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A. G. Hopkins
AMERICAN EMPIRE
A Global History

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The United States has long been the peakaboo empire: now you see it, now you don't. The American empire comes into focus at moments of stress or success – the Spanish–American War, the Second World War, 9/11, the Second Gulf War – but fades away when the crisis abates. Empire-talk has tracked these peaks and troughs: it ramped up during the second Bush presidency but then fell off markedly during the Obama years. It has barely returned under the Trump administration, despite all its bluster about “making America great again”, the President's frustrated inability to detach himself from his predecessors' military commitments and the country's seeming death-struggle with China for global hegemony. Where are the empire analysts of yesteryear? When, if ever, will the American empire reappear?

American Empire: A global history decisively reopens the conversation. Its author arrived from Britain in Austin, Texas, for a new professorial position the day before 9/11: A. G. Hopkins tells us that his monumental book was born after the subsequent US-led invasion of Iraq. More than a decade in the making, it seeks to understand “Washington's reaction to the first assault on its continental territory since 1812” (though this overlooks Japan's attacks on the West Coast between 1942 and 1945 – its modest shelling from the sea and some 9000 fire balloons). Many historians might have directed that effort towards the working of policy-makers under Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld; Hopkins, a distinguished historian of Africa, the British Empire and of modern imperialism more generally, chose instead to go far back in time – to the mid-eighteenth century – and global in scope, to place the United States “among empires”, as Charles Maier put it in perhaps the best of the last tranche of books on American empire from the early 2000s.

The result is a slow-burning but high-impact argument encompassing almost the entire sweep of the history of the United States from the Seven Years War to its most recent war of choice. General readers may tire of Hopkins's methodological and historiographical ground-clearing, but his grand narrative accelerates after the first hundred pages as it presents a novel account of American economic and territorial expansion across two centuries. Hopkins is as indefatigable in his sources as he is omnivorous in his sidelights: Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter rub shoulders here with Tarzan and Captain America, and he frames them all with vignettes from Iraq in 1915 and 2003.

With these materials in mind, Hopkins sorts the last three centuries into three broad, overlapping processes that played out on a planetary scale: proto-globalization, modern globalization and postcolonial globalization. The first was the period of fiscal-military empires, which squeezed their peoples financially while expanding their footprint territori-

ally. The next was the era of national-industrial empires, which tried to form Weberian states in an age of novel and competitive technologies. The third is the time between the Bandung Conference in 1955 and the rise of the BRICS, when commercial integration largely replaced imperial stratification. Hopkins argues that the United States participated in every stage of these developments, initially as a “late-start” empire like Italy or Germany, not an early adopter along the lines of Spain or Britain. And, like other major modern empires, it remains incompletely decolonized.

In the minds of most Americans, as well as many students of imperialism, the United States was an anti-imperial entity, born out of what Senator William H. Seward called, in 1853, “the first act in the great drama of decolonization on this continent”, the War of Independence. A nation that had exited empire so early could have no imperial ambitions of its own; whatever territory or peoples it incorporated surely only came reluctantly and with tortuous disavowals. This assumption of innate anti-imperialism became a major plank of American exceptionalism: Hopkins demolishes it at length and with gusto. He defines empire as that peculiar kind of state that has the “ability to step outside of the nation”, to incorporate novel territories and peoples, to suspend differences within similarity and to maintain structural hierarchies of race, citizenship and belonging. For almost a century, the US fit this imperial bill as a belated fiscal-military empire up to the Civil War, as a nascent national-industrial empire for the century thereafter and as a post-colonial agent of globalization since the 1950s.

Hopkins's stated aim is not “to put the United States down but rather to put it in – to the mainstream of Western history”: that is, the very narrative from which the exceptionalists had tried to quarantine American history. “Western history” for Hopkins includes both the European empire-states and their former colonies, dominions and protectorates. When viewed in the light of these imperial and post-imperial histories, the United States had lost a role but was yet to find an empire. Hopkins describes it as one of the earliest states to face the classic post-colonial dilemma of asserting effective cultural independence as well as rising to the challenges of political legitimacy that generate violence at home and struggles for recognition from outside. In this perspective, the US Civil War was both the latest crisis of the “Age of Revolutions” among Western fiscal-military states and the harbinger of post-colonial battles to come from India to Biafra.

Hopkins might have pressed his comparisons further to align the conflict with the civil wars that tore apart Spanish America's new states in the decades after 1810: Spain only enters his argument when the United States becomes its successor empire in the Caribbean and the Pacific after 1898 and the Spanish–American War, which he sees as a war between military-fiscal states painfully transitioning into national-industrial states, the one triumphing by entering the imperial ranks, the other failing to hold its colonies or secure its modernizing destiny. On the eve of the First World War, the United States possessed only 0.6 per cent of the world's colonial territory, by Hopkins's count (Great Britain held two-thirds), while 23 million subjects fell under American colonial rule by 1940. This expansion never put the US in the front rank of impe-

rial powers, but it did render it a hemispheric and transoceanic force for imperial modernization for over half a century, as Hopkins shows in a series of richly detailed and densely sourced chapters on Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Hawaii.

This post-1898 empire was a bewildering patchwork, with Hawaii incorporated (and on the road to eventual statehood), the Philippines unincorporated (until its revolution) and Puerto Rico already the hybrid anomaly it remains to this day, “foreign in a domestic sense”, as the Supreme Court notoriously ruled in the Insular Cases of 1902. Puerto Rico is the largest remnant of the American empire, neither adequately decolonized nor properly protected from devastating hurricanes or equally destructive bond-sharks. It stands alongside Guam, Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands and the US Virgin Islands as well as the archipelago of almost 800 American military bases from Greenland to Seoul. Hopkins does not treat these other evidences of empire, though together they comprise perhaps the largest imperial assemblage in the world today. Nor, perhaps more tellingly, does Hopkins treat the continental United States itself as an empire acquired from indigenous peoples by multiple waves of settler colonialism, from Florida to Alaska, which show the American polity to be the successor state to, variously, the Spanish, British, French and Russian empires in North America.

Alexander Hamilton, writing in the *Federalist Papers*, famously called the infant United States the “most interesting” empire in the world. He did not mean by empire quite what most of us – and certainly not A. G. Hopkins – imply by the term, but his assessment has resonated whenever Americans have stirred from their imperial amnesia. With his gift for witty summations, his serious investment in comparison and his dispassionate outsider's view on the pieties of American history, Hopkins has rendered the topic of American empire not merely interesting but truly compelling again. It remains to be seen whether *American Empire* is the last, and the grandest, of the Bush-era reflections on US imperium or the first of a new wave of studies animated by American overseas adventures and misadventures in the long shadow of the Iraq War.

