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1. Introduction

- 1 Students of politics, from the most novice to the most credentialed, should understand that contestation, debate and dissensus in scholarly discourse are common. The study of empire as a form of political organization is no exception. Conclusions about empire are often connected to the disciplinary training of the scholars and students engaged in the task of conceptualizing and researching the topic. Professional historians, especially those influenced by the postcolonial turn, acknowledge that empires take varied forms and continue to shape political outcomes in the 21st century. By contrast, a number of their colleagues in political science and international relations are, on balance, seemingly more skeptical of the proposition that empires still exist. As a result of this gap in perception Biccum suggests that there is a need “to broaden the conversation between IR and postcolonial theory.”¹ Saying that, there are still some in the disciplines of political science and international relations, including a number of political theorists, who do concede that empires are very much alive and that the United States fits into this category.
- 2 Historians, and others, especially in fields including sociology and literature, have produced a rich and nuanced discourse that carefully demonstrates that empires take assorted forms, employ varied tactics and strategies in pursuit of their ambitions, and did not disappear after the conclusion of the Second World War. This narrative also generally accepts that the United States has evolved an empire that includes its westward expansion across North America, its pursuit of small and large territories outside of the contiguous United States (including Alaska, Hawai’i, the Philippines, Cuba, Puerto Rico and more), and continues to use novel tactics, including the acquisition of bases, economic pressure or cultural forms, to behave in ways that look and feel very imperial. Historians in particular appear generally more willing to consider the latter as a part of empire and Immerwahr, a historian, subsequently states that “The proposition that the United States is an empire is less controversial today.”²

Whilst his work contends that this message is not controversial among historians it argues that it remains more controversial, however, in other parts of the academy.

- 3 To be sure, scholars in political science and international relations often take the opposite stance on these issues. Take, for example, the renewed debate over American Empire in the years following the September 11, 2001 attacks and the American led invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq. *International Studies Perspectives*, a journal of the International Studies Association, dedicated space in the August 2008 issue to the consideration of an American empire. A quick perusal of this section makes plain that most contributors do not believe that there is an American Empire. Indeed, in this section there is considerable resistance to the study of empire. This issue appeared at a time when the United States was occupying both Iraq and Afghanistan not to mention Washington's myriad other possessions, ranging from bases to small islands to large islands, i.e., Puerto Rico. Writing in 2016, Schumacher notes, "Over the last decade, studies of the American empire have experienced a renaissance."³ He, in turn, cites Kramer, and it is clear in both cases that historians have their literature on empire and political scientists have theirs and the two do not often meet.⁴ The divergence between these two epistemic communities reminds the authors of this article of the studies in psychology where bystanders report the sequence of events which caused an automobile accident in very different ways, i.e., smart people observe the same thing but reach very different conclusions about cause and effect.
- 4 This study on empire is the product of a professional union between a historian and a political scientist and it hopes to connect discussions and conclusions from history with discussions and conclusions in political science. But the aim of this work is not simply to start some sort of open discussion between two groups of scholars who interpret the same events rather differently. Instead, it also aims to synthesize some key literatures and attempts to demonstrate that political science and international relations scholars, and perhaps others as well, would gain some intellectual purchase from more carefully countenancing works from history and other fields as they consider empires; by doing so we hope to open up discussions of empire even further, making the subject "more visible".⁵ Finally, this research helps locate and place the United States within broad discussions about the current state and future of imperial polities.
- 5 The dissensus between some individuals in these academic communities is, in part, inspired by the lack of definitional clarity over what exactly constitutes an empire. According to Münkler: "there is an abundance of historical accounts of individual empires... but the question of what an empire is... has remained virtually unexamined... Political Science has not provided solid definitions."⁶ Biccum similarly contends that there is a "lack of consensus on the meaning of the term, a profound sense of confusion and a dearth of systematic theorization".⁷ Perhaps predictably this debate has tended to break down over epistemological traditions and disciplinary divides. Mainstream political science remains generally skeptical of empire as a form of political organization in the contemporary era. The reluctance of political science to recognize empires in the modern world is largely a function of the way in which the discipline defines the concept.⁸ Many in that field are wedded to some variant of the following: one large polity acquiring, usually through conquest, lands that were part of another sovereign polity. Colás, for example, defines an empire as "any single polity that successfully expands from a metropolitan centre across various territories in order to dominate diverse populations".⁹ Hoganson and Sexton point out that "Historians

generally define *empire* as a political unit that encompasses an extensive sweep of territory containing various peoples or polities.”¹⁰ Kramer, also a historian, uses a more encompassing definition when he writes, “Here the imperial refers to a dimension of power in which asymmetries in the scale of political action, regimes of spatial ordering, and modes of exceptionalizing difference enable and produce relations of hierarchy, discipline, dispossession, extraction, and exploitation.”¹¹

- 6 Many historians, as well as scholars and commentators in other disciplines, including Go in sociology, additionally take it as a given that empires endure despite decolonisation.¹² These approaches tend to embrace more expansive definitions of empire. They often recognize that there are many variants of the occurrence in the contemporary world, including informal empire. Postcolonialists, in particular, have focused on some of these informal processes, recognizing that empire entails more than just invading armies and fluttering foreign flags. Therefore, the latter tend to focus instead on the dissemination of an invasory colonial culture that stresses the superiority of the colonising power. As McLeod notes, “representations and modes of perception are used as fundamental weapons of colonial power to keep colonised peoples subservient to colonial rule.”¹³ As Howe subsequently posits: “Should we see modern empires as first and foremost cultural phenomena, or as political or economic ones?”¹⁴ Black British poet Benjamin Zephaniah (2007) nicely sums up the cultural legacy of empire when he writes:

Tis true that we have not now our chains
 Yet we were never free,
 Still masters [sic] chains corrupt our brains
 Come children see ¹⁵

- 7 Given its very long history this essay cannot fully grapple with the ontology, historiography and epistemology of empire. Nor, given time and space constraints, does it “write back” and give voice to those First Nation peoples displaced or silenced by empire; but it does examine one critical question that is central to the debate over the continued relevance of empire as a concept: is the United States an empire?¹⁶ Taking account of its outsized role in global affairs, its westward expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries, its history of acquiring overseas possessions, its long-standing practice of establishing outposts and a far-flung network of military bases, not forgetting a range of other seemingly imperial actions and policies, many consider the United States an empire.¹⁷ Yet this question is not fully resolved as many others also deny the premise: “Most studies of imperial and postcolonial culture omit discussions of the US as an imperial power... [treating it] as an entirely separate phenomenon from nineteenth-century European colonialism rather than related to it.”¹⁸ Concerned about this historical myopia Fergusson, as well as Hoganson and Sexton, refer to such unbelievers as living in “denial”; meanwhile Cox calls for people to “drop the pretence that America is not an empire.”¹⁹ Put plainly, if scholars cannot demonstrate that one single country like the United States, a so-called super-power, qualifies as an empire, it is highly likely that empire as a form of political organization is not especially useful in the study of contemporary international affairs. Consequently, this work proceeds by: providing an outline of the debate over empire as a form of political organization; considers some reasons as to why there are so many who are skeptical of an American empire; proposes a discussion of some of the ways in which the United States might qualify as an empire; offers some considerations about the on-going political, cultural and historical importance of empire as a typology, as well as its definitional obstinacy;

and finishes by reiterating the challenge posed by Hoganson and Sexton “to call out empire” by suggesting that America’s entire history is in fact the story of empire, albeit one which changes forms and tack along the way, depending on context and technology, and is thus difficult to pin down.²⁰

2. Defining Empire: Confusion Reigns!

- 8 Much of the debate on empire stems from the multiple and often contradictory definitions assigned to empires.²¹ In this work, it should go without saying that the definitions and assumptions tend to vary by field, with some historians starting perhaps with more nuanced or qualitative understandings of the subject and those in political science and international relations approaching the topic with narrower or quantitative conceptions. Restrictive definitions, i.e., one polity gaining territory from another polity through conquest, are helpful as they remain concise. They thus lend themselves easily to more socially scientific approaches as these narrow taxonomies conveniently rule out marginal cases and make it easier to falsify examples of empire. Schake suggests that treating United States overseas colonial conquest the same as westwards expansion “isn’t useful” on the basis such an approach is too expansive.²² Nevertheless, as American satirist and writer H. L. Mencken pointed out : “There is always a well-known solution to every human problem – neat, plausible, and *wrong*” [our italics].²³ Despite the analytic clarity provided by this restrictive stance others argue a need to revise and expand the definition. They base their approach on the premise that whilst the narrow approach may prove simple it comes at the expense of empirical accuracy. As Darwin asserts: “The history of empire is often presented in a single dimension: the assertion of dominance by imperial officials (or settlers) and the experience of oppression by indigenous peoples. But... this is not the whole story.”²⁴ Consequently, these others claim that opening up the definition of empire will enhance our ability to understand the phenomenon and its wider impact more fully, making it clearer that empires remain potent in international and economic affairs – even if they have changed and evolved their tactics.²⁵ Historians Streets-Salter and Getz subsequently emphasise a need to move beyond conquest to examine “the thoughts, doctrines, and ideologies” of empire.²⁶ Similarly, Motyl, a political scientist cognizant of some of the imperial nuances, similarly argues that scholars interested in understanding empire need to move away from just invasion-focused imperial narratives to look at alternative means by which empires could expand, namely through marriage and purchase.²⁷
- 9 When some definitional agreement exists it usually rests on the foundation stone that conquest is one important mechanism of imperial expansion. As Howe advocates: “A kind of basic, consensus definition would be that an empire is a large political body which rules over territories outside its original borders.”²⁸ Formal empires based on military conquest and the occupation of foreign lands are thus universally recognized because it is supposedly easy to differentiate them from non-empires; and history is certainly littered with numerous empires that conform to this definition. Yet scholars are now increasingly spotlighting alternate mechanisms for empire building, including: purchase, lease, acquisition of basing rights, use of corporate intermediaries, marriage, mandate or writ by international organization. They are also beginning to question notions of size (note Howe’s emphasis above above on “large”), as well as the focus on

state-led only agency (Alessio 2013: 89). By concentrating on different aspects of empire and picking apart existing models these alternative approaches suggest that empires are not simply one polity annexing another and only holding formerly sovereign territory *via* conquest. However, much work remains to be done and there is no commonly accepted understanding of what exactly constitutes an empire. By extension there is even less consensus on whether or not the United States qualifies as an imperial power. In discussing definitions of the subject, Colley (2006) subsequently argues that the literature on empire does not include a rich, complete or intellectually satisfying definition of empire. Many other scholars make similar points.²⁹ While they do not all raise identical issues they do all demonstrate that empire remains ill-defined. Indeed, when thinking about empire's meaning Howe reminds us that the term derives from the Latin word *imperium*, which in its most simple sense means broadly: to rule.³⁰ This point, without further specification, does not automatically entail direct, physical control of territory. Spruyt, while rejecting that the United States is a formal empire, does simultaneously make an appeal for more nuance when he writes:

I conclude that although American foreign policy might be deemed imperialist, the United States with its network of overseas connections at present does not constitute formal empire. It lacks the institutionalized authority relations of core and periphery that typify empire (our italics). Its unilateralist policies, however, which seek to maintain American dominance in military power as well as to prop up "friendly" government abroad, are in many respects imperialist.³¹

- 10 Nonetheless, a too narrow approach risks analytic and taxonomical inaccuracy, e.g., the Ottoman Empire. While the Sultan did nominally control huge swaths of land many peripheral areas remained only under nominal control.³² Local rulers in many regions were essentially autonomous so long as they provided tribute to the Sultan and caused him no headaches. Should these semi-sovereign places be properly understood as part of the Ottoman Empire? After all, they were not usually occupied by permanent Ottoman forces? The threat of Ottoman military intervention was, though, often enough to deter these actors from breaking with the regime in Constantinople. Similar arrangements have existed all over the world for thousands of years, and are best understood in the context of informal empire. Informal empire is defined as a relationship between a more powerful polity and a weaker one in which the former has orchestrated an unequal relationship and is often able to compel the weaker to do things that it would not otherwise do. Jürgen Osterhammel characterises this sort of informal control as including: "a legal structure that privileged foreigners, a free trade system imposed by external forces, and the use of intervention either through force or through institutions such as imperial consuls."³³ But as the previously mentioned Ottoman case makes clear it is possible for an empire to simultaneously be formal in some parts and informal in others.
- 11 Part of the confusion over empires, formal or otherwise, stems from the idea of "original" borders. Linking empire or non-empire to an expansion beyond "original" borders is arbitrary and not especially clarifying, specifically for polities with histories which are measured in centuries. The French Empire, for example, waxed and waned in continental Europe and elsewhere over the course of hundreds of years. Deciding on what constitutes France's original border seems difficult at best and impossible at worst. Restrictive definitions of empire offer no guidance on how long we are to consider a formerly sovereign unit as a formerly sovereign unit and not something that has now been wholly incorporated? In the French example the acquisition of Artois, a

swathe of land in the northeast of modern France near Belgium, elucidates these complexities nicely. Originally independent the region eventually came under French control in the 12th century but periodically emerged as either independent or part of another polity when Isabelle of Hainaut became Queen of France after marrying Phillip II in 1180 and brought Artois as part of her considerable dowry. Subsequently, between 1180 and 1237 Artois was part of France owing to Isabella's *marriage* (not conquest) to the French crown. In the 13th century the region became once again independent, but shortly after in the 14th century was ruled by the Burgundians, and then was taken over by the Spanish Hapsburgs as part of the Holy Roman Empire. It was finally annexed again by France in 1659. By the start of the First World War it seems impossible now to consider Artois, the scene of the famous Christmas truce between Allied and German troops, as anything other than French soil and thus in the French front line of invading German forces in 1914. Yet it was once on the colonial periphery.

- 12 While Artois is relatively obscure this kind of case is commonplace and reflects a fundamental truth in international politics: borders are not static. To take a similar example from United States history. When Pearl Harbor was attacked by forces belonging to the Japanese Imperial Navy in 1941 Hawai'i was not a state. That milestone had been reached *only* in 1959. Instead Hawai'i was an organized incorporated territory of the United States that until 1898 had been an independent kingdom. What is more, it only became American after it was forcibly taken when "United States troops landed on Hawaiian soil over the protest of the legitimate ruler as a deliberate and flagrant act of war."³⁴ Yet despite having been invaded by the United States and being under occupation for a mere 43 years (compared with Artois' nearly 300 years of French rule), the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbour was considered an infamous attack upon American soil. As Immerwahr documents, Japan attacked not only Pearl Harbor but additionally a host of other American *colonial* possessions, including the Philippines, Guam, Midway Island and Wake Islands.³⁵ Former President Roosevelt declared, after hearing news of the attack on Hawai'i, "Always we will remember the character of the onslaught against us [our italics]..."³⁶ Thus, the Japanese attack was perceived in the popular media as an invasion of American soil. It was conveniently forgotten that this territory had been taken by force by the United States from Native Hawai'ians a mere forty-three years earlier. But rather than address the issue of Hawai'ian occupation by the United States, as "the idea runs so counter to the day-to-day administrative and governmental operations in Hawaii... the subject tends to be avoided by Hawaii politicians."³⁷ Intriguingly, then Congressman Abraham Lincoln had first made a political name for himself when identifying a similar border controversy. In his 1847 'Spot Resolutions' he called out then President Polk to prove exactly where and how Mexico had invaded United States territory, thus precipitating the Mexican-American War, when Mexican forces had never actually crossed onto so-called American soil.
- 13 Another area of confusion, one related to boundaries, revolves around trying to differentiate between nation-states and empires. Streets-Salter and Getz argue that empires occur when a polity "comes to exert control over other states or peoples without fully integrating them."³⁸ Others, including Immerwahr, have noted that the United States has a long history of such behavior, e.g, Puerto Rico.³⁹ Once these conquered peoples have been assimilated some suggest that empires cease being empires and evolve into states. Colás, a professor of International Relations, proposes that modern state formation, symbolised by fixed boundaries/frontiers and liberal internationalism which "actively seeks to promote self-government, civil liberties and

territorial integrity”, is thus now replacing older imperial systems.⁴⁰ To make his point about the differences between an empire and a nation-state he suggests that “War and violence are intrinsic to imperial rule in a way which is not true of other political orders.”⁴¹ But such a position only further confounds our understanding of empire. Firstly, empires can also try to fix their boundaries permanently, as occurred under the Roman Emperor Augustus at the Rhine and Danube Rivers in the 1st century AD. So fixed borders are not unique to nation-states. Secondly, modern nation-state boundaries are themselves not necessarily as fixed or as collaborative as Colás makes out. Nazi Germany was a nation-state but that did not stop it wanting to invade both eastern and Western Europe in 1939. Historians Hoganson and Sexton call this the “gray zone where nations shade into empires”.⁴² Thirdly, nation-states, like empires, can also be multi-ethnic units and frequently minority groups within said nation-states can feel much very much like the colonised in an empire, despite apparently being part of a state. As Hobsbawm warned: “nation-state frontiers could not structure the areas formerly under imperial rule without creating new minorities, injustices and repression.”⁴³

14 Therefore, by emphasizing such distinctions between nation-states and empires it seems too easy to forget how or when a particular nation state was formed. The Samoan writer Albert Wendt drew attention to this incongruity in history when discussing this silencing of the indigenous voice: “...look at the way New Zealand history has been constructed. It has been constructed by the colonizers who took over this country, and write it to suit themselves. Their histories are their version of things, and they do not want other competing versions.” (Albert Wendt, qtd. in Ellis 83).⁴⁴ Kumar, a sociologist, also comments upon these paradoxes when he says that there are “significant similarities between nation-states and empires. Many nation-states are in effect empires in miniature.”⁴⁵ Delay makes this point forcibly too in relation to the history of U.S. foreign relations when he states that the “The Bureau of Indian Affairs was our Colonial Office, and the long history of U.S. relations with *native polities* [our italics] was more than a dark prelude to or a formative context for U.S. Empire. This was U.S. Empire.”⁴⁶

15 Whilst trying to define empire Doyle concedes that their histories are often intertwined with conquest and territoriality but suggests that “economic, social, or cultural dependence” are also their hallmarks.⁴⁷ Given his more expansive view of empire and the convergences between empire and nation-states discussed above, it becomes less clear that a polity, as the Ottoman example demonstrated above, must always exercise some kind of physical control of lands beyond its original borders. This tension illustrates another critical divide in the study of empire: formal *versus* informal. Formal empires tend to closely match Howe’s definition and are almost always easily recognized by fluttering imperial flags and marching troops. By contrast, informal empires involve arrangements other than formal annexation of territory and are more contentious. In the Ottoman case the relationship between the imperial policy and the subjugated areas is perhaps best called suzerainty. Once a common way of thinking about political and imperial organization the term has largely died in recent decades. In 1899 Wallwyn P.B. Shephard, writing in a legal journal, defined it thus:

Suzerainty is a term applied to a certain international relations between two sovereign states, whereby one, whilst retaining a more or less limited sovereignty, acknowledges the supremacy of the other. Such a relation may be either feudatory, by the grant at some early period of sovereignty as a fief; or conventional, by some

treaty of peace or alliance. The difficulty is to define what juridical relations are implied by the use of the term suzerain in the language of the treaty; and, further, to settle whether any given relations established by a treaty may be properly referred to as suzerainty.⁴⁸

- 16 Well over a century later, and despite the fading of suzerainty as a concept in international relations, Shephard's conceptualization remains useful and important. The words have changed, i.e., hegemony replacing suzerainty in the literature, but the concept closely matches more inclusive definitions of empire, especially informal empire. Indeed, both terms suggest power disparities and the ability of one actor to influence a less powerful actors. However, hegemony also suffers from a lack of definitional clarity with various scholars understanding the term in multiple ways.⁴⁹ Go captures some this confusion:

If empire is not the same thing as hegemony, and if imperialism is not the same as imperialistic activity, at stake in current debates on America's empire today is the relationship between them. Most pro-empire commentators suggest that empire, hegemony, and imperialistic activity are logically and historically intertwined.⁵⁰

- 17 Ferguson notes that hegemony in its classical meaning sprang from an Athenian-led and relatively voluntary anti-Persian alliance.⁵¹ That, at least, is the official position as outlined in Herodotus, the 'father of history'. Intriguingly, this alliance soon turned into the Athenian-dominated Delian League, an empire in all but name. Norwegian historian Lundestad seems to be of similar thinking in his discussion of an American empire in post-war Europe as he posits an "empire by invitation" that is impossible to fully parse from alliance politics.⁵² Keohane finds Lundestad's analysis compelling but balks at equating empire and hegemony since the latter is less formal than the former.⁵³ Thus, for Keohane, hegemony is a more accurate description. But as O'Reilly and Renfro posit, "This contentious debate [defining empire] often hinges on semantics."⁵⁴ This seems especially true when one considers that many empires include formal pieces and informal pieces. This split is especially relevant to the study of American empire as Washington has, across time and space, included formal pieces, e.g., Puerto Rico, and informal pieces, e.g., military bases in many parts of the world. Interestingly, Ferguson believes that the United States had an informal empire in the wake of World War II, but that it no longer does.⁵⁵ Yet ironically, whilst doing so, Ferguson also over-looks all of its Pacific colonies as well as its history of continental land expansion. Immerwahr, in his discussion of "the pointillist empire" more fully explicates how Washington gained a vast network of imperial possessions in the Pacific.⁵⁶ Worth (2015) offers a near exhaustive accounting of the definitions of hegemony but his analysis underscores the many and different ways in which the term is used.⁵⁷ On some level, many of these terms are perhaps interchangeable; but this question of nomenclature, while problematic, only serves to bring us back to where we started, namely the lack of agreement over how to define and understand empire, and now also hegemony, informal empire and suzerainty.
- 18 Part of the confusion over the status of the United States is the narrow focus on conquest as the primary mechanism through which polities may expand into empires. As Fernandez-Armesto argues, imperial history has "over-emphasised conquest".⁵⁸ If one understands that empire by conquest is one, though not the only path to empire, it becomes much easier to accept informal empire. As others have pointed out, conquest has been central to formation and expansion of empires; but there are many other ways for this to happen and these are not mutually exclusive. They include: marriage /

dowry contract, voluntary association, invitation, mandates or awards by international organizations, land swaps, purchase / lease, and economic or political coercion.⁵⁹

3. An Empire in Denial?

19 Because empires form and expand in multiple ways there is no consensus on what constitutes an empire. This confusion makes it more possible for many to not view the United States as an empire. The literature does, however, show that there are generally two ways of differentiating empire from non-empire. The first is structural, i.e., one polity acquiring (*via whatever means* - though often conquest, war, or conflict) land outside of its original borders. This generally matches formal empire. The second is based on outcomes, i.e., regardless of structure or land can one polity compel other actors to do things that they would not otherwise want to do? This generally matches informal empire. Both of these lenses are appropriate when examining the question of the American empire, as some argue that the United States qualifies as an empire by both means.⁶⁰ These two methods of acquiring empire are not mutually exclusive, however. Lundestad argues that the United States, at the behest of its allies, formed a series of both formal and informal arrangements this way in post-war Europe that some consider imperial.⁶¹

20 The literature on American empire shows that the United States, using conquest and other means, obtained huge amounts of land from formerly independent polities, including First Nation peoples, European powers and other American nations, such as Mexico and Columbia. The process began immediately after independence from Britain. Indeed, one might even argue that if the desire for land west of the Appalachians was a driving force behind the Revolution, then the very act of American independence might have also been itself an imperial first move. According to Ostler:

Jefferson's denigration of "merciless Indian savages" signaled that the war for independence from Great Britain would also be a brutal war to seize indigenous lands. From 1776 to 1783, U.S. troops and colonial militias destroyed more than 70 Cherokee towns, 50 Haudenosaunee towns, and at least 10 multiethnic towns in the Ohio Valley, killing several hundred people (including civilians) and subjecting refugees to starvation, disease, and death...⁶²

21 This divide between the historical record and the willingness of others to concede that the United States was and is an empire has not gone unnoticed. Burns, writing after World War II but before American involvement in Vietnam, suggested that Americans dismiss entirely the idea that their country was ever an empire: "When the average American thinks of 'colonialism', or of the Colonial Powers, he is apt to confine his thoughts to European 'colonialism.'" ⁶³ Finlay makes a similar argument when he writes that "No one speaks about the colonization of the Midwest and west of the United States."⁶⁴ This point is crucial to understanding the argument that the United States is an empire. After all, a considerable amount of land that now constitutes the continental United States had formerly belonged to other polities and peoples, but over the decades (only four in the case of Hawai'i!) had ceased to be considered as taken forcibly. Others, including Mann and Bush, spotlight this gap between reality and public and scholarly consciousness.⁶⁵ It is worth noting that historians, starting with the revisionists in the 1970s, have been much more willing to accept that the United States is an empire. Historians, including Williams and LaFeber, have made the case for the American empire.⁶⁶ More recently Ferguson, O'Reilly, Johnson, and others have attempted to

draw attention to what they consider to be an American empire.⁶⁷ This claim, as noted, still remains contentious, especially with scholars from political science. This bundle of definitional and other issues is further confounded by at least two elements: the fact that the United States has relied upon multiple means of expansions, including purchase and lease (as opposed to solely relying on conquest), and by elite political rhetoric which almost often loudly denies that Washington is imperial.

- 22 Frymer demonstrates that the United States during its territorial expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries behaved similarly to states that were unabashedly imperial.⁶⁸ Hopkins, considering the 20th century, provides comparable evidence that the United States, through its foreign policies, behaved in ways that often looked imperial.⁶⁹ Thus, for some scholars, it is clear that the United States has always been an imperial enterprise though the mechanisms of imperial growth and maintenance may have shifted. During the 18th and 19th centuries many European powers were trumpeting their imperial status. The United States frequently engaged in similar behavior but often, though not always, denied its empire and cloaked itself in the language of democracy, freedom and republicanism. Indeed, Washington disguised its imperial expansion by using less overt language to describe its political development. While it is undeniable that the United States led various campaigns of conquest against First Peoples over a long period of time these campaigns are often not billed as wars or conquests but rather as ‘removals’.⁷⁰
- 23 Moreover, the history of the United States is replete with expansions outside of conquest, especially *via* purchase and lease. Some of those were truly exchanges of money for land that did not involve war, e.g., the Louisiana Purchase. Others were nothing short of conquest that was later labeled as something less imperial sounding, e.g., Florida, which Washington purchased from Spain in 1819. Yet a close examination of the latter suggests that this is not a straight forwards purchase. While Washington did eventually pay Spain in exchange for land the outcome only came after United States forces had essentially conquered most of that territory. Later, after the Spanish American War, in which Washington acquired Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines, Washington similarly disguised its imperial status by paying Spain \$20 million for the Philippines and Guam, and by describing Puerto Rico not as a colony by the more neutral sounding term “commonwealth”. Later still, after WWII, the United States gained control over a series of possessions in the Pacific from 1947 – 1986 under the more benign sounding label of Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. As Hoganson and Sexton attest: “Misleading terminology keeps us from understanding the politics of transimperial pasts.”⁷¹ While the cases mentioned here vary in terms of mechanism of acquisition (with some being conquest, others being real purchases and others still being awards by outside agencies, such as the United Nations), they all involved the transfer, sometimes on an enormous scale, sometimes not, of land from another polity. In no case were the local inhabitants consulted.
- 24 Additionally, in many of these cases Washington used non-imperial sounding labels to depict its expansion. Both Johnson and Bush have described the ways in which the United States relied on euphemisms to cover practices that in reality are imperialism.⁷² There are also ideational and rhetorical explanations that explain why many do not ask if the United States is an empire. From its founding documents until the present-day Washington has sought to cast itself a bastion of freedom and liberty and this idea is mutually exclusive with empire.⁷³ Lake writes: “The phrase [empire] remains contested.

To many Americans, it is inconceivable that their country, born in anticolonial struggle, could be an empire.⁷⁴ Indeed, the United States was born in a revolution against an overtly imperial state and takes considerable pride in being a republic and a democracy. Presidential rhetoric too has denied the existence of an American empire, formal or otherwise. Rather, American presidents tend to emphasize American exceptionalism. This approach conceives of American democracy as the antithesis, and perhaps antidote, for empire. Bill Clinton, for example, opined that, “Americans never fought for empire, for territory, for dominance but many, many American gave their lives for freedom.”⁷⁵ This message is entirely compatible with George W. Bush’s proclamation that “We have no desire to dominate, no ambitions of empire.”⁷⁶ The claims of the 42nd and 43rd presidents are not novel. Ronald Reagan, in a Cold War flourish, drew the distinction between “free” Americans and “imperial” Russians when he labelled the Soviet Union an “evil empire.”⁷⁷ Straining credulity Lyndon Johnson discussed American foreign policy in Vietnam saying: “It is not conquest; it is not empire; it is not foreign bases; it is not domination.”⁷⁸ While these are isolated quotes many scholars note that presidential rhetoric both reflects the political landscape and also exercises an independent influence on citizens’ beliefs. Indeed, Neustadt in a seminal study of presidential leadership, spotlights the ability to persuade as critical.⁷⁹

- 25 Immerwahr’s work on American empire makes a compelling case that the machinery of the United States government actively worked to make Washington seem less imperial. Discussing the 1940 decennial census and the ways and amount of people included or not, he writes, “Nearly nineteen million people lived in the colonies, the great bulk of them in the Philippines.”⁸⁰ He continues:

Another way to consider those nineteen million territorial inhabitants is as a fraction of the U.S. populations. Again taking 1940 as our year, slightly more than one in eight (12.6 percent) of the people in the United States lived outside the states. For perspective, consider that only about one in twelve was African-American. If you lived in the United States on the eve of World War II, in other words, you were more likely to be colonized than black, by odds of three to two.⁸¹

- 26 Indeed, as Immerwahr notes, the census was very state-centric and largely downplayed the huge amounts of land and people that constituted what some considered the “greater United States.” Given its self-avowed ethos of freedom and liberty and the attempts to disguise its own imperial actions, it is not surprising that the United States has engaged in a collective act of cognitive dissonance *vis-à-vis* its own expansion. Colley, therefore, describes Americans as “disengaged” with respect to what she considers their own imperial nature.⁸² Having spotlighted some of the reasons as to why so many do not believe in the concept of an America empire this work now turns to a discussion of why some believe the United States has both a formal and an informal empire.

4. An American Empire

- 27 As previously noted, the literature on empire generally includes two variants: formal and informal. In the former, one polity acquired territory from another polity often, though not necessarily, through conquest. In the latter, one polity has such a degree of power or influence that it is able to compel other polities to do things that they would not otherwise do. What is more, this control or influence is not necessarily tied to the annexation of land. Part of the confusion over empire generally, and the American

empire specifically, involves the various means by which expansion occurs. While everyone recognizes that empires by conquest are real there is some confusion about other mechanisms that may create empire. As Doyle notes, empire is when one state is able to control another and this can be achieved by conquest or other means, including collaboration and economics.⁸³ This definition is close to the one offered by Peers in that it is not explicitly tied to territory and is rather a function of power asymmetry.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, Ferguson disagrees, arguing that “Doyle’s thoughtful definition is shot full of holes...”⁸⁵ He goes on to discuss the “elusive ideal type”, concluding that:

Whatever one’s ideal-type definition, old and new empires-like sovereign states and all other polities-exhibit remarkable variety, and the things that make them different often are at least as interesting as the things they share. Perhaps, then, it is best to look at “empires” as a continuum, where some polities fit the model drawn from the “usual suspects” better than others.⁸⁶

- 28 Ferguson’s commentary is especially useful for two reasons. First, it offers a way of thinking about empire that recognizes that power, control and empire do not always come in a standard package. Secondly, when scholars and others adhere to very inflexible understandings of empire it makes it easier politically for some imperial states to decry their own imperial status, e.g., the United States. How different, therefore, is such a US disavowal from Moscow’s *maskirovka* tactics along Ukraine’s borders?
- 29 Nonetheless, the literature makes a compelling case that the United States has a formal empire and may have evolved a significant informal empire too. By the narrower definitions of formal empire, i.e., one polity taking land from another polity, usually via conquest, the United States certainly qualifies because of its campaigns against First Peoples and others. The Mexican Cession that followed the Mexican-American War of 1848 also meets this definition. In this case, one republic fought another republic and at its conclusion the losing polity, Mexico, ceded huge swathes of its territory to the United States. This transfer of land was crucial to the development of the modern United States and represents the third largest territorial *acquisition* by the United States after both the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and the Alaska Purchase in 1867. This, too, was billed as a purchase, though the transfer of funds only occurred after the United States had bested Mexico in the war. There are other qualifying incidents, including the American “purchase” of Florida, but which was also really a conquest, that additionally clearly qualify the United States as an empire, even by this most narrow of definitions.
- 30 Interestingly and unlike other 19th century European powers which have lost most of their overseas colonies, the United States remains in possession of a number of overseas territories, notably Puerto Rico, American Samoa, the US Virgin Islands, and Guam.⁸⁷ While the United States calls Puerto Rico a “commonwealth” and not a colony, this linguistic sleight of hand does not change the basic, and imperial, structural relationship between Washington and the island. Moreover, American practices in Puerto Rico, including denying the commonwealth Electoral College votes, the continuance of the Jones Act and Washington’s lackluster response to a massive hurricane that crippled the island in 2017, also strongly suggest that this relationship, whatever it is called, is distinctly imperial. What is interesting is that many scholars who conclude that the United States is not, and perhaps cannot be an empire, are examining the United States *after* it completed its westward expansion and *after* it bested Spain in 1898. They do not look at territory in the longer *durée* which, like France’s Artois, has been under direct US control for a century or more, even if it was

taken by conquest. Cooley and Nexon, for example, are grappling only with American bases and conclude that these bases do not make an empire.⁸⁸ While others, including Vine and Johnson disagree with this conclusion, it is important to point out that this debate in the literature is quite understandable since examples of the alleged American empire in the postwar period usually do not entail formal agreements and are less definite.⁸⁹

- 31 Using more expansive definitions of empire which include, in addition to conquest, the transfer of territory through means other than conquest as well as informal empire (which hinges on power asymmetries), the United States probably still qualifies. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the Platte Purchase of 1836, the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, the Alaska Purchase of 1867, the United States Virgin Islands Purchase of 1916, as well as the leases of Diego Garcia in 1966 and Kwaj in 1983, are all examples of territorial aggrandizement first and foremost by purchase or lease - not conquest. Moreover, there had been additional attempts in the 1930s to buy Easter Island from Chile and the Galápagos Islands from Ecuador for the purposes of developing military bases.⁹⁰ Additionally, President Trump drew global attention to this process in his failed bid to purchase Greenland from Denmark in 2019.⁹¹ On informal empire, it is also clear that the United States has behaved imperially in places like Iraq. It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising also that given its ongoing possession of Puerto Rico, American Samoa, Guam and the US Virgin Islands the United States is still listed on the UN's list of Non-Self-Governing Territories.
- 32 For many the staggering amount of power that the United States wields seemingly makes it an empire in the postwar era - even if Washington is not actively seeking formal arrangements that meet the strict definition of empire. For many in the developing world the United States is imperial not because it directly controls territory but because it wields considerable power. Immerwahr points out that the United States has a formal empire but then cites American economic power in global affairs, Washington's use of military interventions, its network of bases, its ability to create scientific and linguistic standards and its subjugation of African Americans, as additional markers of empire.⁹² Most common in the work of Critical Studies scholars this outcomes-based conceptualization of empire suggests that Washington's role in international institutions, from the United Nations to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, coupled with the actions of its private proxies, including multinational corporations, all help the United States to achieve imperial aims in unconventional ways.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

- 33 Several important conclusions emerge from this work. First, and despite some excellent scholarship on the topic, empire remains under-theorized and somewhat ill-defined. In a related point, there are rather serious divergences that seem closely tied to disciplinary training. This divide is reminiscent of Miles' Law in public administration which states, "Where you stand depends on where you sit." Many, though not all, scholars in political science and international relations conceive of empire in more narrow ways, often emphasizing the contemporary. This lack of recognition of empire's various historical forms and permutations has resulted in its more extensive tentacles being hidden from public view. It is perhaps no wonder then that so many in the United

States fail to conceive of their polity as imperial even though it is apparent to so many others, ranging from professional historians to First Nation Peoples and to inhabitants of places like Puerto Rico. As Immerwahr demonstrates in his aptly titled work *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*, most Americans are in a state of denial about their nation's own imperial status.⁹³ This is perhaps not surprising given the myriad ways in which Americans have denied or attempted, *via* euphemism, to conceal their empire. Discussing this Schumacher opines, "This omission is in part the result of a century of obfuscation in American commentary on colonialism. With its discursive recourse to exceptionalist nationalism and its rhetorical demarcation from European imperialism, such commentary helped to obscure the U.S. colonial project as anti-European decolonization."⁹⁴ A good example of this obfuscation occurred after the United States invaded Mexico, wherein it took California, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico and parts of Colorado in return for giving the defeated Mexican nation \$15 million, and one American contemporary newspaper commented "we take nothing by conquest."⁹⁵

- 34 Disciplinary conventions, competing epistemologies and issues of national identity and historical narrative further confuse the topic of American empire. And while some might consider the question of empire the worst sort of academic navel gazing it does matter if the world's most powerful actor, i.e., the United States, is an empire or something else. In particular, it has bearing on how Washington views and understands its own sense of legitimacy and standing in other parts of the world and on how others, including its own Pacific Islander or First Nation citizens, perceive it. After all, if the United States views itself as an exemplar of liberty but others view it as a very conventional empire, processes and outcomes in foreign affairs are likely to be muddied - at a minimum. Recognizing a range of diverse actions as potentially imperialistic might also enable Washington to critique its rivals more easily and see their perspective more clearly. How different, for example, is the US's leasing of a military base in the Pacific from China's island-building program in the South China Seas?
- 35 This work establishes that narrow definitions of empire, namely one polity gaining territory from another polity and usually through conquest, are insufficient in capturing the full range of imperial possibilities. The restrictive definition seems poorly suited for describing the world as it exists for at least two reasons. Firstly, it places too much emphasis on conquest as the mechanism by which empires form and expand. This is not to suggest that conquest is not an important mechanism but rather that others exist. Moreover, this work points out that there is much scholarship that demonstrates that as conquest became less palatable and more costly, empires simply change their *modus operandi*, e.g., seeking bases and islands and not large polities. This work also suggests that the literature in political science and international relations would do well to more seriously consider the case of American expansion in less myopic ways. Empires appear to be durable forms of political organization but that is not to say that they do not change and adapt. Indeed, scholars in all fields would do well to consider the ways in which contemporary empires are evolving and responding to changing conditions in politics, technology, and business. Consider, for example, the ideal type of democracy. While there is much ink spilled over defining the concept, scholars from various fields have worked to incorporate new developments, e.g., the adoption of universal suffrage as a necessary condition, into the study of the topic.

Scholars of empire should do the same. The fact that polities have generally stopped more overt forms of “land grabs” doesn’t obviate empire, but it does warrant more sustained study so that we can understand how this form of organization has changed. Immerwahr comments on the durability and flexibility of empires and concludes, “You might see the intrusions of colonialism into recent politics as a sort of hangover – a price paid for yesterday’s excesses. In this view, empire is an affair of the past, even if its effects longer on.”⁹⁶ He continues and is explicit when he writes:

Empires live on, too, in the overseas bases that dot the globe...Britain and France have some thirteen overseas bases between them, Russia has nine, various other countries have one – in all, there are probably thirty overseas bases owned by non-U.S. countries. The United States, by contrast, has roughly eight hundred, plus agreements granting it access to still other foreign sites. Dozens of countries host U.S. bases. Those that refuse are nevertheless surrounded by them. The Greater United States, in other words, is in everyone’s back yard.⁹⁷

- 36 The empirical record is clear; there is no contesting that the United States expanded beyond its original borders by conquering lands held by indigenous neighbours, making war with other European empires, and by purchasing or leasing territories, both large and small, in North America and beyond. In a very formal sense the United States has previously held or controlled, though not annexed, any number of polities, including Cuba and the Philippines. The fact that Washington did not seek to control these polities in a long *durée* arrangement doesn’t make them any less imperial. Furthermore, the United States has fully incorporated some imperial possessions, namely Alaska, Hawai’i, and the states that Washington “won/purchased” in its war with Mexico in the 19th century. Admission to the United States does not mean that the methods of “acquisition” were not imperial. It might be tempting for some to conclude that these acquisitions and gains are somehow too long past to qualify the United States as an empire. This work rejects that notion since these processes are such a critical part of the political and economic development of the United States.
- 37 In addition, there is considerable evidence suggesting that Washington sought territory and influence in ways that looked like empire long after the idea of trumpeting imperial grandeur seemed distasteful. Indeed, acquiring and administering whole polities became both unsavory and wildly inefficient. In the Cold War and the decades that followed, Washington increasingly relied on acquiring bases or other small possessions as a means to build imperial networks that gave the United States many of the advantages of formal empire without bearing the costs, real and psychic, that come with being a more traditional empire interested in occupying large amounts of territory. This does not mean, of course, that the United States is unwilling to engage in military interventions that produce quasi-imperial outcomes, e.g., Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. Owing to reasons of scope, this work does not grapple with other alleged instantiations of American empire, e.g., globalization or cultural hegemony. Kramer briefly mentions “structural adjustment” as a marker of this kind of empire in the context of the post-Soviet era, and connects this to variants of informal empire.⁹⁸ Westad also takes up the less visible but very real connections between the United States, the Soviet Union, and empire during and after the Cold War.⁹⁹
- 38 Nevertheless, in the post-war era it seems that Washington largely abandoned the practice of formally occupying big territories. It has, however, assembled a truly astounding network of military bases that span the globe. Johnson notes the special role that military bases play when he writes, “This vast network of American bases on

every continent except Antarctica actually constitutes a new form of empire -- an empire of bases with its own geography and not likely to be taught in high school geography class".¹⁰⁰ We partially disagree with Johnson's assessment, namely that this practice constitutes an entirely *new* form of empire; indeed, Blower suggests that this base-building practice extends back in time to the early colonial period and a history of factories and forts.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, many previous imperial powers have behaved similarly, though merely just not on the same scale as the United States. Germany, after its unification in 1871, aggressively sought to build a network of coaling stations that provided a similar function as US bases. Indeed, it could be argued these bases kick-started the second Reich. On balance, though, Johnson's point is useful. Cooley and Nexon have some reservations about equating bases to empire, but they at least are open to the possibility that they may be related and suggest that the field needs to do more theorizing *vis-à-vis* empires and bases.¹⁰² Often cloaked in the language of mutual defense treaties or leases this seems like a mostly benign practice. Unless, however, you live in an area now occupied by an American military base, e.g., the inhabitants of Diego Garcia who were forcibly "resettled" in 1971, or unless you live in a nearby polity that is affected by the presence of American bases, i.e., collateral damage often in the form of civilian casualties caused by direct air or drone strikes or irradiated air and water that originated from those bases.¹⁰³

- 39 Recognizing that empires may be built on comparatively small plots of land opens the door further for a wider recognition of informal empire. Indeed bases, which tend to be small in terms of their size, may well be the best indicator of an empire today. After all, occupying large amounts of territory is financially draining and politically risky. More overt forms of imperialism that involve occupation, for example, additionally create a host of obligations for the imperial actor, including maintaining some monopoly on the use of force, providing a degree of infrastructure and basic services and upholding the area's territorial integrity. At the same time most inhabitants do not welcome occupation and this often creates push back. This resistance is often costly to the imperial agent. Thus, according to their logic, following World War II and decolonization empires moved from the overt to the covert. As previous sections outlined, the United States is something of a trailblazer in that Washington used a variety of tactics to disguise its empire during a period when most other states were busy loudly proclaiming their empires.
- 40 This combination of smaller holdings and a reliance on means other than conquest, some argue, have become hallmarks of more modern empires.¹⁰⁴ After all, there has been a considerable shift in how citizens and political elites value empire. Being an empire used to be a point of national pride and a goal for rising powers, e.g., Germany in the 19th century. Nevertheless, in the contemporary period great powers seek to avoid the label as it is almost always carries a negative connotation. Shifting public opinion and changing contexts aside, this does not fundamentally alter the geopolitical and economic reasons why polities might seek to become empires. Powerful actors, after all, still want to be able to compel other actors to act in ways that they want. They also want basing rights and cooperative agreements that allow them to more readily project military power. Immerwahr in his discussion of American bases in Saudi Arabia notes, "It wasn't only the fighting that had gone pointillist. To launch planes and fire missiles, the United States needed platforms. Bases and ships, not too far from the combat zone, were essential. Hence the buildup of a basing network in Saudi Arabia, especially at Dhahran."¹⁰⁵ Immerwahr also chronicles the ease and speed with which

the United States can find replacement bases when political or security “blowback” occurs, as it did for the Americans in Saudi Arabia. Bases, after all, are easier to administer, move and hide than entire polities.

- 41 In addition to projecting power, empires want to create a political order that creates economic advantages, often in the form of access to raw materials at low prices and access to foreign markets. Hopkins chronicles this sort of behavior in the historical context of what he considers the American empire and the conclusion is that these forces and incentives matter a great deal (2018).¹⁰⁶ What modern empires do not want though is to be called imperial. Nor do they want the obligations, costs and negative press that come with administering large amounts of territory with potentially large and unruly populations. This bundle of issues is perhaps the thorniest set of questions about both empire as a form of political organization and the lingering question of the American empire. While this work cannot fully resolve these contentions here it does point out that the literature is incomplete. Whilst it cannot give too much space to the indigenous voice either it can at least help to explain why that voice have been subordinated. Moreover, the American case nicely illustrates the fact that empires can change over time and may include both formal and informal parts simultaneously. Washington thus has a formal empire that includes areas annexed into the Union, i.e., the territories added after independence from Britain. It also has a formal empire that encompasses overseas possessions that Washington has not granted full and equal status, e.g. Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa and Guam. Certainly, it is also true that Washington once controlled other overseas polities, e.g., the Philippines, and that it still dominates a few of them (Hawai’i) as well as other continental lands taken by conquest or purchase over the course of the 19th century. More contentiously, some argue that the United States has evolved or co-evolved a flourishing and sprawling informal empire which, at a minimum, includes bases and islands. Indeed, Blower argues that an “outpost strategy appears as a constant throughout American history”, although those outposts can vary between frontier trading stations to today’s high-tech listening posts.¹⁰⁷ Returning then to the question of definition and the issue of an American empire, perhaps the best approach is to see the phenomenon of empire as fluid, one that best employs the analogy of a river. Sometimes empire can be a raging torrent (formal conquest of large spaces by invading armies), whilst at other times it can merely threaten to flood and burst its banks (hegemony). Like a river, empire can also change its course and forge new channels and river banks whilst older contours get forgotten or swept away until what was at one time a river bed is now so old and dried up that it is not even thought about by some as a river anymore (Artois, First Nation Lands and Hawai’i). Consequently, in aiming to clarify the definitional conundrums of empire we helpfully suggest the following: empire is a river even when it is a river no more!

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