

To what extent can the United States in the twentieth century be described as an empire?

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The question of whether the United States (or indeed any state) can be defined as an empire depends on the criteria by which 'empire' is defined. This is not something which can be addressed neutrally; indeed, much of the self-image of the United States has involved defining itself in opposition to imperialism.¹ For Maier, 'Empire is a form of political organization in which the social elements that rule in the dominant state [...] create a network of allied elites in regions abroad who accept subordination in international affairs in return for the security of their position in their own administrative unit'.² Similarly, Hunt and Levine describe 'coercion [...] to subjugate an alien population', involving both the use of force as well as 'ideological orthodoxies that rationalize dominance both at home and in the field'.³ A more complex description is given by Darwin, describing imperialism as 'the sustained effort to assimilate a country or region to the political, economics, or cultural system of another power'.⁴ Writing primarily about the British Empire, he elaborates that imperialism has both 'formal' and 'informal' modes: the former, involving 'explicit transfer of sovereignty'; the latter, 'trade, investment, or diplomacy, often sup-

¹Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War, Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), chap. 1 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511817991>>.

²Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 7 <<https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674040458>>.

³Michael H. Hunt and Steven I. Levine, *Arc of Empire: America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), pp. 3-4.

⁴John Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion', *English Historical Review*, 112.447 (1997), 614-42 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cxii.447.614>>.

plemented by unequal treaties and periodic armed intervention' (a state of affairs also referred to as hegemony). In this model, an imperial power may only exert formal control over a subject when necessary to protect its interests, relying on informal influence at other times; this 'informal imperialism' may also be referred to as hegemony. This essay will attempt to show that, at various times during the twentieth century, the United States has exercised both formal and informal imperialism.

American imperialism can be dated back to the nineteenth century, with the War of 1812, and later territorial expansions within the continent. Westad notes that by 1900, 'less than 30 percent of Latin America was formally colonized' but 'most of the continent was dominated by European or US capital'.⁵ The Spanish-American War of 1898 led to the United States gaining sovereignty over Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, with Cuba gaining formal independence in 1902. However, the United States retained the right to direct its foreign policy and intervene in other areas of government, by means of the Platt Amendment to the Cuban constitution, with the hope that close integration — in particular, free trade — would lay the groundwork for 'annexation at the earliest possible moment'. The aims took the form of supporting the 'better classes' to assert their 'natural governing role' and support them against threats to their position and property. Indeed, ownership of property was in some cases the criterion by which the right to a political opinion depended: 'The Cubans as a whole — meaning all those who have any property [...] — desire annexation to the United States', along with a racial aspect: annexation was preferable to a 'government of half-breeds'.⁶

American intervention in Latin America continued over the next decades, with Theodore Roosevelt and his successors justifying it by means of the Monroe Doctrine, by which the United States asserted its right to intervene in nearby states. Although in 1913 Woodrow Wilson argued against putting 'material interests' ahead of 'human liberty', this was hardly reflected in his foreign policy, which saw more foreign interventions than his predecessors.⁷ Major examples during the first half of the century include occupations of Cuba (1906–09), Nicaragua (1912–33), Haiti (1915–34), and the Dominican Republic (1916–24). It also intervened in the Russian Civil War

⁵Westad, chap. 4.

⁶Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba Between Empires, 1878-1902* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), chap. 11, 17, 19.

⁷Antony Best and others, *International History of the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2008), chap. 6 <http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=1dPngEACAAJ&dq=isbn:9780415438964&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api>.

between 1917 and 1920.

After the Second World War and with the start of the cold war, American foreign policy took on a new dimension, establishing itself firmly in opposition to the Soviet Union as protector of capitalist democracy. This new era of policy was summed up by Harry Truman, who stated that 'it must be the policy of the United States to support free people who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures'. On the one hand, this can be seen as a continuation of Wilsonian principles of self-determination; however, in practice it amounted to 'support for anti-communist regimes throughout the world, no matter how undemocratic'.⁸

Significant interventions in the immediate post-war period came in 1947, in both Italy and Greece. In the former, the US applied economic pressure (in the form of withheld financial assistance while communists and socialists held government posts); in the latter, the support also included military assistance to the right-wing government, installed by the British at the end of the Second World War, against socialist rebels, remnants of the anti-Nazi resistance groups.⁹ In both of these cases, it can be seen that the reasoning of the Truman Doctrine cannot be applied, since the 'threat' came from within — indeed, in Greece in particular the Soviet Union had stood aside, by agreement, and allowed it to become part of the British 'sphere of influence'.

Interventionist tactics were taken further in Iran in 1953; going beyond simply supporting a friendly regime, US and British intelligence services collaborated to remove a prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, whose policies of nationalization were detrimental to British and American business interests. There was no question of 'supporting free people': Mosaddegh had been democratically elected, and received no support from the Soviet Union, who viewed him as a 'bourgeois nationalist'. Similar policies were followed in Guatemala the following year,¹⁰ and regularly over the next decades, particularly in Latin America during the 1980s, where US-backed anti-government guerrillas in socialist Nicaragua were bolstered by the similarly US-backed right-wing regimes in neighbouring Honduras and El Salvador.

⁸Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History*, 2nd edn (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

⁹William Blum, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* (London: Zed Books, 2003), chaps 2-3.

¹⁰Blum, chaps 9-10; John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), chap. 6.

The US occupation of Japan (1945–52) can also be interpreted as imperialism, going beyond that which was necessary to establish a functioning state after the devastation of the war. In particular, and unlike in Germany, the United States had a free hand in the administration of Japan, and although this began initially with the intent of establishing a liberal democracy, the onset of the Cold War changed the priorities. In particular, the occupying forces limited political freedoms to suppress left-wing dissent. More ominously, US advisors spoke of the need to ‘remold’ the ‘Japanese brain’, i.e., to teach Japanese people to think like Americans, and to impress upon the Japanese population the same ideologies shared by the American population.¹¹ With the start of the Korean War, the need for a regional ally became even more pressing, leading to the acceleration of plans to end the formal occupation and a transition to a situation whereby Japan became an independent state and junior partner in a military alliance with the United States. This shift also saw a transition, mirrored in the US itself, from pre-war New Deal social policies to what might later be called neoliberalism; a free liberal democracy was less important to the United States than was an ally against Communism.¹² Japan could thus be expected, by the late 60s, to ‘build a military power of its own and gradually take on the role of a counterbalance to Chinese influence in Asia’.¹³

United States policy in south-east Asia can be seen to follow the same tactics, with a progressive escalation as each failed in turn. US involvement in the region began in 1950, providing support for France in Vietnam’s war for independence. After a ceasefire in 1954, the US chose to an international agreement that required elections to be held for all of Vietnam in 1956, instead supporting the establishment of a nominally-independent Republic of Vietnam under president , providing the new regime with financial and military aid, while establishing economic sanctions against North Vietnam.¹⁴ American involvement then increased steadily until the 1960s, at which point a pretext was found to engage in direct military action.

Vietnam’s significance came out of the US policy of ‘containment’, which is to say its desire to prevent socialism from succeeding and becoming es-

¹¹Westad, chap. 1.

¹²Eric J Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–91* (Abacus, 1994), chap. 7; John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), chap. 8; Westad, chap. 1.

¹³Westad, chap. 5.

¹⁴Best and others, chap. 12; Blum, chap. 19; Martin Shipway, *Decolonization and Its Impact: A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), chap. 4.

established, particularly since the establishment of the People's Republic of China. In Darwin's model, as quoted in the introduction, this can be understood as an attempt to maintain Vietnam and its neighbours within the American politico-economic sphere of influence, or, at least, to prevent it from moving into the Chinese (or Soviet) sphere. The same can be said of Cuba; a close neighbour allying itself with the Soviet Union presented not only a military threat (as exemplified in the missile crisis of October 1962) but also a challenge to American authority, which might set a 'bad example' for other states.

It is therefore clear that America intervened regularly in other states, including the use of military force. The question, therefore, is: does this intervention constitute imperialism? Part of the American ideology has always been that it is an anti-imperialist power, that it stands for liberty, and not, in Wilson's words, 'material interests'.¹⁵ Yet an ideological self-definition clearly does not constitute an unbiased judgement. How, for example, is 'freedom' defined? In fact, it has meant different things at different times. It has been claimed that, far from simply pursuing the goal of freedom, no matter how aggressively, the United States during the Cold War redefined 'freedom' simply in opposition to socialism — '[w]hatever Moscow stood for was by definition the opposite of freedom',¹⁶ a rejection of Isaiah Berlin's 'positive freedom' (tentatively favoured in the pre-war New Deal welfare state) in favour of 'free enterprise'.

Indeed, the American claims of 'freedom' were often directly self-contradictory; Hồ Chí Minh could quote the Declaration of Independence of the United States in his Proclamation of Independence in 1945, yet faced decades of conflict with states supposedly inspired by the same principles (the French Republic, after all, also took inspiration from the liberal democracy of the United States). Even more contradictory is the way that the same regime could be a friend or an enemy of freedom at different times; geopolitics, not liberty, was the driving force here. Examples with particular relevance into the twenty-first century are the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party in Iraq, both of which received United States backing during the Cold War only to reveal themselves as a threat after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Another example, in the opposite direction, can be found in the Communist Party of Cambodia (the Khmer Rouge), which as the ruling party of

¹⁵Westad, chap. 1.

¹⁶Eric Foner, 'American Freedom in a Global Age', *American Historical Review*, 106.1 (2001), 1–16 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2652222>>.

Cambodia was an enemy of the United States, a genocidal 'Communist' regime. Nevertheless, after the Cambodian-Vietnamese War and the Khmer Rouge's ousting by a Soviet-aligned socialist party in early 1979, the Khmer Rouge formed a government-in-exile and received military and diplomatic support from the United States among others, although its leadership remained the same.

Thus it seems clear that American interventions, particularly in the Cold War period but generally throughout the twentieth century, were based not in pursuit of 'liberty' broadly defined, but on free markets and free trade; that is, US foreign policy constituted a sustained effort to assimilate and maintain significant regions of the globe to its economic system, by economic or diplomatic pressure where possible, and by overt or covert military force where that failed. Karl Marx wrote in 1867 that "[t]he Established Church, for instance, will more readily pardon an attack on thirty-eight of its thirty-nine articles than on one thirty-ninth of its income. Nowadays atheism is a *culpa levis* [a relatively slight sin, c.f. mortal sin], as compared with the criticism of existing property relations".¹⁷ The United States, likewise, repeatedly prioritized its material interests over its principles, and challenges to its economic primacy met with political repression at home and abroad, in a manner that constituted 'informal' if not formal imperialism.

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¹⁷Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1976), I, Preface to the first German edition.

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