

***American Empire: A Global History*, by A. G. Hopkins (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018; pp. xviii + 980).**

*American Empire* offers an interpretation of the United States seen through the lens of comparative imperial history. By plotting the growth and expansion of the United States against other globalising empires, Hopkins suggests, we can see a nation that looked and behaved much like other imperial powers, despite its repeated and long-standing claims to distinction.

Challenging American exceptionalism can hardly claim to be an innovation, of course, but the devil of this argument is in its extraordinary level of detail. Hopkins' comprehensive synthesis produces an interpretation that is extensive, persuasive, and repeatedly innovative.

The book is structured around three historical periods: a phase of "proto-globalisation", which until 1861 saw the United States emerge and develop under British imperial influence; a main phase of globalisation that lasted until the 1950s, in which the United States operated more or less as a conventional imperial power; and a phase of decolonisation and "post-colonial globalisation" beginning in the second half of the twentieth century in which the United States sought (unsuccessfully, in Hopkins' view) to achieve hegemonic status.

Some sections of this long work cover well-trodden ground and would have benefited from further editing, but three chapters particularly reward attention. Chapter four interprets the United States' first half-century in terms of a struggle to acquire forms of effective independence from Britain that would match its independent constitutional status. Such quests are characteristic of most decolonising states but have rarely been applied to the postcolonial United States, even though the nation's economic and political development continued to be underpinned by British cotton and grain purchases and London's capital markets until well into the nineteenth century. Neither the Jacksonian nor Hamiltonian models of national development were able to offer a path to effective independence in the period up to the Civil War, Hopkins argues. Indeed, the North-South conflict can be understood both as the culmination of a process of competitive dependent development and the point at which the United States, by breaking the cotton economy, was able to free itself of British dominance in practice as well as theory.

Chapter eight offers a similarly creative interpretation of the path to empire in the late nineteenth century. Like many other "late start" empires, Hopkins argues, American

imperialism was shaped by political imperatives, especially the desire to build a national counterculture – in this case, drawing upon chauvinistic white nationalism and a sense of historical and religious mission – rather than obviously economic motivations such as the desire to reward key business interests or to open up new markets for American goods. Inasmuch as economic factors intruded upon leaders' political calculations, the goal was to defend the Republican Party's high tariff policy in the face of challenge from free trade Democrats. The adoption of Blaine's reciprocal trade policy was not about promoting overseas expansion *per se*, but was rather a tactical concession to specific interest groups in order to defend the larger protectionist agenda. Similarly, McKinley's decision to launch a "virtuous" war against a crumbling Spanish empire in the name of liberty helped to present the Republican Party's political priorities as a national mission, pulling diverse groups of citizens behind the party's gold standard, high tariff platform. It was domestic affairs, not the search for economic opportunity overseas, that was therefore the critical concern in policymakers' minds.

Chapter fourteen offers an argument that has been articulated by others, but rarely developed so systematically. Here, Hopkins argues that twentieth-century decolonisation should be not be seen as a product of the Cold War, but that the Cold War should be seen in the context of decolonisation. The disruptions of the Great Depression and Second World War were followed by a concerted effort to revive Western imperialism, in which the United States played a central but no means divergent role, defending fragile European empires, entrenching political allies within its insular empire in the Caribbean and Pacific, and maintaining white supremacy ("internal colonialism") on the continental mainland. From the 1950s onwards, decolonisation played out in the American space much as it did elsewhere. Again, Hopkins suggests that America's record was not noticeably better or worse than others'.

Given the scale and scope of the book, there are inevitably choices made over which one might quibble. Each part begins with a survey of imperial history, followed by chapters situating the US within this formula. This makes a kind of sense, but the effect can be odd, inasmuch as the notional subject of the book entirely vanishes for stretches, and some of the longer digressions can seem indulgent. There is extensive discussion of nineteenth-century European affairs, but comparatively little on the American colonies prior to the independence era. The role of competing imperialisms – British, Spanish, French, indigenous – on the eighteenth and nineteenth-century continental mainland is understated. Cuba, a notionally-independent protectorate, is discussed at length, but Panama, despite the canal zone being

directly controlled by the United States, is barely mentioned. America's emerging network of global military installations are mostly overlooked. Nor does the work engage with the interventions in the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Haiti, even though these "nation-building" projects connect more closely to the characteristic patterns of American imperial power revealed in places such as Iraq – the location where the book begins and ends – than, say, the territorial imperialism of the Philippines, Hawai'i or Puerto Rico.

These choices typically prioritise an Anglo-Saxon comparative frame and a model of territorial imperialism over others, and can downplay the ways in which US imperial power was evolving from European models into new and distinctive forms over the twentieth century. Nevertheless, lines had to be drawn somewhere to make the subject manageable ("to avoid being sunk by excess freight", as Hopkins puts it, p.192). To connect historians of empire with historians of the United States, Hopkins has drawn upon two voluminous but too-often separated bodies of literature, and the two hundred pages of endnotes demonstrate quite what an exceptional feat of investigation was already required. It would be a rare scholar indeed who did not learn much from *American Empire*, even in areas where they previously, perhaps naively, thought to claim a modest expertise. They may, in the light of reading this book, quietly think again.