "orderly" colonization without chaotic, disruptive, inter-European warfare. Here as elsewhere, U. S. policymakers embraced racist European discourses of a "civilizing mission" in Africa as they sought to secure open commercial access and prevent the carving up of Africa into economic spheres from which Americans might be excluded. Meanwhile, African-American commentators hoped to protect Liberia from European colonization, even as many advanced their own versions of a "civilizing mission." In this context, as in Priest's other cases, Americans developed their changing attitudes towards empire, and the United States' role in the world, in the thick of conflicts over European colonialism, its varieties and its alternatives.

In the insightful exchange that follows, the respondents—experts on the wide-ranging histories

that Priest's book engages with—emphasize its many strengths. As they point out, Priest's account of Americans' involvements in and reflections on European colonialism reveals the complex ways that Americans observed and learned from other imperial states, projected onto them, and distinguished themselves from them. While it is easy to take for granted that Americans would cast themselves as an exceptionalist non-empire or anti-empire (given the polity's origins in anti-imperial revolt and its more general propensities for exceptionalist self-understanding), Priest shows these forms of imperial exceptionalism emerging, and reinforces how important American imaginaries of European empire were to this process. While Americans' exceptionalist impulses stretched back further in time, and developed in myriad contexts—from debates about the viability of republican forms of government to questions about whether all industrial-capitalist societies would ultimately give rise to socialism—each of these discursive domains had their own particular dynamics. Priest convincingly shows that Americans' understandings of self and world were not worked out in the abstract, but in the context of specific inter-imperial interactions as they unfolded. Importantly, he demonstrates that there was no necessary contradiction between Americans' acceptance of Eurocentric, imperial discourses, their adoption of features of European colonial rule, and their insistence that Americans ways of being in the world were exceptionally and virtuously different. Across the contexts he studies, racialized visions of the naturalized and necessary geopolitical domination of Euro-American states—already present in U. S. ideologies of Manifest Destiny—played a defining role in Americans' evolving understandings of their right and duty to conquer others. Shaped in the crucible of U. S. involvements with European colonialism, these visions would be reformed in ways that informed (even as they did not determine) the United States' extra-continental colonial-imperial projects in the 20th century.¹⁰

While emphasizing the book's strengths, the respondents also register some criticisms. Fogarty suggests that the book, which mostly uses diplomatic archives, Congressional debates, and elite opinion published in influential journals, might have benefited from more varied primary sources, especially popular-cultural sources through which Americans came to imagine and depict European colonialism. He also wishes the book had taken its discussion of U. S. attitudes towards French colonialism forward in time, into France's era of self-consciously assimilationist, republican imperialism, a project that had historical linkages to and resonances with the United States' own, racialized, imperial-republican project. Donoghue similarly would have liked the book to embed its central cases in deeper chronological contexts, and notes that the conclusion could have gone into greater depth in tracing the implications of these European-American encounters for the United States' extra-continental imperial projections in the 1890s and beyond. Johnston observes that the book's discussions of imperial interactions in the post-Civil War decades make only limited reference to larger contexts of white-supremacist, North/South reconciliation, and rising immigration restriction that unfolded at the same time. Jones would have wanted to see the book, which includes a number of prominent Black commentators, discuss the points of view of a wider range of observers, especially Black women, who had their own diverse approaches to European colonialism, especially in African contexts.

The respondents nevertheless agree that *Designs on*

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Empire is a significant and well-executed book that makes a key contribution to histories of U. S. empire, inter-imperial interaction and Americans' evolving understandings of the United States' place in the world. And like many useful scholarly works, it raises compelling questions that go beyond its immediate scope, including questions about our own time. Americans' attitudes towards the actions of other imperial states continue to reshape their visions in ways that enlighten and obfuscate. The United States has continuously triangulated its geopolitical identity with reference to both positive and negative models of empire; in the context of the brutal invasion of Ukraine, Russia clearly plays the latter role. Here some commentators have stressed the uncomplicated moral necessity of American power and insisted that discussion of the United States' own recent and ongoing histories of imperial projection must be set aside in the interests of rallying Americans and "the West" for a unified response to Russian aggression. Remarkably, such comments predicate a responsible, clear-eyed response to Putin's imperialist war on the erasure of U. S. imperial pasts and presents.

But it is far from clear why supporting Ukrainians' aspirations for self-determination and freedom, and safeguarding Ukrainian refugees, requires U. S. imperial forgetting, especially given that such forgetting has in many cases had its own horrific and violent fallout. There will always be a geopolitical rationale available for why defining aspects of the U. S. past and present are inconvenient; by a set of remarkably versatile, ever-shifting criteria, and in light of the reality and specter of other empires' actions, the right moment for reckoning may never arrive. The question is whether empires get the histories they want and need, or whether historians insist on creating something else. *Designs for Empire* explores very different moments and situations, but it shows these dynamics at work. When it comes to the longstanding project of exceptionalizing U. S. power in the world and sanitizing, effacing and forgetting its imperial dimensions, the violence and ruthlessness of other empires remains a sinister gift that keeps on giving.

Notes:

1. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Problem of Asia and Its Effect upon International Policy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1900), p. 4.
2. W. E. B. DuBois, "The Color Line Belts the World." *Collier's Weekly*, Vol. 28 (Oct. 20, 1906).
3. The turn of the 20th century saw a burst of scholarly and popular publications and university courses that placed the United States new, overseas colonizing thrust in an inter-imperial context, in hopes that that the United States might learn the "white man's burden" from seasoned experts, and take away cautionary lessons. But the trend faded relatively quickly, including among historians. See Frank Ng, "Knowledge for Empire: Academics and Universities in the Service of Imperialism," in Robert David Johnson, ed., *On Cultural Ground: Essays in International History* (Chicago: Imprint Publications, 1994), pp. —.
4. For a definition and exploration of "methodological nationalism" as it applies to immigration historiography, see Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences," *Global Networks*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (2002), pp. 301-334.
5. For a discussion of exceptionalism and empire in histories of the U. S. in the world, see Paul A. Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 116, No. 5 (December 2011), esp. pp. 1358-1361.
6. Amy Kaplan, "Left Alone with America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 3-21.

7. On this development see, especially, Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (Oct. 1991), pp. 1031-55; Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Daniel T. Rodgers, "American Exceptionalism Revisited," *Raritan* Vol. 24, No. 2 (2004), pp. 21-47.

8. Paul A. Kramer, "Empires, Exceptions and Anglo-Saxons: Race and Rule Between the British and U. S. Empires, 1880-1910," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 88 (March 2002), pp. 1315-53; Elizabeth Kelly Gray, "American Attitudes toward British Imperialism, 1815-1860," (PhD thesis, College of William and Mary, 2002); Julian Go and Anne Foster, eds., *The U. S. Colonial State in the Philippines: Global Perspectives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Harvey Neptune, *Caliban and the Yankees: Trinidad and the United States Occupation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Anne Foster, *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), chapter 2. For other projects in inter-imperial history, see Paul A. Kramer, "Historias Transimperial: Raíces Espanoles del Estado Colonial Estadounidense en Filipinas," in María Dolores Elizalde y Josep Ma. Delgado, eds., *Filipinas, Un País Entre Dos Imperios* (Barcelona: CSIC, 2011), pp. 125-41; Paul A. Kramer, "'Reflex Actions: Colonialism, Corruption and the Politics of Technocracy in the Early Twentieth Century,'" in Bevan Sewell and Scott Lucas, eds., *Challenging U. S. Foreign Policy: America and the World in the Long Twentieth Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 14-35.

9. Dirk Bonker, *Militarism in a Global Age: Naval Ambitions in Germany and the United States before World War I* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); A. G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton, eds., *Crossing Empires: Taking U. S. History Transimperial Terrain* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

10. On race in U. S. foreign relations history and historiography generally, see Paul A. Kramer, "Shades of Sovereignty: Racialized Power, the United States and the World," in Frank Costigliola and Michael Hogan, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 3rd edition (Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 245-270.

Not in It for the Real Estate

Richard S. Fogarty

Born of a protest movement and a war of decolonization, the United States has since its inception imagined itself as anti-imperial and anti-colonial. This notion is as influential at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when viewing the United States as an empire may be more strongly justified than it has ever been, as it was during the nation's first two centuries of existence.

In October 2001, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld articulated this repudiation of empire with distinctive bluntness when he discussed U.S. policy in Afghanistan and the Middle East. He claimed that the United States had "no aspiration to occupy or maintain any real estate in that region." Eight months later he would repeat the formulation, this time asserting that the Western nations united in NATO, following in the foreign policy tradition of the United States, were "countries that have no interest in taking over other peoples' real estate."¹

Gathering the allies of NATO under the umbrella of America's selfless magnanimity in this way was interesting and significant. Historically, Americans who thought about imperialism and colonialism most often compared U.S. policies and behavior with those of the great European

empires, particularly the British, French, and Spanish. Most American observers were keen to contrast the imperial restraint of the democratic, altruistic United States with traditional European acquisitiveness, highhandedness, and oppression.

Indeed, though he had a different purpose in mind, Rumsfeld drew on this familiar trope contrasting progressive American attitudes with retrograde European behavior when he referred to Western European nations, even NATO allies, as "old Europe," which could not understand or support U.S. policy like the "new" European nations of the eastern region of the Continent.² That the secretary of defense seemed to muse somewhat contradictorily with respect to the qualities of his NATO allies is less important than his channeling of powerful currents of official and often popular thinking about the United States in relation to both empire and Europe.

Andrew Priest, in his insightful new book *Designs on Empire: America's Rise to Power in the Age of European Imperialism*, demonstrates the enduring resonance of these sentiments in official rhetoric about empire by beginning his study with a statement by a figure very different from Donald Rumsfeld: President Barack Obama. Speaking at Fort Bragg in December 2011, Obama said, "Unlike the old empires, we don't make . . . sacrifices for territory or for resources. We do it because it is right" (1).³ The vocabulary and phrasing are, characteristically, more elevated

and eloquent, but the nearly exact correspondence between the sentiments expressed by the two men is striking.

Priest's work makes it clear that this is no accident, for both men, in their official capacities as formulators of and spokesmen for U.S. policy and as (admittedly very different) products of American political culture, were inheritors of a long and powerful tradition of thinking about the United States as "essentially *unimperial*" (4). This idea has been an important part of the broader sense of American exceptionalism that animates so much of political life in the United States. What Priest demonstrates so clearly and in such detail is not only the long-term consequences of this way of thinking about the nation and empire, but also just how important encountering and thinking about European empires has been to America's development.

Critically, *Designs on Empire* locates key moments in this development before the late 1890s, when the United States erupted into the global pursuit of imperial power through its war with Spain. A great deal of scholarship, with good reason, focuses on this period, but Priest shows that Americans were having robust conversations about imperialism and colonialism earlier, during the period between the 1860s and the 1880s. And the actions of European imperial powers fueled these conversations, which would powerfully shape American self-understandings with respect to empire well before the USS *Maine* exploded in Havana Harbor.

Priest is primarily interested in American ideologies of empire as articulated through political discourse. He notes that ideology is often not a central focus in scholarship on U.S. foreign policy, but he argues that domestic conversations about the imperial and colonial ventures of European powers, both those aired publicly and those carried on internally among government officials, were important in shaping American approaches to its own empire-building.

In this the author is in harmony with the historiographies of European imperialism, which have long focused on

ideology and culture more broadly as keys to understanding the empires of the “new imperialism” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, it is not too much to say that the study of ideology and culture have come to dominate these historiographies.⁴ To be sure, these studies often, though certainly not always, examine attitudes about empire among people across the social spectrum and on both sides of the colonial divide, while Priest is primarily concerned with the words and thoughts of elite political actors and opinion makers. He argues that the focus on elites is more or less inescapable, because they “left the clearest imprint on the documentary record” (3), but it is important to note that historians of European imperialism have explored popular attitudes as well by surveying the artifacts of popular culture—such as advertisements, music and songs, literature, memoirs and adventure stories, games, imagery, films, expositions, and more—that are often surprisingly full of revealing references to empire.⁵ Nonetheless, the author here seeks to uncover the thinking of influential figures who were in a position to shape U.S. policy with respect to empire, and through deep research and insightful analysis he paints a clear picture of earlier developments that led to later and better-known assertions of U.S. imperial power at the very end of the nineteenth century.

Priest begins his book by surveying attitudes toward the great European imperial powers during the early years of the American republic, finding sentiments that would become more pronounced during the period he is primarily interested in, the 1860s through the 1880s. Before the Civil War, influential Americans regarded European empires with feelings ranging from skepticism to distaste. They believed that the young republic’s form of government and its commitment to non-intervention in the affairs of other nations (a foreign policy stance famously inaugurated by George Washington during the founding years of the country) set it apart and above the corruptions of empire.

At the same time, however, the United States was embarking on a policy of colonial expansion, which Americans could separate from the empire-building of others by ignoring the despoliation of Native Americans, characterizing new lands absorbed as “empty” or “unproductive,” viewing the incorporation of new contiguous territories as different from the conquest of faraway lands overseas, and arguing that the United States eventually welcomed these new territories (or at least the white males in them) into the republican family on an equal footing and with political representation.

This hypocrisy and double-talk about empire would endure through more overt assertions of imperial power, such as those that resulted from the Spanish-American War, and beyond (they would even crop up much later in the words and actions of U.S. government officials such as Donald Rumsfeld and Barack Obama). In short, this early period saw Americans “assuming a separation from European imperialism but incorporating many of its prejudices and practices” (41). Crucially, there was very little difference between Europeans and Americans when it came to racist views of non-white peoples as unfit to direct their own affairs and live outside the control of Western imperial control. In this, Americans were already very close to embracing the European rhetoric of a colonial “civilizing mission” long before they sought to carry out this mission far from the continental United States.

This sort of sneaking admiration for and emulation of European imperial prejudices and practices, combined

with an ideological and rhetorical repudiation of these same prejudices and practices, informed the responses of Americans to four critical episodes between 1861 and 1885. Watching France’s Napoleon III intervene militarily in Mexico during the U.S. Civil War, Secretary of State William Seward drew a clear distinction between French tyrannizing over a foreign people and the United States’ own expansion, which was, he wrote, “domestic and republican” (67).

It is clear, however, that Seward and other Americans could not bring themselves to oppose French policy too forcefully, even when it involved overthrowing a republican form of government in the Western Hemisphere. Their reluctance was due not only to the exigencies of civil war, but also to their views of Mexicans as a people unfit for republican self-rule. Even Frederick Douglass, himself a victim of condescending, paternalistic racism, agreed. He wrote that there was “perhaps a deficiency inherent in the Latin races” that prevented Mexicans from a “full comprehension of the principles of republicanism” (70).

This world of empires was significantly consolidated at the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference, where more than a dozen imperial powers met to regulate European control over Africa—in effect, to divide up the continent among themselves. The United States sent a delegation to the conference, not to obtain for itself what Leopold II of Belgium called “a slice of this magnificent African cake,” but to preserve American economic interests by advocating for international free trade, a stance formalized a decade and a half later as the Open Door Policy.

Such views also informed U.S. policy toward Cuba during the Ten Years’ War, which began in 1868, and discouraged the United States from intervening on behalf of Cuban insurgents against Spanish rule (an intervention that would have been in line with America’s general distaste for Spanish colonialism and its interest in gaining greater influence over the island). In addition, they gave further impetus to the tendency of white Americans to identify with European colonial powers as they sought to rule over “inferior” races. As the editor of the *New York Evening Post* put it in a letter to Secretary of State Hamilton

Fish, “We do not want Cuba with her ignorant population of Negroes, mulattos . . . alien to our population” (113). Even in a Western Hemisphere supposedly covered by the Monroe Doctrine, which repudiated European interference, American racism significantly tempered the rhetoric of anticolonialism.

Events in Egypt in 1882 further pushed American elites toward identifying with European imperialists rather than those who rebelled against the influence of the very imperial power against which Americans had fought in their own war of decolonization. To many Americans, British control over Egypt seemed justified—and certainly preferable to the chaos that would supposedly reign if non-white Egyptians managed their own affairs. What was more, Britain’s model of indirect rule rather than outright colonial conquest and direct rule was attractive to Americans, who regarded such arrangements as models that would enable the United States to develop international economic power without the burdens of formal empire. The “civilizing” process of indirect rule would safely keep racial inferiors at arm’s length while preserving the economic benefits of free trade in a world of Western empires that often closed off their colonial markets to competition.

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Europeans' "civilizing mission" in Africa, predicated as it was on the essential savagery and primitiveness of black Africans.

This mission sat easily with the predominant racist views of white Americans, of course. The American presence in Berlin "further embedded" the United States "in concepts of race and rule . . . that would be . . . ultimately acted upon in multiple arenas" (157). More similar to European colonialists than they often wanted to admit, American elites were not only ready to engage in an imperial project by the mid-1880s, they were in fact already engaging in the broader Western imperial project and had more or less fully developed the particular blend of "civilization" and "commercialization" that would characterize U.S. imperialism well before the conflict with Spain at the end of the century that would decisively propel the nation onto the world stage as an empire (188).

Examining four discrete episodes in chapters that mostly focus on American views of a particular European empire (first France's, then Spain's, Great Britain's, and Germany's) at a particular point in time enables Priest to develop fully and in detail particular aspects of the evolution of the United States' own complex relationship to the idea and fact of empire. Yet although the chapter on the Berlin Conference does allow for a wider focus and some sense of how American policy- and opinion-makers viewed and compared European empires, there is at least one disadvantage to the author's approach.

For instance, as instructive as the U.S. response to the French intervention in Mexico is, moving away from a sustained discussion of French imperialism after the French left Mexico in 1867 leaves important and potentially very interesting aspects of the French colonial empire unexamined. Napoleon III fell from power three years after withdrawing from Mexico, and France inaugurated its Third Republic, a regime that decisively consolidated the republican form of government in the country and remains to this day the longest lasting in French history since the Revolution of 1789. While building the republic at home, the Third Republic also built a globe-spanning colonial empire in the decades after 1870, second in size only to the British Empire.

If Americans were temperamentally suspicious not only of French intervention in North America, just across their southern border, but also of Napoleon III's status as an emperor and his efforts to put another European emperor on the throne of Mexico, there was every reason they might view the actions of a sister republic in a different light. Just five months after the end of the Berlin conference, Prime Minister Jules Ferry, one of the most important early architects of the Third Republic and of its colonial empire, defended his government's colonial policies in the French parliament. France, he argued, needed to participate in the European scramble for empire heating up in the 1880s for three reasons. First, in an international economic environment of rising competition and protectionism, France needed to capture additional export markets. Second, there was a "humanitarian and civilizing side of the question." "Superior races," he claimed, "have a right vis-à-vis inferior races . . . a right because superior races have a duty . . . the duty to civilize inferior races."

The third justification for building the French colonial empire was a matter of "politics and patriotism." Strategic considerations in a competitive and dangerous world dictated that France seek—through enhanced wealth, naval coaling stations, and much else—to put itself in a geostrategic position of strength in relation to the other great powers.

Ferry articulated a case for what might be called "French exceptionalism": France's republican leaders had a "sense of the grandeur of France" and had shown that unlike the limited horizons of smaller, lesser nations, "something else is needed for France . . . she cannot be merely a free country . . . she must also be a great country, exercising all the influence over the destiny of Europe that is rightfully hers . . . [S]he ought to spread this influence throughout the world and carry everywhere that she can her language, her customs, her flag, her arms, and her genius."⁶ As Priest's book demonstrates, many Americans were thinking along these same lines about their own exceptional nation, also a republic, also with long experience dividing humanity into "superior" and "inferior" races.

If American observers in the 1860s could lament the French incapacity for self-government, as evidenced by their imperial regime headed by a Napoleonic emperor, and compare French foreign adventures unflatteringly to the successes of the British Empire (57), it would be interesting to know how views might have changed later, during a period when a republican regime in France, far more democratic

than the government in Britain, was building a colonial empire that by the early twentieth century covered over 6.5 million square miles and ruled 44 million people outside of France.

To be sure, an affinity with Great Britain and its empire—reinforced through linguistic, historical, and cultural ties that have for most American elites been stronger than links to any continental European nation—was in strong evidence from the beginning of the American republic, and would continue down to the present day's "special relationship." The remarkable

statement from an editorialist in 1889 that Britain was "nearly as much entitled to be called a republic as she will ever be" demonstrated the power of these ties (though the idea of Britain as a republic would shock most Britons, then and now, and demonstrates the author's odd confusion between that nation's increasing, if grudging, expansion of democracy and a truly republican form of government).

Priest quotes this British editorialist's statement, but what his readers might not know is that it appeared in an article entitled, "Republicanism in France," published in the centenary year of the French Revolution of 1789. The writer denied the title of republic to France, despite the formal nature of its constitution, for various alleged political failings. Prejudices and stereotypes die hard.⁷ Yet Francophilia has been as powerful a current in U.S. history as Francophobia, and from their origins in twin late-eighteenth-century revolutions shaped in part by a common Enlightenment heritage, through various alliances (including the young U.S. republic's first alliance in 1778, which helped ensure its survival) and disagreements, the two nations' histories and self-images have intertwined.

Much would change in the United States and the world of empires by 1914, and in any case, Priest is concerned with an earlier period. But it may be significant that when the Great War broke out in Europe many Americans were drawn to risk and even sacrifice their lives to fight for the imperiled republic of France (and its empire) well before the United States entered the conflict in 1917. During the war Americans also expressed their affinity for the French cause on official occasions: witness the famous declaration, delivered in a speech at Lafayette's tomb, by one of General Pershing's staff officers, Colonel Charles E. Stanton: "Lafayette, we are here!" Such sentiments attested to the long history of friendship between the two nations and the many debts of gratitude incurred over the years.⁸

American attitudes toward their British allies in this

Examining four discrete episodes in chapters that mostly focus on American views of a particular European empire (first France's, then Spain's, Great Britain's, and Germany's) at a particular point in time enables Priest to develop fully and in detail particular aspects of the evolution of the United States' own complex relationship to the idea and fact of empire.

war were often notably cooler, at all levels of the government and military. In other words, we cannot always take for granted the closeness of the United States and Great Britain over the last two centuries, despite the very real influence and even admiration of Americans for Britain's ways of ruling its empire during the nineteenth century.

What Americans made of the republican empire France was building from 1870 onward is at least worth investigating. In particular, it would be interesting to know what Americans thought about the French version of the colonial civilizing mission, which laid heavy stress on the supposed assimilation of colonial subjects into French culture and, theoretically, the body politic of the nation. This sometimes caused the French to appear far more racially tolerant than either the British or the Americans, who were more likely to balk at the notion of absorbing allegedly inferior peoples, even if they were "civilized" through colonization.

To be sure, race-consciousness did exist in France, as the possession of a colonial empire predicated on white superiority and a "right" and "duty" to rule clearly indicated. Understandings of race merely differed in certain respects between France and the United States, and the race-consciousness of white Americans often aligned more closely with predominant views in Britain. But the republican form of government and a formal adherence to republican principles of freedom, equality, and universal humanity suggest some consonance between attitudes toward empire in France and the United States.

If Americans have often been uncomfortable with the idea that they rule over an empire on the model of European imperial constructs, if colonialism was, in the words of William Appleman Williams, an "embarrassment" for Americans, it was and is at least in part because colonialism clashes so glaringly with the republican principles by which Americans like to think they live (Priest quotes Williams on p. 5). As the great historian of French colonialism Henri Brunschwig recognized, this sort of hypocrisy was likely to give professed republicans a bad conscience. For French colonialists, the way to clear their consciences was to claim, to themselves and others, a sincere pursuit of a humanitarian "civilizing mission" and an assimilation of colonial subjects that would allow them, eventually, to enjoy republican freedom and equality⁹

White Americans have always lived with the glaring reproach to their republican ideals embodied first in the institution of slavery, then in vicious racism and oppression. But attempts to resolve these contradictions through an ideology of "civilization" and a supposedly selfless and altruistic foreign policy that seeks to "free" and "lift up" other peoples without coveting their "real estate," to make "sacrifices" because "it is right" rather than for "territory or resources" like the "old empires" of "old Europe," were and are critical justifications and rationalizations of U.S. foreign policy and empire-making. In short, like republican France, the republican United States must appear "fundamentally unimperial" (201) to clear its guilty imperial conscience.

These ruminations on the intractability of a comparison between the republican imperialisms of France and the United States are not criticisms of Andrew Priest's excellent work, but a measure of how thought-provoking and intriguing his work really is. Readers will come away from it thinking harder about aspects of U.S. and European history they thought they knew well, and having learned much that is new. At the very least, no one will be able

to deny the importance of thinking about imperialism and colonialism during the formative first century of the American republic's existence. By the time Rudyard Kipling famously beckoned to Americans to join in the Western scramble for empire and "take up the White Man's burden" in 1899, he was in many respects preaching to the choir.

Notes:

1. See transcripts of Rumsfeld's remarks during a press briefing on October 9, 2001, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/rumsfeld_100901.html; and during a question and answer session after a speech at NATO headquarters in Brussels on June 6, 2002 (the 58th anniversary of D-Day): <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2002/s020606g.htm>.
2. U.S. Department of Defense, Press Operations, Transcript, Briefing at the Foreign Press Center, January 22, 2003, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140228200949/http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=1330>.
3. For the full text of Obama's remarks, see <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/14/remarks-president-and-first-lady-end-war-iraq>.
4. For a particularly influential articulation of this approach in the historiography of European imperialism, see Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, CA, 1997).
5. See, for instance, John Griffiths, *Empire and Popular Culture*, vols. I and II (London, 2021 and 2022); Simon J. Potter, "Empire, Cultures and Identities in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Britain," *History Compass* 5 (2007): 51–70; Andrew S. Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Abingdon-on-Thames, UK, 2005); Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur, eds., *Promoting the Colonial Idea: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France* (London, 2002); Edward Berenson, "Making a Colonial Culture? Empire and the French Public, 1880–1940," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 127–149; Eric T. Jennings, "Visions and Representations of French Empire," *Journal of Modern History* 77, no. 3 (September 2005): 701–721; Michael Perraudin and Jürgen Zimmerer, eds., *German Colonialism and National Identity* (London, 2011); Jeff Bowersox, *Raising Germans in the Age of Empire: Youth and Colonial Culture, 1871–1914* (Oxford, UK, 2013).
6. *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, Débats parlementaires, Chambre des Députés, 28 juillet 1885, pp. 1659–1670.
7. Editorial, "Republicanism in France," *Century* 26, no. 6 (April 1889), 953.
8. See Robert B. Bruce, *A Fraternity of Arms: America and France in the Great War* (Lawrence, KS, 2003).
9. Henri Brunschwig, *French Colonialism, 1871–1914: Myths and Realities* (New York, 1964), 167. See also Raymond F. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890–1914* (Lincoln, NE, 2005).

Review of Andrew Priest, *Designs on Empire: America's Rise to Power in the Age of European Imperialism*

Andrew M. Johnston

There is a scene early in Michael Mann's 1992 film *The Last of the Mohicans* where colonial frontiersmen are being recruited by a British officer to fight the French. Hawkeye (Daniel Day-Lewis) stands aloof, muttering that the French are Britain's enemy, not the colonists'. The war was started, he argues, by the territorial greed of the Crown. Hawkeye's adoptive Mohican father, Chingachgook, had similarly complained that the "Fathers of England and France both take more land, furs, than they need. They're cold and full of greed."

In 1992, one could still credibly claim (at least with a popular audience) that the French and Indian Wars had

nothing to do with the colonists' territorial restlessness or the settlers that the French and British were trying to restrain. Mann's film affirms that Americans were, from the outset, different from their European masters and wanted nothing to do with imperial skullduggery. They just wanted to be left alone to raise their families . . . on native land.

Andrew Priest's terrific new book tackles America's always paradoxical and often self-delusional disposition toward empire, but this time he focuses on the tense period between the Civil War and the Cleveland administration. It was there that we find the dress-rehearsals for the great imperialist-anti-imperialist debates after the War of 1898. Priest picks four examples where U.S. politicians and leaders of opinion debated the question of European imperialism, two from North America (France's intervention in Mexico during the Civil War and Spain's repression of a ten-year insurrection in Cuba between 1868 and 1878) and two from Africa (Britain's occupation of Egypt after 1882 and the Berlin Conference over the Congo in the winter of 1884–85). In each example, he draws on a rich mixture of diplomatic archives, congressional debates, and elite discussion in influential journals to uncover how the United States defined good and bad empires while trying to understand its own interests in a shrinking world. These discussions created the ideological vocabulary for America's own overseas expansion once it had acquired a capability for self-assertion. Priest's analysis is nuanced, carefully reasoned, and, most importantly, shifts our attention away from seeing 1898 as a sudden, unexpected watershed.

The book emphasizes the play of ideas rather than the economics of imperialism, although (and some readers might want something a bit more explicit here) the two are frequently connected in Priest's own analysis. American critics of European empires routinely emphasized economic issues, expressing concern that imperialism threatened to close the United States off from commercial opportunities at an especially critical (and violently unstable) time in American capitalism. The sequencing is crucial here insofar as America's continental empire wasn't completed until after the Civil War, when the Europeans had already accelerated their partition of the rest of the world. Consequently, when the United States came to assert its belief in "free trade" (the Open Door), it was a gesture born of a certain futility that was then turned into an ideological virtue, albeit a selective one, given Washington's own dogged protectionism.

But the inheritance of the Revolution and the Monroe Doctrine meant, above all, that Americans continued to see themselves as fundamentally different, even as they looked on in wonder at Europe's global reach. Priest's pundits focused on three basic contrasts. First, Americans believed that the aggressive colonialism of the Europeans was an "outdated feature of the international system," as America's own existence seemed to prove. Republican thought bent toward the teleological view that European imperialism was a dying, if still dangerous, feature of the ancien régime. Second, America's continental expansion was perforce different: it was "natural," sometimes underscored by providentialism, but always starting from the (racial) perception that led Americans to see the "uncultivated lands" before them as *terra nullius*.

Priest gingerly refers to this notion as the "dismissal" of Indian cultures (something more accurate and graphic might be called for), but he is consistent throughout the book in affirming that America's tendency toward empire-denial—or what Jeanne Morefield has called a "strategy of deflection," which it went on to share with Britain—was founded on a blunt refusal to see its violent dispossession of the continent's inhabitants as anything other than modernity realizing itself. Indeed, this expansion provided the unifying political morality behind the federation of the nation.¹ And, finally, the Monroe Doctrine encouraged

a tradition in American opinion that the United States' ideological integrity depended on its ability to separate itself from European spheres of influence, and vice versa, under a policy of mutual non-intervention.

This worldview was buffeted by two developments that took over the production of ideas by the 1870s: first, a growing economic assertiveness induced by a socially transformative industrial revolution; and second, the rise of scientific racism, which, ironically, flourished particularly well in republican France and the United States precisely because their political egalitarianism required, as George Frederickson has put it, other "reasons for exclusion."² The former provided the United States with new confidence but also an attendant insecurity about being shut out of the unfolding global scramble for raw materials and markets. And scientific racism gave salience to arguments about progress having something to do with an entirely invented "Anglo-Saxon" racial lineage that, not coincidentally, emerged in the United States when newly freed Blacks and central European immigrants were threatening to transform America's social space.³

Some of the new theorists of "liberal imperialism" in London elaborated upon these ideas. They had begun to see the white settler colonies (which the United States once was) of the world as the best way to reconcile freedom and tyranny.⁴ Race is the constant presence in such ideas—in contradictory ways, as we know, because it could point toward both paternalistic absorption and racial quarantine, although never full human equality. Because of his focus on elite American opinion, Priest pays less direct attention to the role played by the emergence of Jim Crow, white reconciliation, immigration restrictionism, and other domestic contexts that increasingly informed American views of empire; but it is, to the book's credit, always present.

These diverse impulses—assertiveness, righteousness, and fears of racial contamination—ended up producing a series of dualisms in American thinking, which could pivot from imperialist to anti-imperialist depending on the speaker and the geographical direction he or she faced. It reminds me of Michael Kammen's *People of Paradox*, which contends that over time, the transplanting of British institutions and values into North America "sharpened comparison of these processes, including interactions between cultures and environments, in the New World colonialisms of Britain, France, and Spain."⁵ The point here is in showing precisely how American anti-imperialism and imperialism have danced, not as opposites, but as contradictory impulses stemming from the same ideology.

Priest's examples bring such impulses into dramatic focus. The strange story of France's efforts to install an Austrian monarchy in Mexico during the Civil War serves as the backdrop to William Seward's embattled efforts to reconcile his vision of a modernizing, expansive America with defending republicanism abroad. Seward knew the United States was powerless to enforce the Monroe Doctrine against France, but he was able to define America's opposition not as self-interest but as a defense of republicanism, meaning that the United States framed its growing power in the region in terms of its defense of the Mexican "people."

The second test of American non-intervention in the hemisphere—and the one which most clearly foretold 1898—was Spain's Ten Years' War against the Cuban insurrection. The end of slavery in the United States took away the fear that expansion into the Caribbean (or elsewhere) might benefit American slavery at home. With it gone, the United States could more logically maintain its benevolent interest in the island's people. That thought, though, was increasingly displaced by the racism the Civil War never fully expunged, a racism that doubted whether the anticolonial rebels, especially those whose faces

reflected the racial composition of Cuba, could either be self-governed or incorporated into the United States. The United States could not decide what it wanted out of the situation. It saw advantages in maintaining good relations with Spain (a decaying Catholic monarchy, but a white one) while keeping disparate voices for annexation or recognition of the rebels at bay.

It might be worth taking a step back here to consider the picture so far. What the three late eighteenth-century revolutions in the United States, France, and Haiti introduced was, in the words of Perry Anderson, a normative concept of internationalism that juxtaposed “the people” against the tyranny of the *ancien régime*. In this sense, the “nation” was the will of this newly emancipated mass (however limited its franchise), and “patriotism” was the universal connection between all who struggled *for* society and *against* superstition and despotism. American hostility toward French liberalism and Haitian racial equality already gave us a sense of just what it was that limited early America’s commitment to such universal solidarity (class and race).

After the old order in Europe was temporarily re-installed (after, in other words, Napoleon had damaged the image of cosmopolitan patriotism), the propertied classes in societies slightly behind England in the Industrial Revolution wanted to create strong states from which to catch up. Their form was less political than cultural and linguistic, but still promoted what Anderson calls “differentiated universalism,” a cultural pluralism that was still valuable in the revolutions of 1848, which were *both* political and ethno-particularist. When these failed, the nationalist model was captured by any conservative or bourgeois liberal sect that had an interest in consolidating its political power, as the tempest of industrialization created a large and disenfranchised working class to be absorbed.

This was when “chauvinism proper” emerged across the industrial world, as capitalism moved toward larger enterprises that sought to control national markets and to press for overseas annexations when those markets became saturated. Capitalism used biology to describe nations and races, now pitted against each other. For the first time since the eighteenth-century revolutions, in other words, the “people” were not theoretically on the same side. The sorting process was a double-edged one: the people were now mobilized behind imperial rivalry (racial chauvinism fed the imperial discourse of superiority and special “mission”), and that happened at the very moment suffrage was giving the lower orders access to the political process. Consent of the (property-owning) governed finally gave way to genuine democracy, but it was now organized around axes of ethno-racial identity.⁶

This long view of how the international solidarity of 18th century liberalism (for want of a better word) devolved from international patriotism to national xenophobia seems to me a useful way to think about all the paradoxes in America’s increasingly confident but ideologically confused shift toward accommodating imperialism. The period covered by Priest’s book in fact witnesses this very transition—bearing in mind all the cross-party divisions on issues like the tariff—from anti-imperial republicanism to racial-imperial nationalism.⁷ And it becomes clearer still when the United States starts to engage with European empires outside the Western Hemisphere.

Priest’s third case looks at Britain’s 1882 invasion of Egypt, which effectively turned the Khedivate into a British protectorate. The invasion was triggered by Ahmed ‘Urabi’s uprising against the influence of an Anglo-French consortium that had come to control Egypt’s post-Suez Canal finances. The lack of an American diplomatic role in Egypt meant that Priest measures American views mainly from “engaged opinion” in the press and from some of the

few Americans directly involved in the region. Predictably, he describes that opinion as “mixed,” but the general idea was to view British intervention in an Islamic society as a step toward “modernization,” and therefore not wholly a bad thing. Opinion was increasingly aligning itself with conceptions of American power that would be amenable to European imperialism if undertaken against peoples designated in some way racially or theologically inferior.

If commerce is an ongoing interest of the United States, as Priest’s invocation of the Open Door suggests, it is only in his final case, the Berlin Conference and the Congo, that he references the pattern of boom and bust that characterized the Gilded Age economy as an impetus for expanding commercial interests. As Eric Hobsbawm has written, despite the exponential growth of productivity in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, what caused paroxysms of fear in economic writers of the time was the prospective decline in profitability upon which all that growth rested.⁸ America’s interest in the Congo was predicated on Leopold’s promise to keep it open and, conversely, on its fears that other European powers would do as they had done historically and close it off to foreign trade.

The U.S. envoy to Berlin, John Kasson, wanted to portray the United States as uniquely disinterested precisely because it was not engaged in colonial acquisitions. If the Congolese could develop and produce something Europeans could buy, they would then purchase vast quantities of manufactured goods. But America’s own agent in the Congo, Willard Tisdell, threw cold water on these dreams: the further he went into the interior, the more he thought American commercial ambitions were a fantasy.

There was support in the United States for “internal improvements” that could bring a humanitarian angle to Kasson’s case, which was probably sincere. But the argument always returned, according to Priest, to what needed to be done to preserve the white race. Kasson accepted all the worst racial stereotypes of the time about Africans, as of course did Tisdell and other white supremacists who saw Africa chiefly as a place to repatriate America’s own Black population.

The other problem was whether getting involved in Africa at all undermined the “exceptionalist” standing of the Monroe Doctrine. Kasson insisted that by being involved in the Congo, the United States was merely taking its “rightful place” with the great powers. He thought it was time to dispense with the Monroe Doctrine of America’s childhood and accept the rigors of “strong manhood.” (This is one of the few references to masculinity in the book, which takes the opinions of elite women seriously but doesn’t venture boldly into questions of gender *per se*).

In the end, the new Cleveland administration was unmoved, regarding the obligation to enforce the neutrality of the Congo as a duty of the sort an alliance would impose. It declined to send the general act of the Berlin Conference to the Senate, but Priest’s point is that the language of imperial engagement was clearly changing. By the 1890s, a long-standing desire for regional hegemony meant building an isthmus canal, acquiring Hawaii, and waiting to see what happened to the Cuban revolution.

There were other signs of confidence by then as well: the Venezuela Boundary Dispute in 1895 and the decision to tuck “distinctly toward Japan” in the Sino-Japanese War in 1894–95, which showed Washington’s ambitions in east Asia. So, another uprising in Cuba in 1895, partly triggered by U.S. tariffs against Cuban sugar after the 1893 Depression, shouldn’t come as a surprise, nor should Washington’s robust response to it. The War of 1898 was thus neither an accident nor an aberration, but the consequence of “a series of deliberate decisions to overthrow Spanish imperial rule and implement a new America one” (198).

One of the challenges this book faces is in reconstructing

the trail of causation when so many disparate elements clearly come together at the same time: racial science, the expansion of global economies, great power rivalry in Europe that was generating centrifugal social forces, and self-conscious efforts to build a sense of nationalism in which empire played a key role. The mechanisms of the impulse toward U.S. assertiveness remain a little unspecified: was it a necessity inherent in the acquisition of economic power? Or internal to the possession of a republican ideology surrounded by potential ideological foes? How, in other words, do the ideational and the material interact?

Priest steps back a little from that challenge. While he incorporates new approaches to empire, he resists being overtly theoretical. That will please some readers more than others, but his remains an immensely valuable book that shows how much America's imperial future owed to its engagement with the heyday of European imperialism.

Notes:

1. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ, 2019), 118–119; Jeanne Morefield, *Empires Without Imperialism: Anglo-American Decline and the Politics of Deflection* (Oxford, UK, 2014); Anders Stephanson, "A Most Interesting Empire," in *The New American Empire: A 21st Century Teach-In on U.S. Foreign Policy*, ed. Lloyd Gardner and Marilyn B. Young (New York, 2005), 253–75.
2. George Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ, 2015), 68.
3. For a great early critique of Anglo-Saxon myths, see Frederick G. Detweiler, "The Anglo-Saxon Myth in the United States," *American Sociological Review* 3, no. 2 (1938): 183–89.
4. Duncan Bell, "The Dream Machine: On Liberalism and Empire," in *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, NJ, 2016), 19–61.
5. Merle Curti, review of *People of Paradox*, by Michael Kammen, *American Historical Review* 79, 3 (June 1974): 833.
6. Perry Anderson, "Internationalism: A Breviary," *New Left Review* 14 (March–April 2002): 5–14.
7. For a related argument, see Marc-William Palen, "The Imperialism of Economic Nationalism, 1890–1913," *Diplomatic History* 39, no. 1 (January 2015): 157–185; and Palen, *The 'Conspiracy' of Free Trade: The Anglo-American Struggle over Empire and Economic Globalization, 1846–1896* (Cambridge, UK, 2016), which Priest favorably reviews in *The English Historical Review* 133, no. 564 (2018): 1341–43.
8. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (New York, 1989), 34–55; Jonathan Levy, *Ages of American Capitalism: A History of the United States* (New York, 2021), 226–28.

Review of Andrew Priest, *Designs on Empire: America's Rise to Power in the Age of European Imperialism*

Michael E. Donoghue

For most historians of U.S. foreign relations, the Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War of 1898 propelled America firmly on the road to overseas empire from which it never departed although we have seen various claims as to why it followed this path and engaged in continuous denial about the motives behind and character of the expansion that followed. Andrew Priest has written a fascinating account of how U.S. statesmen and opinion-makers wrestled in the several decades that preceded the 1890s with the idea of empire both continental and overseas. Key events examined in this volume spurred arguments about whether the burgeoning power of post-Civil War America should lead the nation to adopt, reject, or even transcend the models and actions of contemporaneous imperiums. Even before independence, Britain's North American colonists yearned for expansion into lands held by the indigenous as well as England's French and Spanish rivals. A hunger for ever more territory marked the United States' early years, beginning with the vast holdings west of the Appalachians gained in the 1783 Peace of Paris, and

continuing with the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, the 1819 Florida Annexation, the 1845–6 acquisitions of Texas and Oregon, culminating in the huge 1848 Mexican Cession.

Continental empire appeared an almost natural goal laid out in the ideology of Manifest Destiny. It was widely accepted, and never even considered imperial since the territories acquired were contiguous, "sparsely populated," and eventually incorporated into the Union as equal states. Even expansion to the North attempted during the War of 1812 would only have united the Anglo-Saxons of the continent (along with the Quebecois) and saved them from supposed British oppression. The nation thus would have escaped the opprobrium of tyrannical empire—empire that it once derided, having gained its sovereignty in an anti-colonial war for independence. How, therefore, could such a people ever really be imperial?

This thinking, of course, ignored the violent crushing of other peoples' aspirations for sovereignty: the indigenous, French, Spanish, and Mexicans who formerly held the lands Americans avidly seized. Perhaps just as important as Priest shows, such reasoning overlooks the many endorsements the Founding Fathers accorded to empire, provided it promoted liberty and land for white Anglo-Saxons and created a "Greater United States." U.S. empire was admirable, while foreign dominion over others as practiced by Europeans and Ottomans was immoral, repressive, tyrannical.

The mental gymnastics required to square such a circle were considerable and provoked many a crisis, including an especially existential one in 1861 in which an Empire of Slavery confronted an Empire (presumably) of Liberty. A difficult reconstruction followed this destructive civil war during which the U.S. emerged as one of the world's leading industrial powers. Yet it also faced the threat of powerful European empires in areas deemed vital to U.S. security, commerce, and/or ideology.

An early peril unfolded right along the U.S. southern border when Napoleon III attempted to expand his empire into Mexico by making an Austrian prince Maximilian the puppet ruler of that state. This alarming provocation occurred at the height of the Civil War when the Lincoln administration, consumed with winning that fearsome conflict, strove to prevent British and French intervention as the Confederacy sought it. Spain also took advantage of U.S. preoccupation with its civil war by reoccupying the Dominican Republic.

Many Americans decried these actions as clear violations of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine which Priest correctly analyzes as a complicated document both anti and pro-imperial depending on one's perspectives and the future U.S. interventions undertaken in its name. After Appomattox, Washington applied its considerable diplomatic weight to force a French withdrawal. Previously Lincoln had provided Mexican resistance fighters with modest clandestine aid, fearing French intervention in the Civil War if he or his Secretary of State William Seward acted too aggressively. Under a combination of U.S. pressure, criticism of this adventure back home, and fears over growing Prussian power, Napoleon III withdrew in early 1867, leaving Maximilian to his fate before a Mexican firing squad.

As the author ably demonstrates no sooner had the Mexican crisis been resolved, when a more complicated and bloody conflict erupted on the island of Cuba upon which Washington had long held annexationist designs. Creole insurgents launched the Ten Years War (1868–1878) to win independence from Spain. Various U.S. administrations had either supported or tolerated filibuster expeditions against the island in the antebellum era and even its outright purchase from Spain. But Grant's government dithered and later recoiled from the intervention option.

Race proved a key factor. Slavery still existed on the

island and sowed divisions between the rebels who wanted independence *and* abolition versus those who desired independence alone. How could the U.S. which had just fought a bloody war for abolition intervene to support forces that opposed it? Americans in this Reconstruction era also grappled with the consequences of expanding full citizenship rights to blacks. The attitude of many conservative - and even liberal - Americans was that the nation did not need more inferior citizens of color by annexing an island whose population was one third African and mulatto with additional mestizos and others of "dubious" racial stock. For Southerners, a liberated Cuba provoked fears of another Haiti with a race war that could spread to their heavily black region. Better to back Spanish rule (a relatively weak empire and not a threat like France or Britain) despite the primacy of the Monroe Doctrine.

In the end regardless of some private U.S. citizens' participation in the war and half-hearted mediation attempts, the U.S. stayed on the sidelines assuaged by Spain's emancipation promises in the final peace accords. All this would change in 1898 but in its response to the Ten Years War, the U.S. revealed its deep internal divisions over race and empire. Many Americans had concluded that people of color lacked the capacity for self-governance which would serve as a springboard for future U.S. overseas interventions in the late 19th and throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries (see Latin America, the Philippines, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan).

Grant's last ditch hopes for an imperial outpost in the Dominican Republic died on the Senate floor when a coalition of still powerful former abolitionists refused to support a racial colony. Former Southern Confederates in the chamber also wanted no part of one. Some African American leaders, actually called for U.S. intervention in Cuba out of sympathy for the struggling Afro-Cubans who fought for both racial and national freedom. And even Frederick Douglass initially supported Grant's proposed annexation of the D.R. for the cause of black Pan-Americanism and uplift. But their voices failed to overcome Congress's rejection.

Priest next examines the 1882 outbreak of anti-foreigner riots in Egypt that stimulated growing U.S. interests in and fears about European imperialism in Africa. Indeed, many historians view this event as the start of the infamous "Scramble for Africa" which colonized the entire continent within three decades. Given that Americans preferred commercial penetration overseas and opposed formal colonialism, the locking off of huge areas from U.S. trade worried American statesmen. Egypt in particular fascinated them with its exotic attachment to the Ancient World and the Holy Land, sites of earlier imperial aggrandizement that prominent U.S. tourists visited and were now coveted by the vibrant British and French empires—and even the declining Ottoman empire. American policymakers debated the lessons to be gleaned from Europe's renewed imperialism in Africa.

While Egypt took a back seat to the more essential U.S. interests in Central America, the Caribbean, and even distant Hawaii and China, U.S. diplomats in Egypt and some observers back home disliked British arrogance and entitlement. They often sympathized with Egyptians chafing under British power as their own ancestors had before 1783. To U.S. Anglophobes, it appeared that John Bull wanted the whole world while Americans preferred a more open arena for international trade and influence.

Egypt also provided a ready example of informal colonialism. London dominated the nation through its control of the Suez Canal, limited naval and military assets, and growing political influence that stemmed in part from loans to local khedives who ruled under Europe and Constantinople's watchful eye. British earlier experience with using the East India Company as a tool of empire also

proved instructive, demonstrating how domination could be achieved through a variety of instruments that fell short of outright military occupation.

That methodology appealed to nascent U.S. imperialists obsessed with expanding their power even as they denied wanting to do so. Civilizational justification for foreign rule also obtained here since despite Egypt's former glory, Westerners now saw her in deep decline like most Ottoman regions and viewed it as easy pickings given the West's technological and military advantages. During a visit to Egypt, retired General George B. McClellan fell into the Western proclivity for stigmatizing Egyptians as wayward children and ignored the growing numbers of grog houses and brothels that marked the baleful effects of Western – not "Oriental"- influence in Egyptian cities.

An examination of the Berlin West Africa Conference serves as the final chapter of the book. In many ways, that conclave proved the most complex U.S. encounter with European imperialism since it comprised such a byzantine collection of competing interests. Empires, nations, and personalities vied for their share of Africa's resources. Foremost among the dueling personalities was the Machiavellian King Leopold II of Belgium determined to wrest control of the Congo Free State for his own gain under the guise of Christian benevolence.

Americans opposed a European carving-up of Africa (and soon had to argue against a similar arrangement in China in the 1890s). They essentially wanted an Open Door for trade with the "Dark Continent," without the costs of military occupation. Europeans had other ideas and were accused of avarice by Americans who claimed a virtuous exceptionalism. Chancellor Bismarck hoping to head off disruptive wars over the riches in play, called for a meeting in his capital to organize an orderly colonization process that would dampen imperial rivalries. As they nobly stole land and resources from weaker Africans, he and the other participants claimed their actions were aimed only at ending the blight of slavery and disease – and the promotion of Christianity and "civilization." No African leaders were invited to the conference just as no Latin Americans were ever consulted in the drawing up of the Monroe Doctrine.

Lacking any knights of the Round Table, the Arthur administration sent two diplomats John Kasson and Henry Sanford to assert America's right to get in on the spoils. Belgium and Britain deployed a better point man here in Henry Stanley an adventurer, promoter, and confidence man whose talents would have put P.T. Barnum to shame.

While initially supporting the announced purpose of the conference, African American leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois were soon disillusioned, as were the U.S. diplomats. There was little potential in Africa for a start-up imperial nation such as the U.S. Without a foothold there, bidding for a share of the wealth proved impractical. And as previously noted, no one in the U.S. was enthusiastic for black colonies. Americans ended up being crowded out by the more experienced European colonizers and the U.S. government bowed out of Africa. Washington declined to accept the conclusions of the conference, contenting itself with its semi-colony Liberia until the World War II era.

In his short but persuasive conclusion, Priest demonstrates convincingly how America took the lessons learned from close observances of and interactions with European imperialism during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age and put them to "good use" in expanding its already strong presence in the circum-Caribbean region and Hawaii, even venturing further afield into the Philippines and China. Clearly, U.S. connections and conflicts with other empires helped refine its own future approaches to overseas expansion.

While imperial enthusiasts like TR decried Americans for sitting on the sidelines during this dramatic period, the U.S. was significantly engaged. And for those of us who are

sports fans can attest, one can learn a lot sitting in the cheap seats as various U.S. administrations undoubtedly did. All throughout this work, Priest portrays Washington as more willing to exert its power when operating closer to home—with a few exceptions. He believes that distant overseas engagement became part of its “long game” that came to fruition after 1898. U.S. doubts about overseas empire certainly provoked pauses in its policy deliberations but intervention in the affairs of other peoples continued on a persistent (if stop-and-go) manner from the founding of the nation to our own era. Ancient Rome actually operated in a very similar manner.

Now comes the part in my review where I have to find something wrong with this excellent and perceptive work that beautifully blends all the key and recent historiography of U.S. empire with new findings and insights, as well as choice quotes from statesmen and opinion-makers. The book also covers a neglected period in U.S. foreign relations history that badly needs its expert analysis. Raised Catholic I have long been indoctrinated with the belief that it is wrong to criticize a priest, but alas, I must proceed.

First, the book could have used a few more paragraphs in each chapter explaining in more detail how things worked out after these revealing episodes and a bit more context on them for the non-specialist reader. Some background on Mexican conservatives’ long-held desires for a monarch, the liberal-conservative civil war in Mexico, and how Maximilian’s regime so quickly collapsed come to mind. Priest sharply analyzes the complexities of Napoleon III’s misadventure, even touching on, for example, the role that U.S. mercenaries played, but he misses one key racial component while otherwise doing a masterful job of including race in all aspects of early U.S. policy. One reason Mexican conservatives and certainly some Americans held the elected President Benito Juarez in such contempt and supported or tolerated a foreign prince to replace him was that he was a “full-blooded” Zapotec Indian. The horror light-complected Mexican elites felt towards Juarez could be likened in this regard to U.S. conservatives’ disgust with a black man in the White House that sparked their backing a white authoritarian to succeed him in 2016.

Similarly on Cuba, a few more paragraphs on the background and origins of the Ten Years War would be in order though Priest’s main emphasis is understandably in the diplomatic field. The same could be said for the two African-focused chapters. The book could benefit a bit more on what happened in Egypt and equatorial Africa after the incidents/crises that are addressed. The epithet “wog” was curiously absent in Priest’s nuanced discussion of British views on race in Egypt.

The book’s conclusion could have worked better as an entire chapter that showed in greater depth how during the 1890s and after, the U.S. used many of the lessons and strategies it learned from European imperialism. To my mind that merited an entire chapter and would nicely conclude the work, though to be fair these matters are sketched out in the conclusion, and I realize that publishers put spatial limits on books to keep them in the 200-page range for university classes. Still, U.S. banana enclaves, railroad building (including the 1851-55 Panama Railroad), mercenaries, and investments before and after the Civil War illustrate nicely U.S. empire-building in its own Caribbean sphere, copying from while condemning Britain and France for doing the same in other locales. As Panama is my specialty, I would have liked more on U.S. fears over the French canal effort. Some American diplomats viewed De Lesseps’ corporation as a dangerous East India Company-style wedge for French imperialism in the Western Hemisphere.

The term “civilization” is used quite a bit in quotes from key players in the book. Perhaps a couple of paragraphs early on defining the term’s relationship with imperialist

thinking would clarify matters, as individuals seem to describe different or very general concepts when using it. But these are small quibbles about an otherwise superb work that illuminates earlier U.S. overseas encounters and that nation’s “love-hate” relationship with imperialism which seriously challenges continued claims to exceptionalism. I thoroughly enjoyed the book, recommend it to all my friends and colleagues, and applaud its author for his first-rate work on such an important topic.

A favorite Western of mine, *Vera Cruz* (1954), starring Burt Lancaster and Gary Cooper, looks at the role of U.S. mercenaries fighting for both sides with great flair and historical inaccuracies.

Andrew Priest. *Designs on Empire: America’s Rise to Power in the Age of European Imperialism*

Jeannette Eileen Jones

In *Designs on Empire*, Andrew Priest analyzes the rise of American power that coincided with four episodes of European imperialism during the nineteenth century: the installation and rule of Maximilian I as the Emperor of Mexico (1864–67), Spain’s ten-year war with Cuba (1868–78), the British occupation of Egypt (also known as the Anglo-Egyptian War) in 1882, and the Berlin Conference on Africa (*Kongokonferenz*) of 1884/5. He argues that these events influenced American ideas and political thought about the morality of imperialism as a vehicle for nation states to establish their place in the world.

Focusing on the period from the Civil War to the 1890s, Priest explores how some elite Americans came to accept “British models of empire,” particularly regarding commercial expansion, rather than Spanish and French imperialist projects. These same American elites also viewed imperial intervention in “unstable” foreign regions as “a necessary evil in the contemporary world” (10). However, Priest makes it clear that there existed no American consensus on empire or imperialism as modes for expanding U.S. power. Rather, there was “a range of possibilities” for executing American foreign policy and extending American power abroad (14).

Whichever path American policymakers decided to take, the United States was operating in transimperial terrain, “enmeshed in imperial networks” (14), long before the Spanish-American War. As Priest reminds the reader, American imperialism began at the inception of the nation, as “logical” American westward expansion and settler colonialism came at “the expense of indigenous populations” (19). Despite avowals to the contrary, the United States was already an empire operating among other empires.

Before delving into the four case studies that make up this study, Priest surveys American attitudes about European empires from the Early Republic period to the eve of the Civil War. Citing Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, Henry Clay, and John Quincy Adams, among other elite American politicians, he dissects various contemporaneous arguments championing both territorial expansion and nonintervention as policies that distinguished the United States from European empires in the Atlantic system. For example, he explains that defenders of contiguous expansion, whether through nonviolent (annexation or purchase) or violent (war or forced removal) means, reasoned that such American actions differed from those of European empires in the Americas, as the United States intended these territories to become states in the Union and wanted the people to enjoy citizenship.

Of course, as Priest notes, this justification erased African Americans and Indigenous peoples. Hamilton declared the latter “our natural enemies” because they supposedly owed fealty to Great Britain and Spain (36). For

him, the “Western frontier” and the Spanish territories to the south were battlegrounds for expelling Europeans from the North American continent. However, such convictions did not translate into U.S. support for hemispheric independence movements. Priest cites Adams’s warning against involvement in “imperial intrigues” or “other nations’ affairs” as a “danger to the body politic” (44). Adams was not alone in this stance; other elites echoed his sentiments, basing their arguments primarily on racialized views of legitimate nation-building. The United States simply could not trust non-white peoples to establish functioning American republics in its image. Read in this context, the Monroe Doctrine was not only “ambiguous” but also flexible, allowing “politicians to adapt and manipulate it for numerous different purposes in the decades that followed” its issuance (45).

Priest demonstrates how French interference in Mexico, which occurred after the Benito Juárez government defaulted on its loans from France, Britain, and Spain, tested the boundaries of the Monroe Doctrine. Napoleon III’s decision to send Maximilian I of Austria to Mexico with French military support came at an inopportune time for the United States, as it was embroiled in its own civil war. Secretary of State William H. Seward’s policy of “nonintervention and hemispheric unity” mollified those Americans who understood that the Monroe Doctrine had no standing in international law, as well as those who feared that upsetting Napoleon would lead to French diplomatic recognition of the Confederacy (74).

In contrast, other Americans begged the U.S. government to save its republican neighbor, Mexico, from French domination. Priest deftly explains the convergence of racist views of Mexicans, non-interventionism, anti-imperialism, and anti-slavery sentiment that ultimately led to Seward’s decision to reassure the French that the United States would not intervene in the Mexican crisis. He did not want to “antagonize Paris more than he felt was necessary” (74).

The Ten Years War, which commenced a year after the execution of Maximilian in 1867, further strained American adherence to the Monroe Doctrine. Like the Mexican crisis, the war between Cuba and Spain appeared to many American elites as a direct challenge to America’s commitment to hemispheric independence from the intrigues of European empires. However, Priest argues that the Cuban crisis differed significantly, as Cuba, unlike Mexico, remained a colony of Spain. Thus, “the Grant administration did very little to pursue an overtly anti-colonial agenda and at times even supported” continued Spanish rule over Cuba to advance the “material interests” of the United States in the island (87).

Priest also points out that Secretary of State Hamilton Fish and elite politicians like Charles Sumner decried intervention in the war—particularly if it led to annexation of Cuba—on racial grounds, believing that Cuba’s “ethnic makeup” precluded any successful integration of its people into the American body politic (88). Moreover, Fish viewed Cubans as “incapable of good self-government” (93). In contrast, those favorable to intervention, including filibusters calling for annexation of the island, often characterized Cuba as “contiguous” territory and thought it best administered by Americans. Frederick Douglass, who once supported annexation of Santo Domingo, believed that all the Caribbean islands with Black populations (including Cuba) would fare better in a republic than as European colonial subjects.

Again, Priest connects racial ideology to foreign

policy, analyzing the racial stereotypes about Cubans that supported *both* nonintervention and annexation policies to solve the Cuban problem, with Douglass as the outlier who argued for Black self-determination (102–3). Despite strong sentiment among Americans for supporting the Cuban rebels, Fish refused to support Cuban independence.

Priest’s treatment of the American responses to European imperialism in Africa (Egypt and the Congo Basin) as part of the broader “Scramble for Africa” during the late nineteenth century exposes the tension between adherents of the Monroe Doctrine and political elites who feared that the United States might be excluded from global shifts of power and sidelined politically and economically. In addition, Priest attends to the actions of nonstate actors and consular servants whose interest in Africa often shaped or influenced U.S. policy with European imperial powers. In chapters 4 (“Britain and the Occupation of Egypt”) and 5 (“Germany and the Berlin West Africa Conference”), he dissects the strains between “popular Anglophobia” (123) and the acceptance (and favoring) of British modes of imperialism based on an increasing belief in “Anglo-American brotherhood” (122). In addition, many elite white

Americans began to embrace the “Anglo-Saxon civilizing mission” (126), which led them to favor Britain’s role in the so-called opening of Africa in the wake of the Berlin Conference, often while simultaneously decrying British imperial policy in India.

Priest explains that Americans’ “reactions to the British intervention in Egypt were . . . mixed” because they

saw the Egyptian government as a “failing state” and were skeptical of British imperial methods for governing Egypt (151). As he notes, the American presence in Egypt before and after the 1882 intervention included missionaries, tourists, merchants, businessmen, and consuls. Among the latter was, most notably, Simon Wolf, who served during the outbreak of hostilities. It was the diversity of these Americans (primarily residing in Cairo and Alexandria and reporting back to the United States about their experiences) that prevented a uniform view of Egypt from prevailing at home.

Nevertheless, there were points of agreement among some of those observers. Many were disturbed by “European encroachment on the people” (138) and by Egyptian attempts to reform their nation as a vassal of the Ottoman Empire because they felt those shifts left Egypt vulnerable to the British, who made no secret of their desire to declare it a protectorate. Others, however, believed British rule over Egypt would free it from the clutches of the Ottoman Empire.

Priest elucidates the warring positions between the Americans who felt “sympathy for the Egyptian plight” (142) and those who feared “burgeoning Egyptian nationalism” (143). He details the “racialized language and attitudes” (148) that underlay some Americans’ beliefs that British rule was necessary for modernizing and civilizing Egypt. He also touches briefly on American views of Muslims, but he could have delved more deeply into American Islamophobia and Orientalism in his discussion. In the end, secretaries of state Frederick Frelinghuysen and Thomas Bayard maintained American impartiality during the early years of Britain’s “veiled protectorate” over Egypt.

Priest’s assessment of U.S. involvement in and American sentiments about the Berlin Conference on West Africa draws from a myriad of Black and White state and non-state actors. Somewhat expectedly, White consuls and commercial agents stationed in Africa and U.S. envoys

extraordinary and minister plenipotentiaries assigned to major European metropolises took an interest in the conference. John A. Kasson, head of the U.S. legation in Berlin, emerged as a major participant in the conference proceedings, along with Henry Sanford, former ambassador to Belgium.

As Priest notes, "American interests in Liberia also encouraged some broader attention to West Africa" (159). African Americans who promoted emigration to Liberia, along with their White supporters, believed that the United States had a vested interest in safeguarding the African republic from European encroachment. Pan-Africanists, many of whom were opposed to or ambivalent about Liberian emigration, argued that Blacks in the diaspora had a duty to protect Africa from the greed of European imperialists. Still, many elite African Americans approved of the "Europeans' proclaimed civilizing mission in Africa" (176).

Priest uses the voluminous correspondence between Kasson, Frelinghuysen, Bayard, and Willard Parker Tisdell (a commissioner to the Berlin conference) to illustrate the complexities of the foreign policy implications of American involvement in Africa. Kasson believed that Africans would benefit from the imposition of "European-styled 'civilization' on them" (181), whereas Tisdell rejected any suggestion that Africans could be induced to work, convert to Christianity, or engage in modern trade relations with the West. While Frelinghuysen supported U.S. participation in the Berlin Conference despite the cynicism of Tisdell and others about the outcome of Kasson's and Sanford's contributions to it, Priest argues that "the U.S. delegation's presence in Berlin was also part of a pattern of experimentation with, assertion, and retraction of American power" characteristic of the period. Moreover, although the incoming administration rejected the Berlin Act, America's "association . . . with internationalism" could not be ignored (187).

Priest concludes his study with a brief discussion of American imperialism and foreign policy in the wake of the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars, highlighting elite Americans' continued discomfort with acknowledging the United States as an empire. Despite evidence that U.S. continental and overseas expansion mirrored that of the European empires that Americans looked askance at, many political elites continued to reinforce an American exceptionalism narrative. Priest recounts how presidents Cleveland, Harrison, McKinley, and Roosevelt regarded their foreign policies towards the Western Hemisphere, the Pacific, and Asia as fundamentally "unimperial" (201). Moreover, the majority of Americans concurred with these political leaders in viewing U.S. expansion as benevolent, serving to modernize and civilize peoples around the world. Priest concludes that the United States "was not at the vanguard of empire during the final decades of the nineteenth century," but "its intellectual development was still deeply embedded in and influenced by" the "new imperialism" (203).

Priest shines in his close reading of the rhetoric used by U.S. statesmen during these key moments in European imperialist expansion and intervention. He reveals a dynamic dialogue among American elites concerned about the implications of British, Spanish, and French imperial power in the Western Hemisphere as well as in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Germany's rise as an imperial power added to their angst. As Priest notes, even with these concerns, many prominent Americans viewed Russia as the exemplar of proper expansion most akin to "Manifest Destiny." From

Jefferson to Thomas Knox, these men espoused pro-Russia sentiments, and during the British occupation of Egypt they "continued to see Russia as a progressive force" (136). In contrast, other elites echoed the position of the Young American Movement that in the 1840s and '50s warned against the "expansionist and oppressive" Russian Empire (31).

Priest's attention to such fissures in American attitudes toward European imperialism is emblematic of *Designs on Empire's* venture into American diplomatic historiography, and it broadens scholarship on Gilded Age political thought. Arguably, his book is as much a diplomatic history as an intellectual one. He builds his argument on a judicious use of archival sources not simply to paint a coherent historical narrative of America's rise to power from the end of the Civil War to the turn of the twentieth century, but also to demonstrate how a range of elite Americans contributed to the history of ideas about empire.

That said, Priest could have included more Black elites and activists in his study. Rightfully, he often quotes or references Frederick Douglass, since Douglass had a national and international reputation as an abolitionist and advocate for Black equality and was minister to Haiti between 1889 and 1891. Priest also cites Martin Delany, D. Augustus Straker, and W. E. B. DuBois, who, among other Black men, expressed their thoughts on imperialism, empire, and territorial expansion.

However, there were other Black thinkers, particularly Black women, who were assessing imperialism in this era. For example, Anna Julia Cooper, in her book *A Voice from the South* (1892), criticizes imperialism and "manifest destiny" as "Barbarian brag."¹ Other Black women, including missionaries in Africa, decried the Scramble for Africa and its potential threat to the sovereignty of Liberia and to the freedom of African peoples. Still others supported the outcome of the partition of Africa, as it allowed them to pursue what they saw as their duty to "uplift" and Christianize Africans as part of their racial destiny, as Michele Mitchell argues.² In her studies of Black women missionaries who traveled to the Congo during the 1890s, Kimberly D. Hill calls this phenomenon "African American Christian internationalism."³ Including such voices would have strengthened Priest's analysis of elite and popular American responses to European imperialism.

Designs on Empire is a much-needed addition to the scholarly study of the "new imperialism" and American empire. Grounded in the historiographies of imperialism and the United States in the World, as well as deep archival and primary source research, the book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of American diplomacy during the late nineteenth century. It is attentive to the inextricable links between racial ideology, internationalism, and imperialist expansion during the late nineteenth century, and it provides readers with a nuanced interpretation of America's quest to establish itself as a power to be reckoned with in global politics.

Notes:

1. Kathy L. Glass, "Tending to the Roots: Anna Julia Cooper's Sociopolitical Thought and Activism," *Meridians* 6, no.1 (2005): 46.
2. Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004).
3. Kimberly D. Hill, *A Higher Mission: The Careers of Alonzo and Althea Brown Edmiston in Central Africa* (Lexington, KY, 2020).

Author's Response

Andrew Priest

Sending a book out into the world is both an exciting and daunting prospect. This is especially the case when that book is about a topic like empire on which so many brilliant scholars have already written so many brilliant things. I am delighted, therefore, that the reviewers think *Designs on Empire* makes a contribution, and, perhaps more important, that the contribution is worth making. I am very grateful to Michael E. Donoghue, Richard S. Fogarty, Andrew M. Johnston, and Jeannette Jones for engaging with the book so fully and for their thoughtful and generous reviews. Thanks also to Andy Johns for organizing this roundtable.

I am pleased all the reviewers agree with me about the need for new work on this topic, especially an intervention that draws us away from the allure of 1898 and war with Spain as the turning point for the United States on the international stage. Since I began research on this book, I have become more and more convinced that understanding the United States as a nation engaged with empire whose policymakers always had imperial aspirations is crucial if we are to comprehend the dynamics of modern American power. In the book, I intended to show that those aspirations were significantly influenced and shaped by the imperial powers of the day and that leaders in the United States were in constant conversation with those powers—learning from and being shaped by them.

Designs on Empire is obviously far from the first book to explore tensions in the course of the history of the United States, which was an expansionist power that broadly considered itself to be anti-colonial. A vital element of this belief was that U.S. territorial expansion was in some way different from that of the European colonial powers' carving up of territories that were often far from the metropolitan center. Yet in adopting a set of beliefs that broadly aligned with the European worldview, American leaders often agreed that there were circumstances in which advanced "civilizations" (as they saw them) should be exported and perhaps even imposed on others. As Donoghue notes, there is more that could be done to explain what American leaders meant by the term "civilization." In this context, I take it to mean forms of politics, culture, and economics that Americans and Europeans took to be acceptable ways to live and prosper.

This concept of civilization was also highly racialized, and questions of race certainly dominated much elite thinking. Jones quite rightly encourages me to say more about Islamophobia and Orientalism as they relate to Egypt and the Ottoman Empire and points me to Black women's voices speaking out on the negative consequences of European imperialism in Africa. In a similar vein, Donoghue and Johnston press me on attitudes toward Native North American cultures: Johnston notes my reluctance to call the removal and extermination of Native Americans what it was, while Donoghue says that I could have made more of the Zapotec heritage of liberal Mexican leader Benito Juárez. All are fair points, and I am committed to taking these challenges forward in future research.

Donoghue's point also leads me to reflect on how putting Juárez himself center-stage could further illuminate American attitudes toward the Mexicans by showing their perceptions of his government during the French intervention in Mexico. It may also help to inform discussions about race in other contexts, especially the Caribbean. On a somewhat similar theme, Johnston notes that I do not say much about how thinking on gender

factored in here—another fair point. Greater attention to gender would undoubtedly cast new light on what is essentially—or at least has usually been seen as—a masculine endeavor.

One way to answer these omissions, as Fogarty notes, might be broadening my source base. Indeed, expressions of ideology in diverse media have become increasingly important to historians. They appear in many different forms, such as nonfiction books, magazines, novels, poems, and travel writing in many mediums. I have touched on this in a previous publication, specifically referencing U.S. author-travelers like Jack London and Mark Twain, but Fogarty is right that I am primarily concerned here with policymakers and those figures who were at least close to power, if not at the center of it.¹ Jones makes a similar point about my concern with writing on diplomacy as well as ideology, and I thank her for her generous comments about my close reading of the sources. I did try to balance this with some focus on literary culture as expressed in leading middle-brow journals, especially regarding views of the British Empire, but my concern was, I suppose, always driven by the archival material I thought revealed so much about political and diplomatic mindsets.

I am intrigued by Fogarty's comments on my treatment of the British and French empires. He begins by querying whether my focus on France as a monarchical and imperial power in the 1850s and 1860s led me to overstate American skepticism about French forms of colonial control. He notes the longevity of the French Third Republic, its rush for overseas colonies in the 1870s and 1880s, and the fact that it incorporated colonial subjects into metropolitan France in a way that might seem to have been more akin to U.S. territorial expansion.

There is much I could say about this, but I will limit myself to a few observations. Firstly, I agree that additional work is needed on the United States and the French Empire during the first decades of the Third Republic. It would, for example, be fascinating to know more about American reactions to the French takeover of Indochina a century before the crisis of American Empire there.

Secondly, I think that attitudes toward republics and monarchies were complex and challenging to categorize. In chapter 3, which deals with the Cuban Ten Years' War, I note that Spain was both a republic and a monarchy during the 1860s and 1870s, but that fact apparently did little to alter American perceptions of its unfitness as a colonial ruler. Perhaps this was because these Spanish regimes were short-lived, unlike the more stable Third Republic, but I do wonder whether shorthand ways of understanding national empires of the day dominated regardless of what was happening in those metropolitan centers. Thirdly, and this idea is related to the previous point, I have increasingly come to think of empires as multifarious—rather than singular—forms of rule. Indeed, Daniel Immerwahr rejects the notion of one American Empire in favor of a "Greater United States" with various types of governance.²

Finally, Fogarty rightly argues that we cannot take for granted the diplomatic closeness of Britain and the United States, especially compared to France—famously the United States' first ally. Certainly, relations between powers wax and wane, but it is noteworthy that American empire-builders after 1898 remained largely wedded to the idea of Britain as the preeminent imperial power on the planet. They observed more closely than ever the British Empire's overseas enterprises as models for their own empire-building and even provided rhetorical support for British colonial violence in places like southern Africa.³

Finally, the reviewers highlight two of the tensions that have accompanied me throughout the research and writing of this book: the question of temporal specificity and the

This concept of civilization was also highly racialized, and questions of race certainly dominated much elite thinking.

role of the domestic. Donoghue suggests that a chapter on the 1890s and the consequences of each episode covered would expand the book's relevance. Indeed, I struggled early on with how to deal with a vast and complex topic like empire, so dominant in the diplomatic landscape of the nineteenth century, while maintaining analytical focus on American elite responses to particular contexts at particular times. My solution was to examine specific moments of imperial crisis and change as part of broader commentaries on particular empires, leaving the 1890s for the conclusion to maintain focus on those key moments.

Likewise, Johnston, while generously noting that the domestic is "always present" in the book, would like it to feature more heavily in both the book's focus and its theoretical framing. These debates were, after all, taking place during a time of pivotal changes in the United States—changes that included the passage of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments, which were followed by decades in which they were not enforced in many parts of the country. Similarly, the nation's economic situation, with its growing extremes of poverty and prosperity, animated much of American life in the Gilded Age.

Here, as Johnston puts it so well, the interplay of imperialist and anti-imperialist forces was honed by the paradoxes of democracy at home (and heavily influenced by race and class). American economic power thus also shaped emerging ideas, just as it was itself predicated on hierarchies of race and civilization, a factor that was particularly obvious in the debates about the Berlin conference on the status of West Africa. Here I was pleased that several of the reviewers welcomed my discussions about nascent Open Door rhetoric among American officials—rhetoric that sometimes seems to be so geographically and temporally specific. Given its significance in China and Latin America in the following decades, I thought examining it was important.

Both these questions about temporal specificity and the domestic reflect choices made in course of carving out the book's scope and potential contribution. While there are compelling arguments to do things differently, I believe there are equally compelling reasons to proceed as I have. I leave it to readers to decide whether the right balance has been achieved.

I will end this response where the book begins: with a reference to the contemporary United States. When I first began thinking about this project, the so-called War on Terror was still very much part of the political lexicon. U.S. participation in Iraq was coming to an end, but President Barack Obama had made the decision to expand the American military presence in Afghanistan. That it was Obama—a figure who is popularly understood to be a progressive and even a dove—who took this decision is especially important for the book, as Fogarty notes.

Obama's protestations about America's supposedly benign uses of power around the world, in contrast to empires past, highlight the fraught place of empire and imperialism in the American political imaginary.⁴ Today, as Obama's former vice president, Joe Biden, continues to grapple with the end of twenty years' engagement in Afghanistan and at the same time must deal with the Russian threat in Ukraine, rapid and expanding competition from China, and the continuing global pandemic, questions about America's place in the world and how it should wield its still-considerable economic and diplomatic power seem bound to endure.

Notes:

1. Andrew Priest, "Thinking About Empire: The Administration of Ulysses S. Grant, Spanish Colonialism and the Ten Years' War in Cuba," *Journal of American Studies* 48, no. 2 (2014): 541–58, esp. 542–43.
2. Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States* (New York, 2019); Immerwahr, "The Greater United States: Territory and Empire in U.S. History," *Diplomatic History* 20, no. 4 (2016): 373–91.
3. William N. Tilchin, "The United States and the Boer War," in *The International Impact of the Boer War*, ed. Keith M. Wilson (Chesham, UK, 2001), 107–22.
4. Barack Obama, Remarks at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, December 14, 2011, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Barack Obama, 2011, Book 1, January 1 through June 30, 2011* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2014), 1550.