Adam Burns, *American Imperialism: The Territorial Expansion of the United States, 1783-2013*

Theodora D. Patrona

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12432
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher
European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

This text was automatically generated on 30 April 2019.

Creative Commons License
Adam Burns, American Imperialism: The Territorial Expansion of the United States, 1783-2013

Theodora D. Patrona

Adam Burns, American Imperialism: The Territorial Expansion of the United States, 1783-2013

Theodora D. Patrona

Adam Burns’s title leaves no doubt as to the book’s content: a historical volume set to explore the popular topic of American Imperialism. The author’s obvious goal, to make an original and significant contribution to the field, is no easy task given the vastness of the existing literature a brief overview of which is offered in the Introduction. However, with his approach, methodology and writing style, the author ably arrives to combine diverse yet unexplored sources so as to successfully fulfill his aim “to provide an accessible Introduction to American imperialism narrowly defined, but broadly exemplified” (4).

Burns initiates his study from the early years of the American state, which is an essential step to grasp the centrality and omnipresence of imperialism in American politics. Examining the period 1783-1893, the first chapter pinpoints the pre-existence of the idea of the empire in American mentality since the Independence War (9-10). Burns follows the Louisiana Purchase, West and East Florida, and Texas annexation with its problem of slavery bringing to the fore “Manifest Destiny” i.e. “the belief in the inexorable nature of the growth of federal democracy across the Western Hemisphere” (19). With careful steps, the author takes the initiate to a trip in history tracing the fundamentals of American politics and ideology: the wars with Mexico, the acquisition of Upper California, New Mexico and the “thorn” of slavery, all of which provide an extensive presentation of the political arena of the times. Burns is quite extensive as regards the “hot” issue of Native Americans, discussing their dramatic decrease in numbers, their removal to the benefit of settlers, the role of missionaries, the railroad expansion, the exploitation of minerals and the extermination of the buffalo, the series of small scale wars between
soldiers and tribesmen (25-26). As the author characteristically states, the status of Native Americans is "one of the clearest signs of US imperialism in action" (26).

The role of Canada (1812-1903), largely neglected in the existing bibliography is the author’s concern in Chapter 2, which constitutes one of the most thought-provoking parts of the volume. Burns places emphasis on the Canadian unwillingness to be a part of the U.S. which infuriated Americans. At the same time, the author analyses the reactions of the French speaking minority and some immigrants who left the U.S. for Canada. Burns considers British and French relations about maritime issues, the 1812 war, Canadian rebellions in 1830 leading to the Webster-Ashburton Treaty in 1842. He also mentions the fear of Canadians concerning a possible attack during the Civil War and the feelings of hatred many Americans had for the shelter Canadians offered to raiders. After several annexationist politicians with diverse agendas, the Washington Treaty in 1871 resolved several issues. The same chapter sheds light on the “Oregon trail,” with Oregon denoting a vast area connecting East and West. While from the 1830s fur trade was the most important motive for the placement of settlers, Americans far outnumbered the British. Avoiding another war with the British, a compromise was reached to keep a balance between free and slave states in 1846. This chapter ends with the case of Alaska, a “problematic colony” following the author’s characterization, purchased in 1867 but not exploited until the gold discovery at the turn of the century. The area acquired a formal territorial status in 1912 but the author stresses centrality in the Second World War and Cold War.

With U.S. expansions in other continents in the period included in this third chapter (1817-1890), Burns starts with Liberia. Foregrounding another obscure area of American imperialism renders this historical study original and indispensable. Like the British, the author claims, Americans planned to benefit from Africa based on the 3Cs: Christianity, commerce, civilization. Nonetheless, the U.S. intended to “provide a homeland for unwanted free blacks” (51) who would spread Christianity and civilization in Liberia. The first Constitution (1824) promised strong black representation in its own government. Even though many politicians wanted an enhanced U.S. role in Liberia, the country declared its independence in 1847, recognized by the U.S. in 1867. As a result, resettlement and annexation ideas were aborted altogether. This enlightening chapter also includes the case of the Guano islands, known for guano fertilizer. They are a very good example of U.S. expansionism with American politicians placing Hawaiians on the islands to stop Japanese expansion in the 1930s. Burns concludes the chapter with Cuba, which while it was occupied by the Spanish for centuries, it was divided in pro and anti-abolitionists in the 1840s toying with the idea of a possible annexation by the Americans. After a series of revolts, and an American invasion, Cuba declared independence in 1868. However the upheaval did not stop as the declaration was followed by a ten year war with Spain, the abolition of slavery and waves of refugees on American coasts.

The next chapter starts by placing emphasis on the shift in American expansionist politics after the Spanish-American war: Hawaii would be the last territory to become a part of the U.S. and a full state with anti-imperialist feelings gaining ground. Discovered in 1778, Hawaii had attracted American attention before other Pacific Islands for its ports, trade and missionaries, as Burns recalls (71). In 1840s British and French recognized Hawaiian independence. With Reciprocity agreements and Constitution not signed until the mid-1880s, whites and king gained more power but the economic condition of the island worsened. The annexation did not occur until 1894, a mystery for most historians,
as Burns contends, with the author favoring American naval strategic concerns and the
toll taken upon them by the Spanish-American war. At this point it is fundamental to note
how gracefully Burns manages to balance between the projection of facts and the
interpretation of political motives and hidden agendas. Back to the chapter, Hawaii did
not become a full state until 1959 along Alaska. The author thoroughly discusses the
connection between Spanish-American war, and American imperialism characterizing
the former as a major event for the creation of an empire. An intriguing point the author
makes, connecting contemporary life and the historical past, regards the photographic
coverage of this war which was the first ever. Burns also discerns the increase of yellow
journalism during military confrontations, which initiated a new era for the media.
Spanish atrocities to stop Cuban War called for an American intervention regardless of
the President’s initial reluctance and anti-imperialism reactions. The author comments
on the role of the anti-imperialist movement which took off in this War. Using as basic
arguments that the Spanish-American war was un-American, and against 1776 ideals,
Burns reflects on how anti-imperialists were so afraid of foreign influences and the
alteration of American ideals to the point of becoming racists. The Republican Victory
started this War and the re-election in 1900 re-enforced this change in political direction.

The fifth chapter entitled “Spanish Plunder” (1898-1917), continues on the topic of Cuba
outlining what followed the Spanish surrender of this country. Burns underscores that
the 1898 War was not about annexation but about Cuban freedom while the Teller
Amendment assured of good American intentions. Moreover, it promised to leave control
of Cuba on its people. Nonetheless, the author reveals the gradual second thoughts of
many American supporters of Cuban independence, along with the conservative Cuban
elite. The author hurries to add that the U.S. prospered from Cuban occupation not
without opposition at home, though, and the cost of the military support. With
independence wishes gaining ground, American politicians had to reconsider the Cuban
policy. Cuban independence was declared in 1902 but interventions were a constant affair
and total control was in American hands until 1934. Burns’s volume additionally unearths
the case of Puerto Rico and Guam, two often neglected areas in the relevant literature.
The former played a significant part in the formation of the so-called empire. As far as
Puerto Rico is concerned, Burns notes, it did not have a large elite whose interests were
suppressed by the Constitution. So the island did not try to dynamically gain
independence. The 1950s were scarred by numerous uprisings. In 1960, after a period of
military government which intended to proceed to educational reforms, Puerto Ricans
had a civil government under close control of the U.S. The country still has a very
unusual status established through Supreme Court decisions and remains an
“unincorporated territory” despite numerous referendums. Situated far from the area
denoted by the Monroe doctrine in the Pacific Ocean, the Philippines were annexed after
the Spanish war with the Spanish surrendering them. The islands gained independence in
1946 having been declared a Commonwealth in 1934. As another “unincorporated
territory”, the Philippines attempted a series of reforms in education, health and the
legal system due to the rebels’ reaction to U.S. control. It still maintains an in-between
status with U.S. economic control, military bases and a mutual defense treaty.

The sixth chapter sheds light on the period (1899-1917) and discusses among others the
case of Samoa, a coaling station since 1839 which had attracted British and German
interests as well as American. Shipping interests increased the diverse foreign pressures
with Americans annexing the eastern islands after a series of interventions, a brief war

---

Adam Burns, American Imperialism: The Territorial Expansion of the United Sta...
and Germany obtaining control over the western islands. Since 1967 Samoans have their own Constitution while being U.S. nationals. American imperialists, Burns highlights, were particularly interested in Panama a key country in the U.S. turning into a naval power, according to Theodore Roosevelt. After driving the British away from Panama by means of diplomacy, the Americans following a 1903 revolution in Panama managed to buy a strip of land from the new independent state. With intense Panama resentment over U.S politics and exploitation, the series of riots in the mid-1960s led to Americans handing over control to the locals. They maintained rights over the area until 1999. This chapter ends with the case of the Virgin Islands. Strategically important for their ports, the Virgin Islands after a long course under Danish law were bought under Woodrow Wilson’s presidency in 1917 after a series of unsuccessful attempts. Nevertheless, they also remained “unincorporated” and citizenship rights were given as late as 1927.

The next chapter focuses on other Caribbean Islands and American interventions in the late 20th century. As the author emphatically points out, American preclusive imperialism was aimed at preventing German expansion in the area, forcing U.S politicians to a series of occupations and not annexations. Burns disentangles the concept of “Banana Republics” as the small Central American and Caribbean States and the relevant American interventions as “Banana Wars”. Burns retraces American imperialist history in Nicaragua from the 1850s, before the creation of the Panamcanal. The Nicaraguan Civil war in 1912 allowed American intervention for the creation of a canal which was initially the plan of Mexican politicians. To succeed this goal Mexicans had attempted to attract European investors. American efforts to control Nicaragua were stopped by the Senate’s refusal to ratify the agreements. Wilson’s “good neighbor” policy made possible the creation of a canal and a naval base and the lease of Corn Islands. Burns rightly underscores the shift in Wilson’s reluctance to American imperialist tactics with marines sent in the area throughout the 1920s up until 1933. He moves on to examine Haiti starting with the revolt of the slaves in 1804 and the American embargo until 1806. The author ponders over the tumultuous course of Haiti due to the chaos in its political arena. Initially offered as a protectorate and a naval base after the American civil war, Haiti was the target of American intervention in 1915 under the pretext of local violence and the protection of American interests. The dictatorial manner of American government caused the outrage of African Americans in the States. While the marines left the country in 1934, there are strong economic relations between the two countries. On the other hand, the neighboring Dominican Republic was never obtained by the U.S. Its politicians were in favor of annexation but were met with the Senate’s rejection. Marines were sent in 1916 until the 1920s. After WWII, as Burns points out, there was a notable change in U.S imperialist politics which would lead them to intervene in more remote areas than the Banana Republics. In this frame of mind, the author goes through the example of Germany and its occupation after both World Wars. Intending to contain communism and support U.S friendly regimes, the U.S applied the Potsdam Agreement which allowed for German growth and industrial development. Burns reminds the readers that British, American and French zones were united in 1948 while the spread of communism was avoided through the application of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. The Federal Republic of Germany was a reality. The Russian zone was completely cut off creating a new state. After the two nuclear bombings, the other major Axis power, Japan, was to be democratized and civilized being a “racially inferior” nation. The 1946 Constitution renounced wars and abolished the feudal system. It also recognized women as equal human beings. The Japanese occupation ended in 1952. The chapter
encompassing the most vital political scenes of the previous century is concluded with the Bonin and Ryukyu Islands. These were occupied until 1968 and were used as strategic bases during the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

The final chapter foregrounds American imperialist politics from the 1940s until 2013. Burns interestingly recalls the shift in control in the area of Micronesia: from the Spanish, to the Germans in late 1890s, to the Japanese who had total control of Micronesia in 1942 in an area that would play a key part for the victory of WWII. In 1945 almost all of Micronesia went under American control. Burns dispels all fantasies about a humanitarian or economic interest in the area, stating that the U.S. was looking after their military goals. As regards the Pacific Trust Territories, Burns mentions that the U.S. tested their hydrogen bomb there, later offering, a Commonwealth Status that only the Northern Mariana Islands accepted. The other islands became independent even though they still allow American meddling in their foreign and military affairs. The author does not neglect to include the cases of Bases like that of Guantanamo. This came in American hands along Cuba in 1898. In the early twentieth century the Cuban government exchanged this Bay with Havana. Guantanamo has been a naval base for over a century even though it is now mostly known as a military detention camp. In 1964 Fidel Castro put pressure by cutting its water supplies. Burns reminds the reader that the question of ceding Guantanamo has come up many times without ever being realized (1996, 2009). Numerous American bases, though, were created after 1940 with the U.S. given military bases for its offer of old destroyers to the U.K. While the real number of bases is unclear, and ranges from 686 to 800, many more bases have been created following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. With a delicate comment on average American mentality, the author mentions that American people consider bases as “being for the general good of the United States” (170). On a final note, the author adds the Polar frontier and “the strategic and commercial benefits from a transcontinental transport route” (171). Whereas there was American interest since 1867, the importance of Alaska was reconsidered in the late 1940s when the first base was established there. The U.S has proven its interest in the polar seas along the other Arctic Nations. Following the 1996 Ottawa Declaration the aim of all parties interested in this remote area is to protect the environment and “explore sustainable development” providing security through energy independence.

In conclusion, Burns’s opus, all inclusive and incisive, explores angles that have never been discussed before like Canada and Liberia. In this sense, it assists the reader, even the novice of American history, in appreciating the scope, parameters and nuances of American imperialist politics diachronically, from the early years of the new State until the dawn of the twenty-first century. The author, well-read and meticulous, offers interesting insights into the American political scene. Simultaneously, he re-enacts the historical and sociopolitical milieu of the diverse countries while carefully interpreting intentions and goals sometimes resorting to unknown, anecdotal material. While some of the volume’s true strengths lie in its structure and clear writing, the author, as promised, deftly manages to navigate his reader towards “important, if contestable, parallels in American imperial history” (180). Weaving through world history, Burns always remains true to his goal to show how “the U.S. has grappled throughout its history to come to terms with being a nation born of a rejection to empire, yet being one itself” (180). Well done!