

A Roundtable on Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*

Carol Chin, Thomas Bender, Emily Conroy-Krutz, David Milne, Odd Arne Westad, and
Daniel Immerwahr

Introduction to the Roundtable on Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*

Carol Chin

Daniel Immerwahr's *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* is a remarkable book. It's not often that a book changes the way we think about something as fundamental as the nature of the United States—or rather, the *non-states* of America. Immerwahr brilliantly (and entertainingly) illuminates the ways in which the United States has consistently hidden, obfuscated, and ignored the existence of its extensive territorial possessions. For instance, at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, most Americans had no idea that the Philippines, Guam, and other strange places were part of the United States. Yet these territories accounted for about 12% of the population and about one-fifth of the land mass of the United States (110), while Manila at the time was the sixth largest city in the United States (210). Instead, most people carried in their heads what he calls the “logo map” of the United States—the shape of the 48 continental states, with the possible addition of Alaska and Hawaii. In 2017, the governors of Guam, threatened by North Korea, and Puerto Rico, in the wake of Hurricane Maria, had to remind the mainland public (and the U.S. government?) that their populations are American citizens on American soil (392). (Every April 15 I'm struck by the fact that the inhabitants of Guam, American Samoa, the Northern Marianas, and the rest send their tax returns to the same IRS processing center as those of us who are U.S. citizens living in foreign countries.)

The book is too richly detailed to attempt a comprehensive summary, but among my favorite episodes are the Filipino architect Juan Arellano, who designed iconic buildings in Manila in the style of the Columbian Exposition's White City (chapter 8); the standardization of screw threads and stop signs to American specifications (chapter 18); the comic-opera defense of the Great Swan islands (a lot of beer was involved); and the U.S. government's announcement that it was annexing a handful of Pacific guano islands, forgetting that it already owned them (chapter 20). In addition to these and other highlights, *How to Hide an Empire* has accomplished something else: it has made me actually look forward to teaching the U.S. foreign relations

survey next time around. Assigning the book would mean completely revamping the way I teach the course, but I can't wait to see what my Canadian students make of it.

All of the reviewers praise the scope and ambition of the book. Thomas Bender calls it “a *tour de force*,” citing the author's “elaboration of both the ideas and practice of empire” while being attentive to “the voices of the colonized as well as the colonizers.” The book, he says, represents “a history of imperialism at a global scale,” combining intellectual history and a kind of military history that is “less about war than the management of colonial people and their response. Most important, he gets very close to the human meaning of empire.” For Emily Conroy-Krutz, “one of the greatest achievements of the book is Immerwahr's ability to use territory to link nineteenth and twentieth century histories of American empire.” This theme “comes pretty close to giving us a clear narrative through-line across the chronological breaks that have for so long seemed disruptive.” David Milne agrees with the author's own characterization that the “book's main contribution . . . is perspectival, seeing a familiar history differently.” Many

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of the chapters, Milne points out, cover more or less familiar ground, but taken as “the sum of its parts,” Immerwahr's approach “opens multiple vistas,” often in surprising ways. Odd Arne Westad particularly appreciates Immerwahr's depiction of American empire as similar to European empires in its original uses of power but very different in its post-imperial transformation. Westad praises Immerwahr's treatment of “the never fully resolved ideological contradictions of a U.S. empire,” revealing the economic, racial and strategic reasons for America's state of denial about its territories.

Our reviewers are also impressed by the readability of the book and the author's success in making it accessible to a general audience without losing scholarly credibility, as well as his lively storytelling and beautifully readable prose. Both Bender and Milne use the phrase “a gifted storyteller”; Milne dubs the book “a rare thing in our field: a genuine cross-over hit.” Conroy-Krutz notes that “Immerwahr excels at the story that surprises and draws you in to learn more.” Those stories, surprising, entertaining, and memorable, give life to what might otherwise be a dry academic argument. Bender characterizes the writing as “prose that is at once conversational and precise.” Milne also notes that there have been fewer “mainstream” or popular histories written by left-leaning scholars than by those on the right,

and he celebrates Immerwahr's achievement in producing a critical history that the general public can, and will, read.

When the reviewers point out omissions and shortcomings, they do so almost apologetically, referring to their criticisms as "nitpicking" (Conroy-Krutz) or "quibbles" in a "fine book" (Westad). Bender feels that the anti-Imperialists get short shrift, suggesting that a more detailed treatment of their arguments "would help understanding what happened and what did not happen." Conroy-Krutz finds it "peculiar" that a book focused on territory gives so little space to the nineteenth century. She would like to see more attention to such themes as settler colonialism within the American continent (Wisconsin and Deseret as contrasting case studies); the role of religion and missionaries in "shap[ing] the potential Americanness (or not) of the settlers" in these territories; and more of the "cultural and economic definition of empire" applied to the earlier period as well as the twentieth century. Westad wishes for "more comparison with other empires" (Britain, France, Russia, and China!); a deeper analysis of America's treatment of Native Americans and African-American slaves as foundational to its conception of colonized peoples; and even "a more through discussion of U.S. capitalism."

In response to the reviewers, Immerwahr acknowledges that he had to make choices about how much space to devote to certain subjects and themes. By his telling, the American empire was a much huger enterprise than most of us usually think of it, and for the book to give due weight to territorial expansion in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, draw comparisons to other empires, and include a more expansive treatment of the evolution of capitalism, among other topics, would have made it unwieldy, to say the least. (Indeed, for a 400-plus page book of history to achieve the status of "crossover hit" and appear in airport bookstalls is already a coup; at 600 or 800 pages, that probably wouldn't have happened. I, for one, rarely have that much space left in my carry-on.) More interesting than mere length, however, is the author's explanation of the *narrative* choices he made. Unlike with a scholarly monograph, where it is necessary to include all the evidence needed to support an argument, in this case Immerwahr was more concerned with narrative, plot, and character. Before telling of the destruction of Manila, he says he needed to bring the city to life, to make the readers "care about it." In this he has succeeded brilliantly. Not only Manila, but the guano islands, the Aleutians, and all the other territories and outposts become vivid characters in a dramatic tale. The reader not only cares about these places and their inhabitants but comes to deeply appreciate their importance to the formation and continuance of American empire. In Immerwahr's finely crafted narrative, the formerly hidden empire is rendered unforgettable.

Review of Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*

Thomas Bender

Daniel Immerwahr's *How to Hide an Empire* is a *tour de force*. It is also deeply researched, expansive (as in global), and written in prose that is at once conversational and precise. Immerwahr makes a fresh and rich argument about making of the American empire to the 1960s. His book might be considered at once a new approach and a culmination of the historical studies of the American

empire going back to William Appleman Williams's *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959) and the work of Walter LaFeber, Lloyd Gardner, and Appleman's other students at Wisconsin in the 1960s and 1970s.

Immerwahr's book is effectively global, and, equally important, he has richly populated its stories and perspectives with actors from both the imperial establishment and the colonized populations. He draws his readers deeply into the aspirations and actions of both the conquerors and the colonized people in the collapsing Spanish Empire who aspired to independence and democracy. They had hoped the Americans, who had thrown off a colonial power, would support or at least allow their aspiration. Instead, the Americans re-conquered them. Immerwahr addresses other territories, but he focuses on the largest acquisition, with the richer history: the Spanish Empire, which was remade into an American empire.

This is not a diplomatic history. It is a history of imperialism on a global scale. At the same time it is an intellectual history of the political ideas and events that are properly called imperialism. Thus framed, it illuminates policy, the question of democracy, cultural issues, and social relations, particularly race or color. There is some conventional military history, but for the most part, the military's role in this account is not combat, but rather the management

of colonized peoples. There is the regular military and political history, but it is largely about values, especially freedom and self-governance, or the lack of it. Of course, Washington counts, as does continental expansion, but the bulk of the book is global; and it is less about war than the management of colonial people and their response to such governance. Most important, Immerwahr gets very close to the human meaning of empire.

For some time, historians of imperialism have sought to address the lives and politics of colonized people caught in a lopsided balance of rights, even of visibility, within an empire. To date I have not seen anyone so able as Immerwahr do that in such detail while operating on a global scale. For example, in a chapter entitled "Doctors Without Borders," he gives a blow-by-blow account of the Rockefeller Foundation's campaign to banish hookworm in Puerto Rico and the American South. That linkage was unwelcome to southern leaders, but he notes that many Puerto Ricans were also uneasy at being identified as having an unhygienic culture.

Immerwahr also tracks the search for reliable modes of combating human health disasters associated with social poverty, and he looks closely at the work of administrators on the ground, both good and irresponsible, as well as those in the higher echelons of the imperial organization. As he details numerous sites, he elaborates their transnational or global histories over the course of as much as a century.

The only recent book in American history that works on this scale and achieves such an expansive framing, richness of detail, and inclusion of a wide spectrum of voices is Steven Hahn's history of the nineteenth-century United States, *A Nation Without Borders: The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830–1910* (2016). Both historians focus on a vast number of individual actors within a broad context. Immerwahr ranges widely but also dives deeply into incidents without losing context. He captures the perspectives of the military and the colonials both on the ground as well as in the larger structure of the empire. Like Hahn, he also captures many of the sentiments of the oppressed—potential leaders and ordinary people alike—under American rule. Both writers provide broad structure for highly detailed experiences and voices representing all

aspects of society and politics.

Immerwahr begins in the nineteenth century, when settlers were sweeping across the continent and displacing the native peoples. In time those peoples would be removed from their historical lands and sent to reservations. The expansionist ambition was present from the beginning of the new nation, and it had a devastating impact not only on Native Americans but also on Africans, whose enslavement was vastly expanded. Americans continually sought more space. That search was not wholly westerling; antebellum southerners looked to the Caribbean as well. Though it is mostly forgotten, Thomas Jefferson even launched a campaign to capture eastern Canada.¹ The Canadians do remember it. It is a holiday.

By midcentury, the idea of “manifest destiny” had been articulated in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. The United States, it said, had a “manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by providence” (35). Notably, the Native Americans and Mexicans were airbrushed away, and expansion went to the Southwest and California by way of war with Mexico. In the 1860s, William Seward, Lincoln’s secretary of state, purchased Alaska, a venture that was characterized by many as his “Folly.” But I believe that Seward had commerce, not territory, on his mind. He understood that Alaska’s Aleutian Islands pointed to the east, not the arctic, and the purchase brought the United States closer to the northern islands of Japan for purposes of trade, not empire.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan published his classic, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890). Frederick Jackson Turner may have proclaimed that the frontier was “closed” in his famous address of 1893, but Mahan had already declared that “the seas were open” (63). Theodore Roosevelt grasped the implications of Turner’s thesis and realized that it sharpened the significance of Mahan’s argument for expanding American power—and empire.

A Supreme Court ruling on the Guano Islands Act (1856) established a precedent and a constitutional foundation for oceanic imperialism. The ruling in the case legitimized ownership of a territory of the United States not contiguous with the continent. These islands off the coast of Peru were valuable for their bird droppings, which were a rich fertilizer. It was literally a “shitty” foundation for imperialism.

Some of the leaders of the Philippine revolt against Spanish colonization, including revolutionary leader Emilio Aguinaldo, welcomed the American navy. They assumed that the Americans would help secure their emergent republic and never imagined they would impose their imperium in place of that of the Spanish. After all, the Americans were at war with Spain, not the Philippines. They soon discovered that the Americans planned to make their country part of the United States—yet Filipinos would not be citizens. Cubans also hoped that the Americans would liberate them from Spain. But since the middle of the nineteenth century, southern American planters, among others, had been eager to take over Cuba. Eventually, Cubans and Puerto Ricans both saw their republican aspirations crushed. The United States destroyed the republican hopes of peoples in the Caribbean as well as the Pacific.

There was no conception of exterior American space in the Constitution, and certainly nothing about colonies. But the Guano Island Act enabled owning offshore territory, and in 1901 the Supreme Court determined, by way of a convoluted phrase, that Puerto Rico was “foreign to the United States in a domestic case” (85). Recent events suggest

that this phrase may still be operative in the White House and perhaps the Congress. The Filipinos inhabited the American Philippines, but they were never able to claim citizenship, and independence was a long time coming.

Mark Twain proposed making a small addition to the Constitution: “Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed white men” (95). Woodrow Wilson, like his secretary of state, William Jennings Bryan, was opposed to the colonization of the Philippines, calling it an “inexcusable blunder.” Those words prompted a Manila newspaper to call him a “modern Moses.” Though a racist and a segregationist, as president he did extend “rights,” if not citizenship, to inhabitants of the territories (115).

The special achievement of Immerwahr’s book is the elaboration of both the idea and practice of empire. Even more novel is the richness of detail he musters in his accounts of colonized peoples and in his rendition of their opinions. He captures a wide range of the voices of colonized and colonizers alike. He also provides intricate accounts of the political intentions of Washington as well as the actual circumstances in various parts of the emergent empire. The structure of the American empire, like that of other imperial powers, was largely military. Yet this is not top-down history, nor is it bottom-up. It is about relations. Immerwahr also carries his story into the postwar years, beyond the era of formal empires and into the age of the United Nations.

Both in his time in the Philippines and in the later occupation of Japan, Douglas MacArthur showed considerable respect for the peoples over whom he had power. Immerwahr neatly points out the differences between Generals MacArthur and Eisenhower in the late 1930s and 1940s. Eisenhower thought of his responsibilities as “just another job” (166). MacArthur felt differently. He had a real respect for the society and people of the Philippines and occupied Japan.

By mid-century, the imperial vision had become global, but it was not the globalization we speak of today. In the nineteenth century, empire was territory, but globalization is largely a transactional world. The United States military is scattered around the world on eight hundred bases—evoked by Immerwahr with the chapter title “Baselandia.” He characterizes it as a “pointillist empire” (18).

But in fact, land still matters, and he makes that clear in the section on Vietnam. That is a vast topic with a huge bibliography, and Immerwahr’s discussion of it, which comes at the end of a long book, is reasonably extensive, but his most powerful evocation of that war appears in a single short paragraph:

In all, the United States dropped 5 million tons of bombs, more than 250 pounds for every person in Vietnam. But dropping bombs and achieving goals are two different things. One of the most important targets was the enormous Thanh Hóa Bridge, which carried both a highway and a railroad and served as a crucial link between the north and south. The United States spent years trying to bomb it, flying eight hundred sorties and losing eleven aircraft in the process. Yet it succeeded in knocking the bridge out of commission only in 1972, at the very end of the war (377).

This observation is followed by his account of the Iraq war. The overconfident Americans, he points out, should have taken seriously Hussein’s promise of the “mother of all battles” (377).

Through the depth of his research and his acute attention to the little act, individual moment, or ordinary person, Immerwahr brings out the human dimensions of

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empire. His writing is wonderfully full, sharp, sometimes amusing, and often attuned to a fine moral compass. Surprisingly, his achievement is built upon massive research that seems to have been done entirely in printed primary and secondary sources. I did not notice any reference to manuscripts. I make this statement simply to remark upon just how much can be accomplished with the vast body of printed materials available. Working with such sources, Immerwahr achieves both enormous breadth and rich detail; and he enables us to hear a great number of individual voices—voices of Americans and colonials, civilians and military.²

Immerwahr is a gifted storyteller as well as a scholar. For all its bulk, the book is not wordy. His prose is clean, and he provides the voices of a vast array of speakers, both imperialists and colonized, who represent a wide range of social circumstances and voices. His literary sensibility never flags.

In the end, his book is about more than the empire. It is also about the way the United States went imperial without fully acknowledging it—hence the title of the book. The brilliant image on the book's dust jacket immediately evokes the concept of a hidden empire. It shows an outline of the continental United States covering the empire. Around the edges of the continent little projections of land stick out, and they all have labels: Guam, Swan Islands, Thule Air Base, U.S. Virgin Islands, Guantánamo, Philippines, Bikini Atoll, Saipan, Alaska, Puerto Rico, Hawai'i. Empire could not be wholly hidden.

The anti-imperialist movement surely noticed it. Americans generally have not and probably still do not think of their country as an empire. They may know the facts of it, but until the Vietnam War the notion of empire had little resonance in American politics. Yet long ago, President McKinley, to his credit, did realize what was at stake. He famously revealed that he had struggled late into the night with the question of whether or not to take possession of the Spanish empire—Cuba and the Philippines. He knew there were arguments against empire, but they did not win him over.

In this book, Immerwahr may underplay the anti-imperialists. Of course, they failed. Losers do not do well in history. Yet for more than reasons than just balance I would have liked to have seen the same kind of rich narrative and insight accorded to them that was given to the imperialists. Immerwahr notes some well-known figures in the anti-imperialism movement, including such diverse figures as Andrew Carnegie, Mark Twain, Nicholas Murray Butler, and William Jennings Bryan. But they (and others) warrant more than a summary disposition. More about the arguments and reach of the opposition would help us to appraise the strength of anti-imperialism as well as the issues of empire raised by the proponents of empire. The content of the full arguments and the responses to their arguments would help us understand what happened and what did not happen.

Happily, Immerwahr also addresses the rare American imperial administrators who were more thoughtful and committed to rights and democracy. They tried to make the situation better for the colonial populations. And that counts. Most notable for his commitment to justice within imperialism was Ernest Gruening of Alaska, who later became governor of Alaska and then a United States senator. As an imperial administrator, he worked hard to bring a sense of justice to his work within the empire in both the Philippines and Cuba. His liberal, even radical views lasted into the 1960s, when he was a strong anti-

imperial democrat. I met him as an undergraduate after one his speeches opposing the Vietnam War. He impressed me then, and I am pleased now to see his earlier humane and serious imperial career outlined in this book.

Notes:

1. Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812* (New York, 2019), particularly chapter 6.
2. Yet I must note some annoyance about the system used to reference the documentation. There are no numbered footnotes. Instead, all quotes can be found by page and a word or phrase quoted at the end of the book. This form of notation is not unique to this book, but for me, at least, the numbered system is vastly clearer and more efficient for both the reader and, presumably, the author. I hope this practice does not become more common.

Review of Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*

Emily Conroy-Krutz

Ten years ago, Al Franken drew a state-by-state map of the United States at the Minnesota State Fair.¹ I remember laughing with a group of grad school friends at the time, as we tried and failed to do this ourselves. (My husband, who can also do this trick, still maintains that this is not a skill that should overawe Americanists, but I, who decidedly cannot, remain impressed.) The most talented among us could do a decent job of the outer borders, at least. State-by-state was a bit of a mess, though, and could only be decently approximated once we had that general outline to guide us.

That basic shape was what Daniel Immerwahr (via Benedict Anderson) calls the “logo map” of the United States. It is the familiar shape of the lower forty-eight, maybe with Alaska and Hawaii over to the side as insets. It is also, as Immerwahr sets out to explain in *How to Hide an Empire*, only a partial map of the United States. To really map the United States, you would need to include all its territorial claims. His 1941 map of this “Greater United States” includes Guam, American Samoa, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands (9). I bet Franken can't draw that freehand.

Immerwahr sets out to tell us the history of this Greater United States. General overviews of U.S. history have tended to focus on the story of the logo map, leaving aside stories of the territories as of importance only at key moments, when they appear suddenly and just as quickly recede. For example, the Philippines appear on a mere three pages of Eric Foner's *Give Me Liberty*. Even in the *American Yawp*, whose collaboratively written online format has allowed it to include some of the most cutting-edge scholarship in its survey textbook, the Philippines appear in 1898 and 1899 as part of a chapter on American empire, disappear for several chapters, and reemerge briefly with Japan's conquest of the islands in the Second World War.² Generalist approaches to U.S. history can struggle to fit the governance of the islands in the intervening years into their narratives. Even as we have an abundance of excellent histories of the Philippines and other U.S. territories, those stories are more likely to be set aside, assumed to be of interest primarily to specialists. It is this status quo that Immerwahr sets out to address.

The book is accessible and engaging, full of the sort of compelling anecdotes that will pull in readers and pep up your lectures. My students will be reading the guano chapter this semester and I can hardly wait for the conversations that follow. Immerwahr excels at the story that surprises and

draws you in to learn more. I was hooked by the story in the introduction about a group of seventh-grade students from Kalamazoo who looked up Hawaii in their classroom atlas after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Finding that Hawaii was marked as foreign, they wrote to Rand McNally to request more information about the islands. How was an attack on Pearl Harbor an attack on the United States if the islands were foreign space? Disagreeing with the publisher's reply that Hawaii was "not an integral part of this country," the girls forwarded their correspondence to the Department of the Interior. Yes, the department confirmed, Hawaii was part of the United States (12).

In addition to plucky seventh-graders, the book will introduce you to Daniel Burnham and the architects of Manila's colonial buildings, Bailey Ashford and the history of American colonial medicine, Emilio Aguinaldo and Manuel Quezon and the Philippine independence movement, Herbert Hoover and the quest for standardization, and, perhaps most unexpectedly, the Beatles. If you are curious about how Immerwahr connects the Beatles to a history of American empire, I direct your attention to chapter 21.

One of Immerwahr's greatest achievements in the book is his use of territory to link nineteenth- and twentieth-century histories of American empire. He manages, in under four hundred pages, to take readers through a survey of American empire that begins with Daniel Boone and ends with drone warfare. Territory alone cannot tell the full story of American empire across these years, of course, but in Immerwahr's skillful hands it comes pretty close to giving us a clear narrative through-line across chronological breaks that have for so long seemed disruptive. With this approach, 1898 is an important year, but not an unprecedented one. The United States, after all, has been seizing territory from its very beginnings. It was imperial at birth and throughout its development.

Immerwahr divides this story into three acts: westward territorial expansion in the nineteenth century; the annexation of overseas territory in the later nineteenth century; and finally, the giving up of large amounts of territory after the Second World War in response to both resistance movements and technological changes that made large territorial claims unnecessary. Throughout, he focuses on American empire and its opponents, and he is attentive to stories on the ground. His look at colonial governance allows readers to understand the ways in which the territories were of major significance to the story of the United States throughout these years, even if distance allowed many Americans to conveniently forget this fact.

Although the book works to connect the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it leans heavily on the later twentieth century. If you were to divide the book between its nineteenth- and twentieth-century portions, you would have just shy of a quarter of the book to read before hitting the turn of the century; by the time you are halfway done, you would be well into the Second World War. This is not atypical of overviews of U.S. foreign relations, but it seems peculiar for a study of territorial empire. Territory is very much a nineteenth-century story.

Daniel Boone and Oklahoma are the stand-ins here for U.S. territorial empire within what would become the lower forty-eight. Indian removal, such an essential part of any discussion of American empire in the nineteenth century, is told through the creation of Indian country and the way white settlement shrank it to fit within the current state of Oklahoma. As Immerwahr rightly points out, the Trail of Tears was "notorious, but it wasn't anomalous" (38). Multiple removals worked to send Native Americans into

what was called Indian country. As white settlers continued to migrate and demand this land for themselves, still more stages of removal resulted in the continued diminishing of territory. By the end of the 1870s, some thirty-two tribes had been moved into the new Indian country.

This is the story of American settler colonialism, though Immerwahr doesn't employ that language. Instead, he uses the work of Laura Ingalls Wilder and a comparison between the writing of Lynn Riggs and Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein to provide an emotional gut punch that drives home an interpretation of Oklahoma's eventual statehood as a key point in American imperial history. You may never hear the music from *Oklahoma!* in the same way again.

The Oklahoma focus, though, suggests some missed opportunities for further engagement in the nineteenth century. I would have been excited to see Immerwahr engage the work of Bethel Saler on Wisconsin's status shift from territory to state as a key example of American state-building via settler colonialism.³ The Mexican War, too, is a topic that ought to have received more attention here. After all, the Mexican cession brought hundreds of thousands of square miles of territory to the United States, all of which went through years

of territorial governance before becoming states. If Texas and California had attained statehood by 1850, the others (Nevada, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona) had years—even decades—of territorial status ahead.

The Utah Territory is of particular interest here, given the complex histories of religion and race that it introduces. The Mormons who migrated to Utah in the 1840s were, after all, heading out of the United States and into Mexico to escape religious persecution, ended up fighting with the United States against Mexico, and finally attempted to establish a new state. The initial plan for the statehood of Deseret after the Mexican War (which was rejected) and the eventual acceptance of Utah into statehood only after the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints ended its endorsement of plural marriage decades later is a key part of the story of U.S. territorial governance as empire. Religion, so important to that story, is generally missing as a category of analysis in the book, which might be fine were it not for the key role missionaries played in helping to govern many of these territories Immerwahr is concerned with. They might not be on the guano islands, but they are an essential part of the story of the United States in the Philippines and Oklahoma.

Some later chapters stray from this emphasis on territory, introducing a more cultural and economic definition of American imperialism as the value of territory becomes less important to global power. In these chapters, Immerwahr discusses screw threads, industrial standardization, and the spread of the English language as key parts of the story of America's global dominance in the late twentieth century. These elements can feel like an awkward fit for the book's earlier territorial emphasis (not least because of the importance of the British, alongside the Americans, to the linguistic story). The inclusion of these chapters raises the question of what the book would have looked like if Immerwahr had included this more cultural and economic definition of empire earlier. In addition to screw threads, readers might learn about the colonization movement to Liberia, American missionaries around the world, or filibusters to Central and South America, to name just a few of the less territorial topics that historians of nineteenth-century American empire have been working on.

These comments feel a bit like nit-picking for a book

that is so wide in scope and tells its stories with such care and energy. It speaks to the breadth and ambition of the book that a reader can be left wanting more. Synthesis and survey texts present formidable difficulties when we expand our geography and chronology.

How do you tell a history of the Greater United States that takes all of these diverse narratives into account? Synthesis is always hard, as we are confronted with the persistent question of what we need to leave out in order to create a comprehensible through-narrative. If this has been a hard task for generations of survey teachers and writers of textbooks who have largely omitted the territories and their people from America's story (with a few key exceptions), it gets still harder when we attempt to include the full geographic scope of the United States.

Scholars of the colonial and early national period who have embraced the Omohundro Institute's call for the study of a "Vast Early America" have explored these questions as well.⁴ Alan Taylor's *American Colonies* is a recent classic that early Americanists might think of as a model for this approach.⁵ Taylor's goal seems similar to Immerwahr's: to help a general readership understand the breadth and diversity of American history by including new voices and new geography and confronting the importance of empire to the United States. For the colonial and revolutionary era, this means including the full continent and the Caribbean; for Immerwahr's nineteenth- and twentieth-century story, it means including transcontinental and global territorial claims.

This is an exciting time for the history of American empire, with historians of all eras, from the founding of the United States to the war on terror, engaging with the meaning, chronology, shape, and nature of American empire. Hopefully, with a book like *How to Hide an Empire*, more readers will now know to look out for similar studies. As Immerwahr points out in his introduction, "the problem isn't a lack of knowledge." Many historians are out there doing the work. The problem has been, rather, how the popular imagination has categorized what counts as "American" history. The story of American empire isn't just a story for specialists, after all. In writing such an accessible, entertaining, and thought-provoking book, Immerwahr has given us a narrative history of the Greater United States that can only generate more discussion, debate, and future research.

Notes:

1. See the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0FYyuvrRk>.
2. Éric Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 4th ed. (New York, 2014), 23, 25, 158; Ben Wright and Joseph Locke, eds., *The American Yawp*, chs. 19 and 24 (<http://www.americanyawp.com/text/19-american-empire/>).
3. Bethel Saler, *The Settler's Empire: Colonialism and State Formation in America's Old Northwest* (Philadelphia, PA, 2014).
4. See Karin Wulf, "Vast Early America," *Humanities: The Magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities* 40, no. 1 (Winter 2019), <https://www.neh.gov/article/vast-early-america> or follow the hashtag #VastEarlyAmerica.
5. Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York, 2001).

How to Write Popular History

David Milne

Daniel Immerwahr's *How to Hide an Empire* is a rare thing in our field: a genuine crossover hit. It has been reviewed widely and glowingly in high-profile venues like the *New York Times* and the *New Republic*, and one can find copies—at a reasonable price for a lengthy hardback—in Barnes and Noble and even in airport bookshops. How has Immerwahr achieved this

feat? Surely, reaching a substantial general audience must have required a perilous degree of simplification. Does the book's commercial success not make it likely that *How to Hide an Empire*—for all its heft—is lightweight?

Not a bit of it. I can't remember a book in our field that I enjoyed reading as much as *How to Hide an Empire*. Immerwahr is a gifted storyteller and he writes in crisp, jargon-free prose. His anecdotes are rich, and the book contains so much variety that reading (and reviewing) it never felt dutiful. But I also learned so much. At book's end my head swam with new information and insight. Immerwahr demonstrates that there need be no scholarly opportunity cost in writing accessibly for a trade press. This book will be read to illuminating effect by academic historian and layperson alike.

Which is not to say that the book's originality stems from insights gleaned from deep archival research (although there is plenty of that too). As Immerwahr himself writes, "this book's main contribution is not archival, bringing to light some never-before-seen document. It's perspectival, seeing a familiar history differently" (16). Thousands of books, he notes, have been published on the U.S. overseas territories. If you were to assign each of *How to Hide an Empire's* constituent chapters to a historian with a corresponding specialism, it is certain that they would find the terrain familiar. What matters here, though, is the sum of the parts.

Immerwahr writes with great verve: one can tell that he took great pleasure in composing this book. His "perspectival" history of America's hidden empire opens multiple vistas and demonstrates that empire is many different things: from the hurried acquisition of the guano islands in the Pacific in the nineteenth century to the standardization of screw heads in the twentieth. The book segues from the inexplicable absence of Puerto Rican nationalist Pedro Albizu Campos from mainstream history books to the geopolitical revolution wrought by rapid advances in synthetic chemistry: "Take the world's most advanced economy, cut it off from tropical trade, and send it into overdrive—it was the perfect recipe for a synthetic revolution" (273). Immerwahr observes perceptively that synthetics were an "empire-killing technology," because the United States could create within its borders those raw materials it had previously acquired through means fair and foul. Synthetics did not kill empire, of course, but they forced it to shape-shift into today's "pointillist empire" of some eight hundred military bases across the world. By comparison, Russia has nine and Britain and France's combined total is thirteen. This is a history that compels and often surprises.

A sweeping and accessible book such as this will always attract critics armed with detailed bibliographies. In his long review of Immerwahr's Bernath-length précis for *How to Hide an Empire*, Paul Kramer took exception to his distinction between "mainstream history," which has neglected the history of the U.S. territories, and academic history, which has not. "What exactly is going on with Immerwahr's use of the term 'mainstream,' with its unobtrusive marking of insider and outsider?" Kramer asks, "Who is on the outside of 'mainstream' history and why doesn't their scholarship really count?"¹

It is not so much that academic scholarship doesn't count, it's that it isn't widely read. This matters less when you have skilled historians such as Immerwahr synthesizing this vital academic work for general readers. But if you don't, then we as a profession have a problem. Without innovative specialist academic research, quality mainstream history atrophies. But if credentialed historians—even if few in number—don't take on the task of writing mainstream history, then we can hardly complain when the history sections of bookshops are dominated by the works of charlatans.

It seems to me that historians on the left are particularly culpable in leaving an open goal here. From 2001 to 2003, supporters of the George W. Bush administration's foreign policy, like Niall Ferguson, Bernard Lewis, and John Lewis Gaddis, were highly effective at communicating their views to a general audience. With the exception of Tony Just, writing in the *New York Review of Books* (and preaching to the mostly converted), I am not sure the same can be said of academics on the center-left and left. Tariq Ali and Perry Anderson in the *New Left Review* were not enough.

The situation has improved since then, and historians like Heather Thompson, Joanne Freeman, Carol Anderson, and Greg Grandin—to name but a few—write substantive, elegantly written histories from which specialists and non-specialists alike gain instruction. Historians like these deserve our praise, because writing quality history for a general readership is as difficult as it is important. In Daniel Immerwahr, SHAFR has a historian who has written a prize-winning monograph with Harvard University Press and has produced a genuine crossover hit in *How to Hide an Empire*. This is something to celebrate.

Note:

1. Paul Kramer, "How Not to Write the History of U.S. Empire," *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 5 (2018): 919.

Empire, Revealed

Odd Arne Westad

Daniel Immerwahr has written a first-rate book on how U.S. colonies (now known as territories) have been consistently removed from view in American history and politics. In revealing the process of removal, as well as its causes and origins, Immerwahr provides an essential corrective to U.S. international history: the U.S. empire is not just informal—through global economic and military hegemony—but formal, too, in ways that are both similar to and different from those that characterize past empires. It includes disenfranchisements and expulsions, defense and development, just like European colonial empires. But it was transformed, much more successfully than those of the Europeans, along the lines of U.S.-led globalization. The territories became steppingstones for the maintenance of U.S. global power, while remaining remarkably obscure to most Americans (who would have real difficulty figuring out what a "U.S. territory" even is, at least if I am to judge by the stumbles of my students).

Immerwahr is excellent on the never-fully-resolved ideological contradictions of a U.S. empire: how can a republic, born through anti-colonial resistance, itself obtain overseas possessions through forms of colonial control? The answer is, of course, mainly through denial: engaging in full-scale colonization while publicly disowning that any such act is taking place. But Immerwahr is far too fine a historian to stop there. In what could have become a fairly familiar jeremiad over U.S. perfidy, he tweaks out underlying motives, be they economic, racial, or strategic. By the end of the book, the reader will be familiar with how it is possible to engage repeatedly in imperial construction projects while happily hurrying away from their consequences.

Another strength of Immerwahr's book is how careful he is with showing the chronological development of U.S. empire and, particularly, how fundamentally it changed over time. Before 1945, the U.S. empire was visible in much the same way European colonies were visible. The Philippines was a major colony, and the fact that it had been promised independence did not make it essentially different from European colonies (some of which had also received

such vague promises). What really made U.S. colonialism different was how, during the Cold War, Washington moved from imperial control to a variety of forms of incorporation, ranging from independence with continued economic and military supremacy (the Philippines) to encompassment (Hawaii, Alaska) to renewed colonial status (Puerto Rico) and to "baselandia" (Immerwahr's wonderful term for places like Guam and Guantanamo). It is this constant ability to employ and conceal foreign territorial possessions that sets the current U.S. empire apart, as Immerwahr shows in the final part of his text.

I have very few quibbles with this fine book, but I do have some. I would have liked to see more comparisons with other empires. There is much that can be learned about the U.S. empire by looking at it from without, as Charles Maier, among others, has argued. This is true not just for juxtapositions with European empires, such as Britain and France, but also—and perhaps even more so—for juxtapositions with Russia and China: large, contiguous, transcontinental empires with a multiplicity of ethnic groups, where elites in the twentieth century still wanted their countries to be seen as nation-states, not empires. China today claims that it does not have "overseas possessions," though some people in Hong Kong would beg to disagree. What it undoubtedly has (and is trying to hide) are continental possessions, such as Xinjiang and Tibet, in which its policies range from those similar to U.S. assimilation projects against Native Americans to those used to control and surveil populations in U.S. territories today.

It would also have been useful to see a bit more about the roots that late nineteenth- and twentieth-century U.S. policies have in the deeper past. The displacement policies used against Native Americans are mentioned, but in no great depth, and the treatment of enslaved African Americans as an internal colony is underdeveloped as an antecedent for policies overseas. There is, I think, much explanatory value in these early cases, although I understand why Immerwahr decided to focus on the twentieth century and beyond.

I very much like Immerwahr's emphasis on the rise of communication networks and standardization, but it would have been useful to have had a more thorough discussion of U.S. capitalism, especially as it changed towards the end of the twentieth century. Since some of these changes are essential to Immerwahr's main analysis of where we are today, it would have been helpful if he had told us more about them, especially the globalization of financial capital and its consequences for both the United States and its foreign territories. One key issue would be the degree to which the U.S. empire has outlived any meaningful economic purpose and exists simply for reasons of military strategy and power projection.

Immerwahr has written a fun book on how to hide an empire. No mean feat! Though the narrative does go astray from time to time, and the author's knack for anecdotes can be a bit exhausting (the point, just give me the point!), on most occasions Immerwahr's ability to tell stories serves his purpose. Overall, this is a terrific contribution to the literature on U.S. expansionism and territorial control. And the big point does come across very clearly: the United States has an empire, though it remains well hidden.

What *How to Hide an Empire* Hides

Daniel Immerwahr

I was thrilled to learn that *Passport* would be convening a roundtable on *How to Hide an Empire*. And I was intimidated when I learned the identities of the knights seated around it. Thomas Bender, Emily Conroy-Krutz,

David Milne, and Odd Arne Westad—this is a positively Arthurian grouping. I am greatly honored by it, and I am grateful to Andrew Johns for arranging it.

I am also relieved that the roundtablists largely approved of the book. Even so, they identified topics about which I should have said more—topics that are, as it were, hidden by *How to Hide an Empire*. These include settler colonialism, the relationship between slavery and empire, religion, anti-imperialism, financial globalization, and rival empires. Before addressing them, I should say how I chose what to put in the book and what to leave out.

As David Milne explains, this is a crossover book, aimed at the airport bookstore as much as the university library. Milne, who also writes crossover books (as do Bender and Westad), gives a good justification for this. My sense is that while democratic values generally guide our research, we scholars can be far less inviting in our prose, frequently writing in ways that confound even graduate students. A progressive politics of knowledge production is too often paired with a Reaganomics of knowledge distribution, whereby we write esoterically and then expect that our findings will somehow “trickle down” to the public.

I am not proposing that all of us write trade books all the time. But some of us should write them some of the time, and this topic struck me as an especially good candidate. As I seek to show, territorial empire is a central part of the United States’ past, despite its general absence from the shelves at Barnes & Noble. So, from the start, I wrote this book with a general audience in mind. That meant eschewing jargon, of course. But my literary agent, Edward Orloff, and my editor, Alex Star, taught me that there are differences between general-interest and specialist history beyond the level of the sentence. Paragraphing, affect, and chapter structure matter, too. Most of all, I came to appreciate larger narrative concerns. In short: plot.

When I was writing a monograph, questions of what to include boiled down to what the analysis required. In writing *How to Hide an Empire*, I also asked what the narrative needed. For example, I wanted a chapter on World War II in the Pacific, particularly the leveling of Manila in 1945. But for that to work, my readers had to know something of that city, to care about it. That strongly encouraged me, in making my “colonies as laboratories” argument, to use the story of how Daniel Burnham planned Manila. Having seen some of those buildings go up, my readers could feel the loss when the same buildings were destroyed. In writing *How to Hide an Empire*, I prioritized such connections and chose my topics with narrative implications in mind. Such fascinating episodes as the Mormon campaign for the state of Deseret fell by the wayside for this reason. Conroy-Krutz wishes I had discussed Deseret, and part of me wishes I had, too. But I am reassured by Milne’s sense that the resulting narrative, for all its Deseret-sized gaps, succeeds in inviting the reader into the rich world of U.S. imperial history.

None of this is an excuse for ignoring worthy subjects, but it is an explanation of why my book doesn’t attempt to cover all relevant facets of territorial empire, as it might have had I written it only for specialists. I am thus glad for the chance to briefly address some omissions and underemphasized topics (though, in a meta-omission, I won’t discuss here all the holes the reviewers have found).

Emily Conroy-Krutz notes a pronounced chronological imbalance in my account. Nineteenth-century settler colonialism gets only two of my twenty-two chapters, as compared to at least three (and arguably six) chapters about the Second World War. “This is not atypical of overviews of

U.S. foreign relations,” Conroy-Krutz writes, “but it seems peculiar for a study of territorial empire. Territory is very much a nineteenth-century story.”

She is right. I had set out to write about overseas territory, and I was particularly interested in carrying the story past 1898 and the Philippine War. But I soon concluded that I would need to say something about territorial empire within the contiguous United States, too. I had two options. I could give continental empire and overseas empire each their due weight, which would mean adding a *lot* about the nineteenth century. Or I could do what many U.S. foreign relations specialists do, which is to treat Indigenous dispossession as a quick prelude to empire abroad.¹

Feeling that I had far more to say about overseas empire (my research specialty) and that the nineteenth-century material would already be somewhat familiar to my readers, I chose the second option. But Conroy-Krutz’s point deserves underscoring: to tell the tale in full, you would have to say much more about the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than I do. And this relates to another important point, which is that the story of North American territorial empire doesn’t end in the nineteenth century.

There are 573 federally recognized tribal nations in the country today. More attention to nineteenth-century territorial empire would not only restore chronological balance, it would also enrich the ensuing story by forcing a greater recognition of the persistence and evolution of Native sovereignty in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Odd Arne Westad would also have liked to see more on the nineteenth-century roots of overseas empire. Here, he mentions not only Native Americans but also African Americans. How did the capture and enslavement of an “internal colony” of black laborers serve as an “antecedent” for later imperial policies? It is a powerful question. Historians haven’t yet settled on an answer to it.

Nevertheless, I’ll take a stab. Slavery and the subsequent subordination of African Americans hummed in the background of all imperial policy. U.S. leaders had white supremacy in mind when shaping the borders of the country and governing colonized peoples within it, and their commitment to white supremacy derived in large part from their thought about black/white relations. They often mapped attitudes about African Americans onto colonial subjects, sometimes quite transparently.

However, that mapping was never perfect, because there were fundamental differences between the “internal colony” (a stark numerical minority of African Americans living in close proximity to whites) and the external ones (large majorities of colonized subjects and generally very few mainlanders on the ground). White leaders had come to grips with the presence of both blacks and Indians on the North American continent and had different models for thinking about each. I suspect that overseas colonial subjects got swept under the rug so often because they didn’t fit easily into either category.²

Finally, Thomas Bender suggests that I may have underplayed the role of anti-imperialists. A recent edited collection by Ian Tyrrell and Jay Sexton, *Empire’s Twin*, supports Bender’s point about the enduring importance of anti-imperialism in U.S. history.³ Just because they “failed,” Bender writes, doesn’t mean that anti-imperialists don’t deserve place of pride in the narrative.

I would go further than that. I think we can identify some anti-imperialist successes of lasting consequence. One occurred in the nineteenth century, when opponents of expansion, largely seeking to protect white supremacy, blocked a number of attempted annexations for fear of letting too many nonwhites into the country. Another took

place during the Philippine War, when such critics as Mark Twain publicized the war's atrocities so loudly as to force even diehard imperialists like Teddy Roosevelt into retreat. The post-World War II turn away from colonial empire, which resulted in independence for the Philippines and statehood for Hawai'i and Alaska, can also be counted as an anti-imperialist success. The irony is that opposition to colonial empire, felt in the United States as well as throughout the Global South, helped push the United States toward a less intensive but more extensive form of territorial empire: the maintenance of hundreds of small military bases around the planet.

Bender ends by recalling his encounter with a key anti-imperialist, Senator Ernest Gruening, who served as the first head of the Division of Territories and Island Possessions in the Interior Department. After a long and varied career that put him at the center of U.S. territorial politics for decades, Gruening became a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War. Bender met him after one of Gruening's antiwar speeches, and the senator impressed him as just and humane.

I will close with a similar story, which will give a sense of how much these reviews—from scholars I deeply admire—mean to me. When I was an undergraduate, I had my first exposure to colonial history through an architecture class, where I wrote a paper about architectural imperialism in Hawai'i. My professor suggested I seek out a historian working at a nearby university who might have something to say about these matters. I did, and that historian gave me a speech about the vital importance—ethical and intellectual—of seeing the United States as part of global history. I was transfixed; I felt as if I had just received marching orders. Though I am sure the historian forgot about it soon afterward, it was in retrospect the single most consequential conversation of my professional life, and the origin moment of this book.

That historian? Thomas Bender.

Notes:

1. For a sharp critique of this narrative strategy, see Brian DeLay, "Indian Politics, Empire, and the History of American Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 39 (2015): 927–42.
2. Not only did U.S. leaders view colonial subjects differently from African Americans and Native Americans, they viewed colonized peoples as themselves a heterogeneous collection. Lanny Thompson makes this case well in *Imperial Archipelago: Representation and Rule in the Insular Territories under U.S. Dominion after 1898* (Honolulu, HI, 2010).
3. Ian Tyrrell and Jay Sexton, eds., *Empire's Twin: U.S. Anti-Imperialism from the Founding Era to the Age of Terrorism* (Ithaca, NY, 2015).

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In the next issue of *Passport*:

* A roundtable on Jennifer Miller's *Cold War Democracy*

* Teaching Sport and Foreign Relations

* A roundtable on Lucy Salyer's *Under the Starry Flag*

and much more!

