In 1884–85 representatives of the major European powers met in Berlin. The topic was empire. Great Britain, France, and Germany agreed on ground rules for their great game. They negotiated a blueprint for carving up Africa among themselves, an agreement that, along with new technologies of violence, medicine, and communication, accelerated their imperial expansion and tightened control over their colonies. Between the Berlin meetings and the world war, nearly a quarter million square miles were added each year to empires worldwide.

The United States was invited to Berlin (probably because of its interest in Liberia, founded by the American Colonization Society in 1821), and it sent a representative but refused to be a signatory to the final agreement. The reasons derived in part from the legacy of Washington’s warning about entangling alliances, and also from a widely held belief, sometimes loudly broadcast, that America’s republican institutions were a standing rebuke to Europe’s corrupt politics and imperial pretensions. Histories of the United States and Europe have largely accepted this American pretension.

An essential part of American national identity is based on difference, on a tendency to define America as distinct from, even separate from, all that is foreign, whether European or those parts of the world Americans unself-consciously called “uncivilized” or “savage.” American republicanism and Protestant Christianity, they thought, were the keynotes of their distinctiveness, as was their rejection of imperial ambitions. One could argue—and I will—that here they were indulging in a semantic sleight of hand.

It is true and important that with the unhappy exception of the annexation of the Philippines and the somewhat more successful instance of Puerto Rico at the end of the wars of 1898, the United States did not formally colonize any overseas territories. That differentiates it from the European powers and Japan, but it does not close the question. U.S. citizens avidly acquired an entire continent, and they did it through conquest; meanwhile, they developed and militarily defended an overseas empire based on trade and finance. It has been said that the United States was an empire without being imperial. In eschewing territorial control and favoring an empire of commerce and finance, the United States was perhaps prescient. Certainly it helped to shape the global economy and culture that it dominated for most of the twentieth century. The American way of empire raised fewer moral issues than did the European empires—though moral questions there were, and they were revelatory ones.

It has been difficult for Americans to recognize their continental expansion as an empire, especially when ethnocentric assumptions obscure the presence of Native
Americans on the supposedly "empty" land. The empire as market power is similarly difficult to grasp, not being visible or tangible. Its abstract character may partly explain the paradox of a nation which is a global power and which does not teach geography in its schools and whose public has little interest in geographical knowledge beyond the borders of the United States. The comparison with Europeans on this point is striking—and it is evident in American mapmaking. World atlases published in the United States typically included more domestic maps than did European ones—and the difference is substantial: up to 80 percent for American atlases, compared with 7–20 percent for those published in Europe.

The participants at the Berlin Conference were not unaware of the rising power across the Atlantic. They had observed closely the military might of the Union armies, and they knew that the United States was on the verge of becoming the world’s leading manufacturing nation. They feared that the size alone of the continental nations—the United States and Russia—would confer a worrisome advantage on them in international competition. And they feared that if they themselves could not expand, they would be vulnerable. In 1883, the English historian John Seeley warned, “If the United States and Russia hold together for another half century, they will at the end of that time completely dwarf such old European states as France and Germany and depress them into a second class. They will do the same to England, if at the end of that time England still sees herself as simply a European state.” German and Japanese leaders made the same point. French premier Jules Ferry told parliamentary critics of his colonial policies that if France abstained from empire, it would “descend from the first rank to the third or fourth.” The language of competition was pervasive in this era that relied so often on metaphors of Darwinian struggle.

The nineteenth-century system of nations encouraged competition, and it was played out among national empires. Many factors were involved. Economic interests were surely part of the equation, but in a complicated way. The empires were money losers for national treasuries from the beginning, though some individuals made fortunes in them. Yet there were counterbalancing risks in not having an imperial market—being shut out of the markets controlled by rival nations was one. So a defensive economics was as important as visions of new markets. Americans were attuned to this issue in 1898.

Prestige and even moral regeneration pressed the newly consolidated nation-states toward empire, and so did fear of internal divisions, which, it was hoped, might be moderated or wholly displaced by a collective imperial pride. Leaders of rapidly industrializing nations, notably Germany and the United States, might see a way to deflect social conflict in imperial adventures, while in other cases empire was pursued in the interest of completing national consolidation, as in Italy’s North African colonial efforts or in the United States after the Civil War. The United States entered the race for empire for all these reasons.

Two Strains
There are and have been both imperial and anti-imperial strains in American politics and culture. Often the two battled in the mind and heart of the same person. It is often difficult to predict or even later explain why one or the other is dominant in a given instance. Americans are drawn to both liberty and empire, yet the two political logics have an unstable relation with each other, even if they are often linked. Americans celebrate liberty and sometimes seek to extend it beyond their shores, often by means that others cannot distinguish from imperial ones. To themselves the two are joined by the articulated intention of doing good. An anticolonial logic of empire can be read in
Theodore Roosevelt’s justification for continuing the control the United States reserved for itself in an “independent” Cuba:

not only because it is enormously in our interest to control the Cuba market and by every means to foster our supremacy in the tropical lands and waters south of us...but also because we should make all our sister nations of the American continent feel that we desire to show ourselves disinterestedly and effectively their friends.3

Of course, some Americans saw through talk of disinterested commitments in extending what Jefferson called the “empire of liberty.” They recognized that empire put liberty at risk. Abraham Lincoln was one such critic. When those Americans shouting “Manifest Destiny” proposed to extend the blessings of liberty (and slavery, too) by taking half of Mexico’s national territory, he objected. The expansionist, he said,

is a great friend of humanity; and his desire for land is not selfish, but merely an impulse to extend the area of freedom. He is very anxious to fight for the liberation of enslaved nations and colonies, provided always, they have land, and have not any liking for his interference. As to those who have no land [that is, slaves in the U.S. South], and would be glad for help from any quarter, he considers they can afford to wait a few hundred years longer.4

It has been argued that American slavery and American freedom were bound together and justified each other, and one might say the same about empire and liberty. Just as a society that depended on slavery formed the basis for republican liberty for white males and even nourished republican statesmen (four out of the first five presi-

Ahab and Empire

Few Americans of his time understood the global dimensions of American enterprise better than Herman Melville. Whaling was a global industry, and the United States dominated it, searching out the necessary “raw materials” in the world’s oceans and selling to a world market. Melville knew this world, knew the tropical peoples who were being colonized by Europeans and whose cultures were being reformed by evangelical Protestants from the United States. “The same waters,” he wrote, “wash...the new-built California towns...and lave the faded but still gorgeous skirts of Asiatic lands, older than Abraham...while all between float milky-ways of coral isles, and low-lying endless, unknown archipelagoes, and impenetrable Japan.”5

Melville knew his America and Americans well. And in Captain Ahab, who relentlessly pursues the white whale to the farthest reaches of the South Pacific and Asian seas, he created an exemplar of the way Americans lived empire. Having lost a leg to the whale, Ahab has a straightforward reason for his pursuit; American empire was often motivated in part by an unexceptionable concern for security. But if that was all Melville had to tell us, Moby-Dick would be no more than an ordinary adventure story, and the story of American empire would be similarly simple. But neither is so.
Moby-Dick is a book of great complexity with innumerable themes, and one of the most obvious concerns Ahab’s self-regarding, unbounded ambition. America as opportunity—especially material opportunity—has shaped a culture in the United States that encourages escape from the past, starting over, expanding one’s horizons and, ultimately, empire. By naming Ahab’s ship the Pequod, Melville signals that empire is on his mind, for it was the Pequot War between Puritan settlers and Indians in 1636–37 that established “English hegemony in southern New England” and opened the way for settlement.6

Like Ahab, white Americans and especially male Americans were always seeking to expand a temporal and spatial future, repeatedly abandoning the past for newer and wider horizons of ambition. Like the whale, these symbolic and material horizons continually moved out of reach of the sometimes violent quest. Foreign commentators repeatedly noticed this aspect of American culture, none more profoundly than Alexis de Toqueville, who was fascinated by the endless pursuit that never realized itself, that always fell short of satisfaction. It was the product, he thought, of a combination of professed equality and an absence of formal social barriers: the American’s “feverish ardor” for his “own welfare” envisions the realization of a “complete felicity” that “forever escapes him.” The ambitious Americans were ever sipping Tantalus’s cup.

Almost unthinkingly—and to an extraordinary degree—Americans came to associate the meaning of America with an entitlement to unrestricted access to land and markets. Land, freedom, opportunity, abundance, seemed a natural sequence, which nourished something of an American compulsion to use new lands and opportunities to achieve wealth. The remarkable expansion of America’s agricultural frontier, of its cities, and of its markets rested on the premise that people could and should “exploit the wealth of nature to the utmost.”

This combination of aspiration and abundance reflected and nourished a distinctive way of life, what Richard Hofstadter once called a “democracy of cupidity.” The international thrust of this democracy, beginning with the expansion of the United States in the West, constitutes a powerful version of empire.

Melville’s remarkable book both elaborated and challenged the expectation that the world should give itself to the ever-aspiring American. He understood, too, that Americans seldom grasped what those on the other side of the territorial or commercial frontier thought or felt about contact and exchange, whether of land or goods. John Quincy Adams, perhaps America’s ablest secretary of state and an architect of its empire, was worldly enough to realize that other nations found Americans peculiarly, even graspingly, ambitious. Yet even he did not think that required an American adjustment or response. Writing in 1819, he observed that “any effort on our part to reason the world out of a belief that we are ambitious will have no other effect than we add to our ambition hypocrisy.” Twenty years later, attacking China’s efforts to restrict its trade with Western countries, he revealed the degree to which he shared this American sense of entitlement and presumption that the world should accommodate itself to American desire and enterprise.

Conquering a Continent
The story of American empire dates from the initial European settlement of the Western Hemisphere. With their utopian dreams and material ambitions, English settlers in North America took possession of lands they alleged to be empty and unused. The American national experience thereafter focused on territorial expansion and on developing global markets for agriculture, manufactures, and investment. We might again take our cue from Melville, who, in his novel Pierre; or, The Ambiguities (1852), described a
narrative strategy that “goes forward and goes backward, as occasion calls. Nimble center, circumference elastic you must have.” The American story also requires a certain nimbleness in respect to ethical matters. Empire, like slavery, sustained Abraham Lincoln’s observation that “the philosophy of the human mind” was such that “the love of property and a consciousness of right or wrong have conflicting places in our organization, which often make a man’s course seem crooked, his conduct a riddle.”

Henry J. Raymond, founding editor of The New York Times, writing in 1854—three years after Moby-Dick and about the time of Lincoln’s reflection on the human capacity for compartmentalization and self-deception—urged Senator William Henry Seward (Lincoln’s future secretary of state) to curb his imperial ambitions. “Empire,” Raymond wrote, “is a grand ambition, but Freedom is loftier... We are the most ambitious people the world has ever seen: —and I greatly fear we shall sacrifice our liberties to our imperial dream.” Raymond was not the first or last to make such a warning. This American worry about our own democracy was far more deeply felt than any concern for those affected by American power. It was almost as if empire were somehow wholly a domestic matter. Anti-imperialists were often no more curious about the experience of empire on the ground than were imperialists.

Historians have been no exception. Most chroniclers of American imperialism, even when highly critical—and perhaps for that reason—limit themselves to questions of intention and morality. But there is more to be examined: a global perspective invites and demands examination of the way American presumptions and policies were understood by those affected by them, and how American empire looked from the outside.

Empire worked in complex and often unpredictable ways; imperial intrusions altered balances of power, allowing, for example, Native Americans to play the European empires against each other in eighteenth-century North America, or the Chinese to do the same when the Americans arrived in their country a century later, advancing the “self-strengthening” policy of chief minister Li Hung-chang. The arrival of imperial authorities could bring new resources but also alter local hierarchies, relations of power, and structures of opportunity. Such was the case in Puerto Rico after 1898. The United States invested in infrastructure, schools, and public health; equally important, the introduction of American law gave support to Puerto Rico’s own movements for women’s rights, particularly access to divorce, which undercut the ruling elite’s paternalistic notions of the island as a harmonious “great national family.” Similarly, American consolidation of sugar production there made an island-wide labor movement (the Federación Libre de Trabajadores) both possible and necessary. Empire extracts wealth, but it also creates new opportunities—usually without so intending—that create new possibilities, enabling local groups to make novel claims of political and economic rights. The intrusion of American corporations similarly shook up local power arrangements, and sometimes shifts in patterns of opportunity invited families to adopt novel strategies for advancement, enabling them to rise to positions of greater wealth or power or standing.

In the Philippines and in Cuba, American officials aligned with the conservative local elites, and in the latter case this collaboration tipped the Cuban Revolution’s fragile commitment to antiracism ever since 1868 toward a reemphasis on racial difference. In the former, the elite ilustrados, as they were called (the educated or “enlightened ones”), were able to limit American colonial authority by raising the specter of popular unrest when the Americans pressed them too hard. These are examples of what Steve J. Stern calls “reverse colonization,” whereby the colonized utilize the apparatus of colonial control for their own purposes,
a process limited in range of action but nonetheless significant.

Historians writing the history of empire rightly emphasize these complex forms of interaction. It is important to recognize the agency of the colonized, whether in territorial empires or in commercial ones. But one must not overlook the uneven distribution of power. Here I emphasize the structure and power of empire and I do not ignore the circumstances at the “other end.” I am especially concerned to challenge the commonplace notion that the United States never or rarely self-consciously deployed its political, economic, and military power to shape the world in the interests of its empire. I challenge, too, the notion that its imperial moment, 1898, was unthinking or accidental.

It is true that the land hunger of individual settlers drove the westward expansion of the United States. Yet the expansion was sustained by national policy and enforced by military means when needed. Taking territory from Native Americans and from Mexico was, except for the Civil War and the emancipation of the slaves, the most important activity of the U.S. government in the nineteenth century. The government also secured, by purchase and treaty from European powers, other land and had little regard for the rights or preferences of those long resident on it. Empire was not wholly the work of private actors.

Second, there was a consistent use of diplomacy and even force to protect Americans’ access to global markets and to secure freedom for missionaries abroad. The commercial policy dates at least from the Jefferson administration, which brought the United States into its first foreign war to protect American commerce in the Mediterranean from the Barbary pirates of North Africa. At the same time Jefferson used diplomacy rather than war to secure New Orleans as a shipping point for American agriculture. The Mexican War brought to the United States vast new territory and the great natural harbor of San Francisco. And U.S. government policy was equally evident in the determination to make the Caribbean an “American lake.” One sees the twentieth-century formulation of this in Woodrow Wilson’s hope, informed by American moral and political precepts, for a postwar world safe for American trade and investment.

The United States, then, entered the twentieth century well experienced in taking territory and in the affairs of empire. It was prepared to seek and protect markets for American agriculture, manufactured goods, and capital, especially in Latin America and Asia. And it competed aggressively with the European powers for market share in the global economy.

**Being the Whale**

Ahab has lost his leg to the whale, and, as he says, that lessens him as a man. But an apter symbol might have been the loss of his sight, for it was blind ambition that marked Ahab’s and the Americans’ endless quest. At the core of empire as a way of life is precisely this incapacity to see oneself as a potential enemy. Confident in their ambition and desire, and sure of their own goodwill, Americans were strangers to self-reflection. As Lincoln Steffens acerbically noted, this meant they never learned to do wrong knowingly, but others endured the consequences of the American dispensation.

Three brief accounts of interactions with “others” show us the heart of the problem: the Cherokee removal, the taking of half of Mexico’s national territory, and an obscure trade mission to Korea.

Two themes unite these disparate cases. First, Americans presumed a position of superiority to the people whose land they coveted or whose trade they sought. Tocqueville made this point with a brutal analogy. Whites, he wrote, consider themselves “to the other races of mankind what man himself is to the lower animals: he makes them subservient to his use, and when he cannot subdue he destroys them.” Second, Americans repeatedly misunderstood the culture,
ideas, and aspirations of other peoples and nations. Again and again they presumed that their own parochial assumptions were universal and should be controlling in intercultural and international exchanges. Leaving out the guns for a moment, this quality of empire can be partly described as a massive, consistent failure of empathy.

With Native Americans this pattern was especially significant. The terms of interaction—partly contributed by the Indians, it is true—were consistently paternal, marked by a practice of human diminution. Listen to Thomas McKenney, the highly sympathetic superintendent of Indian Trade in the 1820s: “Our Indians stand pretty much in the relation to the Government as do our children to us. They are equally dependent; and need, not unfrequently, the exercise of parental authority to detach them from those ways which might involve both their peace and their lives.” That easy presumption of the government’s right to “detach” Indians from their inappropriate “ways,” their historical culture, made even humanitarian concern frighteningly similar to the frontiersman’s greed in its results, if not its intentions.

While some religious leaders and a few politicians from New England tried to protect the Indians, it was all too clear that American political culture had no place for them. Politicians had nothing to gain by protecting the Native Americans. When the Cherokee, following the admonition of Jefferson, adopted American ways, becoming literate and taking up plantation agriculture, including slaves, and adopted a written constitution, they claimed sovereignty, infuriating Georgians who coveted their lands. Their adoption of American ways did not sacrifice their traditional values but aimed to protect them, something the Americans could not grasp. While their leaders insisted that the “stale” notion that Indians could not adapt and must be pushed aside, they were, their leader John Ridge said, “assaulted with the menaces of expulsion.”

General Winfield Scott concentrated the Cherokees into camps, and then in 1838 marched sixteen thousand of them “at the point of a bayonet” a thousand miles west to Oklahoma; a quarter of them died on the way. The Cherokee experience was not singular. The administration of Andrew Jackson made seventy removal treaties with Indians. In 1890, when the Battle of Wounded Knee marked the end of the Indian wars in the American West, the journalist Theodore Marburg celebrated this final war in the multi-century conquest of the Indians in a way that anticipated the next phase of American imperialism. “We have brushed aside 275,000 Indians,” he wrote. “In place of them [we] have this population of 70,000,000 of what we regard as the highest type of modern man... [We] have done more than any other race to conquer the world for civilization...and we will probably...go on with our conquests.”

The War with Mexico

Even as the United States was accumulating Indian lands, there was a developing aspiration to expand American settlement into northern Mexico, beginning with a movement to annex Texas, then a Mexican state. In 1829, when Andrew Jackson proposed to buy Texas from Mexico, Simón Bolívar, the liberator of Spanish America, observed that the United States seems “destined by Providence to plague America with torments in the name of freedom.”

Advocates for expansion in the United States saw their providential destiny differently, and they tended to be oblivious to the possibility that the beneficent developments they planned could have victims. Taking the lands of the Southwest was simply part of the larger story of their westward expansion, what the Mexican historian Josefina Zoraida Vázquez refers to as North American “spontaneous expansionism.” For Mexicans the war was and remains the “central event of Mexico’s history and destiny.” Not only is it well remembered, but it is remembered as a
trauma. The Mexican Nobel laureate in literature Octavio Paz wrote that the U.S. war against Mexico, which “deprived us of over half our national territory,” was “one of the most unjust wars in the history of imperialism.”

Admittedly, the war against Mexico was a divisive issue within the United States. When he wrote his memoirs in 1885, Ulysses S. Grant, who had been a young officer in it, recalled his bitter opposition to the annexation of Texas and his feeling that the war itself was “one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation.” It was, he added, “an instance of a republic following the bad example of European monarchies, in not considering justice in their desire to acquire additional territory.”

But North American expansionists, blinded by visions of Manifest Destiny, did not grasp—as most Americans today do not—the perception of the United States as greedy and dangerous, as an enemy. For Stephen A. Douglas and most Americans at the time, expansion concerned only the United States. “You can make as many treaties as you want to contain...this great Republic,” he declared, but “it will shrug them off and its people will be directed toward a limit I will not dare describe.”

We also forget that in the early years of the nineteenth century there were two newly independent nations sharing the territory of the North American continent, with equally promising futures. Mexico’s constitution of 1824 was a liberal one, significantly influenced by that of the United States. Mexico was 1.7 million square miles, with 6 million people; the United States extended over 1.8 million square miles, with 9.6 million people—so the magnitudes were comparable. (The consequences of the war between them are revealed in the statistics for 1853: Mexico had lost 1 million square miles to the United States; the population in the booming United States grew to 23 million, bolstered by a massive flow of European immigrants, while Mexico stagnated at 8 million.)

**The Case of Korea**

Another war that is largely forgotten by Americans, including historians, is known to Koreans as the “barbarian incursion of 1871.” Yet the American public at the time had an intense interest in what a New York newspaper called “The Little War with the Heathens.” This was the first time American forces seized Asian territory and raised the flag there, even if only briefly. And it very clearly reveals how Americans unthinkingly dismissed different cultures, especially of nonwhite peoples, while presuming the universal appeal of their own values and national aspirations.

U.S. diplomatic interest in Korea had developed after the Civil War. In 1866 a heavily armed American merchant vessel arrived in Korean waters seeking a trade agreement. The Korean government had recently driven out French Catholic missionaries, and they sent a message to the Americans indicating they wanted neither Christianity nor trade. When the Americans ignored the message and landed at P'yongyang, a crowd formed. The U.S. sailors fired on them, and the Koreans retaliated by killing those whom they presumed guilty and burning the ship. There was war talk in Washington, but nothing was done. Then, in 1870, Hamilton Fish, Grant’s secretary of state, sent instructions to Frederick F. Low, the new U.S. minister to China, asking him to open negotiations with Korea to the end of establishing commercial relations and provision for proper treatment of shipwrecked U.S. sailors. He counseled Low that “little is known...of the people who inhabit that country.”

Lack of knowledge notwithstanding, Americans had strong opinions about all Asians. Low had previously served as governor of California, which had a substantial Chinese population, and he was confident that he knew what was necessary. “I appre-
hend that all the cunning and sophistry that enter so largely into the oriental character...will be brought to bear to defeat the object of our visit,” he informed the secretary of state, “and if that fails it is not unlikely that we may be met with a display of force.” He also believed that “orientals” were likely to misunderstand Western restraint; a failure to deploy force would only invite a Korean use of force. However wrongheaded his understanding, it produced the predicted results. A sequence of misunderstandings, largely based on racist and cultural presuppositions of superior moral virtue on both sides, produced needless violence.

Without making formal contact with Korean authorities, the Americans began to survey the river and coast. Local officials might easily have interpreted these actions as provocative, but the Korean emperor had ordered them to avoid conflict. The Americans misunderstood this restraint, and, finding no resistance, they pressed on, confident of the purity of their motives and rightness of their mission. They believed, moreover, that international treaties and trade relations were central to civilized life, and that they were offering the option of civilization to a people whose commitment to isolation marked them as uncivilized.

Finally, communication of a limited sort commenced. The Americans affirmed their peaceful intentions—and indicated their plan to continue the surveys. When survey parties entered the Han River and proceeded upstream toward Seoul, the Koreans opened fire. The American ships landed a contingent of 651 Marines, who defeated the Korean force on shore and then departed. Low interpreted the Korean attack as “unprovoked and wanton, and without the slightest shadow of excuse.” The Koreans, he wrote to the secretary of state, were no more and no less than a “semi-barbarous and hostile race” who resisted the Americans’ reasonable aspirations. But the Koreans had understood the withdrawal as an indication of their victory, an example of their moral virtue overcoming the Westerners’ superior technology.

The historian Gordon Chang, the principal scholarly analyst of this episode, rightly observes that the American failure to understand the Koreans’ point of view or why they might have perceived the U.S. convoy as a hostile one derived largely from their ethnocentric presumptions about Korean barbarism and American superiority. “The very premise of the mission, which aimed to force Korea to join the ‘civilized’ nations of the world” and to engage in regular intercourse, defined the Koreans as “backward” and “inferior.” The United States, by contrast, assumed that its commitment to trade and open markets “represented advanced civilization and a system of international relations in accord with the natural order.”

The Rhetoric of Empire
American imperial action, whether on the North American continent or in more distant places, was justified by a cocktail mixed of various rationales—religious mission, theories of social efficiency, and ideas of racial hierarchy and capacity. Happily, or so many Americans thought, self-interest and humanitarianism apparently converged in empire American-style. Richard Olney, secretary of state in the Cleveland administration, gave a lecture at Harvard College in 1898 arguing for greater U.S. engagement in the world, assuring his audience (and readers of The Atlantic Monthly) that “our material interests only point in the same direction as considerations of a higher and less selfish character.”

Christian missionaries carried these higher considerations throughout the world, and represented the major American cultural influence beyond the borders of the United States. The first generation of them, in the 1830s and ’40s, were Christians first and Americans second, having neither a nationalist nor a modernizing agenda. They were propagating God’s word. It would be a
“mistake,” as the secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions put it, to “reproduce our own religious civilization in heathen lands.”

But by mid-century, they were carrying specifically American Christianity with them. American culture in its global extension, whether brought by missionaries or by businessmen, increasingly had a similar content, a message of uplift and modernization. Culture and commerce both promised modernity, much as Hollywood culture did a century later. According to a nineteenth-century consular official in the Middle East reporting on missionary activity there: “They are raising the standard of morality, of intelligence, of education... Directly or indirectly every phase of their work is rapidly paving the way for American commerce.”

The different European empires had particular theories of legitimate possession that governed the way they took land in the Western Hemisphere. From the beginning of settlement in North America the English had framed their justifications in the language of religion and of God’s intentions for the world, presuming that effective use—or social efficiency—justified and legitimated their claims to land, whether taken by direct theft or by treaty. The Portuguese believed that discovery itself, or more precisely the technical capacity to discover, conferred dominion, while the Spanish claimed that speech—a ritualized “declaration” of possession—was sufficient to claim actual possession. But for the English, legitimate possession depended on use, on making the land fruitful. Agriculture, fences, and hedges indicated ownership. Unused land, at least as the English would define use, was available for the taking. John Winthrop thus explained the Puritan taking of land in Massachusetts Bay: “[T]he Natives in New England...in close noe land neither have any settled habitation nor any tame cattle to improve the land by...soe as if wee leave them sufficient for their use we may lawfully take the rest.”

A grander formulation of this logic begins with a presumed right of the world itself to growth, expansion, and the development of resources. This philosophy had religious overtones in the seventeenth century, as the resources were considered God-given. Some centuries later, the justification was a secular social efficiency or economic development. Walter Weyl, a leading American progressive, declared in 1917 that “the resources of the earth must be unlocked.” Speaking of the colonization of the Philippines, Alfred Thayer Mahan argued that the right of “an indigenous population” to retain their land “depends not upon natural right” but rather upon their “political fitness,” which would be demonstrated in the “political work of governing, administering, and developing [it], in such a manner as to ensure the natural right of the world at large that resources should not be left idle.”

Local ownership, in other words, was subject to the most productive use.

In the nineteenth century, the taking of land beyond the Mississippi River was thought to be justified by Providence. John L. O’Sullivan, editor of the Democratic Review and a leader among the New York intellectuals who called themselves “Young America,” declared in 1845 “the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole continent which provi-idence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government.” O’Sullivan here fused liberty, democracy, and the United States. Lincoln made the same connection in his Gettysburg Address. But the implications of these two formulations differed: for Lincoln, the aim and result was an expansion of freedom, while O’Sullivan wanted to justify territorial aggrandizement and empire.

When Jefferson and other founders had spoken of an “empire of liberty,” they meant
a large and populous nation, not imperial rule, and they did not envision a nation of continental proportions, believing that more than one republic would thrive in North America. In 1815, Simón Bolívar’s “Jamaica Letter” hoped a pacific union of nations in the “New World,” perhaps led by Mexico, would protect self-rule and freedom.

In only a little more than a decade these mutualist visions of an America of republican freedom beyond the United States gave way to a North American appropriation of “America” to refer to itself and its dreams of hemispheric hegemony. In a private letter of 1843 intended for public disclosure, former President Jackson linked the diffusion of republican government to the open-ended process of incorporating new territories into the United States, slightly but significantly emending Jefferson’s phrase to “extending the area of freedom.”

Over the next century the religious, social-efficiency, and political arguments associated with the dispossession of the Native Americans were subsumed under the rubric of race. Indeed, throughout the Atlantic world race emerged as a fundamental social category. Partly this was because the romantic movement accentuated differences among peoples, but it was also the product of so-called racial science, whether identified with the American school of anthropology or the French race theorist Joseph Arthur de Gobineau and his Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines (1853–55).

By the late nineteenth century, Manifest Destiny was as much a racial concept as a political one, about the rights (and responsibilities, too, it was believed) of “civilized” nations to rule lesser, uncivilized peoples. For those who accepted it, race offered a comprehensive, if crude, interpretation of global history. At one level, therefore, the spokesmen for Anglo-Saxonism would wholly agree with W.E.B. DuBois that “the Negro problem in America is but a local phase of a world problem,” and, as he said, “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” But the perspectives and politics differed on either side of the color line. For DuBois the issue was freedom, justice, and dignity for all peoples; those shouldering the “white man’s burden” thought they had the task of educating people of color for their (limited) participation in civilized society and of managing them as a labor force for the profits of empire.

In 1898, when Americans debated the annexation of the Philippines, masculine Anglo-Saxonism was as prominent and probably as influential as the strategic and economic arguments favoring an empire. According to William Allen White, the famous Kansas editor and Progressive, “Only the Anglo-Saxons can govern themselves.” It is their “manifest destiny,” he continued, “to go forth as world conqueror.” Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana, a leading imperialist, agreed, for Anglo-Saxons and Teutons were made by God to be “the master organizers of the world.” As for the Filipinos, he declared, “they are not a self-governing race. They are Orientals, Malays, instructed by Spaniards in the latter’s worst estate.”

Many imperialists may have come across as bullies, but there was a good deal of anxiety about the challenge of empire in the 1890s. Intellectuals had absorbed the language of Herbert Spencer’s “struggle for survival” and Darwin’s notion of “natural selection” and transferred them to races and nations. Thus Josiah Strong spoke of “the final competition of the races, for which the Anglo-Saxon is being schooled.” The openly racist rhetoric of empire was eventually supplanted by a vocabulary of “order,” “development,” “responsible government,” “economic efficiency,” and “freedom and democracy.” It is not clear, however, that the North Atlantic states have wholly abandoned the assumptions that diminished the
dignity and even the humanity of those in what is now called the "global South."

A Global Strategy
Historians and journalists often remark on the historical moment when the United States stepped onto the world stage with a new global awareness. Surely there was such a moment, but in my opinion it came earlier than the ones commonly cited—1898, World War I, 1941, 1945, or the beginning of globalization talk in the 1980s. From at least the presidency of Thomas Jefferson, American leaders have been aware of their nation’s global position and have sought consistently to expand its commercial and cultural influence. The major cultural influence emanating internationally from the United States was once religion, but in the twentieth century the volume of cultural exports became vastly larger and more diverse. The projection of American culture, whatever its form, is not recent.

Since Jefferson, perhaps even since George Washington, the United States has had a sequence of presidents and secretaries of state who have self-consciously fashioned a global strategy for the nation. “Globalization has been at the heart of American strategic thinking and policy” for the whole of the national history of the United States, the journalist Walter Russell Mead has written.13 By paying too much attention to President Washington’s warning against entangling alliances with the warring European powers of his time, we may have overlooked his encouragement of global trade. We have also underestimated the comprehensive strategies and policies devoted to that end for the next century; the United States was not wholly preoccupied with developing the West and not wholly inward-looking. Charles Francis Adams, writing in 1899 as an anti-imperialist, rightly read Washington’s oft-repeated advice as favoring international commerce but with “as little political connection as possible.”

The United States was not reluctant to use its power to negotiate favorable commercial treaties or to use force to protect its commercial interests abroad. Between 1787 and 1920, it intervened abroad 122 times (excluding declared wars); 99 of these interventions occurred in the nineteenth century and involved every continent. Historians and analysts consider that the American state was weak at the time and lacked a military establishment in the nineteenth century, excepting the Civil War era, yet the state effectively supported aggressive territorial expansion and protected American commerce abroad.

The events of 1898 are often considered an aberration, a departure from American tradition, prompted by a desire to participate in the end-of-the-century European race for empire. Mahan said that American colonization of the Philippines was “but one phase of a sentiment that has swept over the whole civilized European world.” It has been estimated that across the globe in 1901 there were 140 colonies, territories, and protectorates, most of them in the tropics. Surely this context is important, but it ought not obscure a key local point: the events of 1898 were also a continuation of America’s “westward expansion.”

Theodore Roosevelt so understood the matter, as did his fellow imperialist Henry Cabot Lodge. In a new preface for the 1900 edition of his Winning of the West, Roosevelt wrote that 1898 “finished the work begun over a century before by the backwoodsman,” that “the question of expansion in 1898 was but a variant...of the great western movement.” Senator Lodge agreed that “to-day we do but continue the same movement.” If the anti-imperialists are right, he added, “then our whole past record of expansion is a crime.” Buffalo Bill’s popular Wild West Show marked both the continuity of western history and its new geography, when in 1899 it replaced its re-creation of Custer’s Last Stand with one of the Battle of San Juan Hill in Cuba.
The reason 1898 seems so different from the Indian removal in 1838 or from the taking of Mexico in 1848 is that the earlier work of empire had been “domesticated” as an internal affair—an idea that depended, of course, on ignoring the claims of Indians and Mexicans. At the same time there was continuous American involvement in East Asia: the Charles Wilkes expedition in 1839, the Wanghai Treaty with China in 1844, the so-called opening of Japan in 1854, and a treaty with Hawaii in 1875 that forbade Hawaiians from disposing of any territory to foreign powers. Americans thought of the Pacific and East Asia as extensions of the West, as well as the focal point for their oceanic commercial ambitions.

In fact, the imperial adventures of 1898 were prompted in large part by worry over the closing of the continental frontier, as well as by fears about the overproduction of agricultural and manufactured goods. In that year, the United States for the first time exported more manufactured goods than it imported; with no more than 5 percent of the world’s population, it produced 32 percent of the world’s food supply. Albert Beveridge surely had these developments in mind when he took the Senate floor in 1899 to explain that “American factories are making more than the American people can use; American soil is producing more than they can consume.” Under the circumstances, he continued, “fate has written our policy for us; the trade of the world must and shall be ours.”

McKinley had to make a decision. Given the foregoing, perhaps his decision was predetermined. But still, he had not anticipated such a development, and he went to some lengths to persuade the public that he had deliberated long and seriously. He told the following story, which has been oft quoted, to a group of visiting leaders of the Methodist Church:

When I realized that the Philippines had dropped into our laps I confess I did not know what to do with them... I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed to Almighty God for light and guidance... And one night late it came to me this way—I know not how but it came: (1) that we could not give them back to Spain—that would be cowardly and dishonorable; (2) that we could not turn them over to France or Germany—our commercial rivals in the Orient—that would be bad business and discreditable; (3) that we could not leave them to themselves—they were unfit for self-government...; and (4) that there was nothing left
for us to do but to take them...and
to educate the Filipinos, and uplift
and civilize and Christianize them...
And then I went to bed, and went
to sleep, and slept soundly.14

Why it would have been “dishonorable”
to “give them back to Spain” is unclear, the
more so since the United States itself did
not in fact possess the Philippines. Nor did
it have any right to them, save a claim of
military conquest over Spain, but not—and
this is important—over the Filipinos, who
were still fighting for their independence.
As for Christianizing them, the Protestant
McKinley speaking to the Methodists seems
to have overlooked that the official religion
of the Philippines was Roman Catholicism,
or he did not consider several centuries of
that faith sufficient evidence of Christianity.
As for their unfitness for self-rule, the Fil-
ipinos, who had been fighting Spain for
their independence since well before 1898,
had a provisional government and a consti-
tution in place. That leaves avoiding “bad
business”—or affirming good business—as
the strongest reason for establishing Ameri-
can imperial rule.

Making the World Safe for Empire
Though in 1898 Woodrow Wilson was less
certain of the merits of imperialism than
Roosevelt, he did not join the anti-imperial-
ist chorus. The situation, he thought, dem-
anded serious reflection, which he gave to
it. By 1901, when the brutal war against
the Filipino insurgents was becoming a na-
tional embarrassment, he was conscious of
the complex interplay of American tradi-
tions and world opinion in the work of
domestic economy:

The best guarantee of good govern-
ment we can give to the Filipinos
is, that we shall be sensitive to the
opinion of the world, that we shall
be sensitive in what we do to our
own standards, so often boasted and
proclaimed, and shall wish above all
things else to live up to the charac-
ter we have established, the stan-
dards we have professed.15

By the time of the First World War, when
American power made him a world leader,
he had become a leading opponent of impe-
rialism. Less publicly, Roosevelt and his for-
mer imperialist colleagues had also ceased
advocating territorial expansion.

In the midst of the world war, and be-
fore America entered it, Wilson became
convinced—like DuBois, Jane Addams,
Emily Greene Balch, Crystal Eastman, and
others far more radical than he—that impe-
rialism was the cause of international anar-
chy, not its cure. Competition among impe-
rnal powers was responsible for the war, he
believed. The alternative he proposed was a
world governed by international law that
was enforced by an international institution.
Such a structure would be a framework for
national self-determination and would lead
to international stability. This view of the
world positioned Wilson against the illiber-
lisms of the time, against the autocratic
imperialist regimes of Europe and Asia—
and after 1917 against international
communism.

Notwithstanding these views, Wilson
was committed to a vision of America and
the world that amounted to an endorsement
of the American way of life as empire. Like
many leaders before him, he thought the
United States was at once unique and a uni-
versal model. The world should look like
the United States writ large, he thought,
and then it would offer America sufficient
space—the globe itself—in which to pursue
the felicity that so struck Tocqueville. Jef-
fferson had thought that in the long run the
United States would be secure only in a re-
publican world, a world like itself. Wilson
offered a similar idea with his Fourteen
Points in 1918. Similarly, National Security
Council document 68 (1950), the founda-
tion of American policy in the Cold War,
sought a particular “order among nations” that would allow “our free society” to “flourish.” That society would be not only in the American interest but in the interest of all humankind, of “civilization itself.”

While Wilson spoke in universalist terms, he presumed, as Americans always had, that global commodity, goods, and financial markets should always be at the disposal of the United States. Conservatives agreed, but somehow thought an American protective tariff was compatible with this idea. The natural resources, commerce, and investment opportunities of other nations ought to be available whenever and wherever Americans desired and on the terms they preferred. The success of the United States in the global economy would, Wilson and others thought, ratify America’s claim to represent a universally desirable future. Whether they realized it or not, Wilson and the America for which and to which he spoke were engaged in their own version of Ahab’s restless ambition and tireless pursuit of the whale.

Sometimes Wilson spoke generously; at other times his language was tough. But he always carried a big stick, bigger in fact than Roosevelt’s—and he used it more often. Wilson was perfectly comfortable with Roosevelt’s “corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine, which justified U.S. intervention to repair “chronic wrongdoing” in the Americas. Roosevelt’s standard for a nation’s doing right included “efficiency and decency,” maintaining “order,” and paying “its obligations.” Using that standard, Wilson intervened in Haiti in 1915 (where troops remained until 1934), in the Dominican Republic in 1916 (where troops remained until 1924), in Mexico twice (1914, 1916), and in Cuba (1917). He sent troops to Russia in 1918–20 in support of supposed liberal opponents of the Bolsheviks whose prospects he no doubt overestimated. He was more cautious, however, in central Asia and the Middle East, showing no interest in discussions at the time of possible U.S. mandates in Armenia, Albania, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, or Palestine.

It could be said that for Wilson the United States as international policeman was an alternative to imperialism as a way of ordering the world. He might even have thought that remaking the world in the image of America was in itself a form of anti-imperialism. But here again one encounters the recurring problem of Americans not being able to see their country as others saw it, to imagine the United States as an enemy. Wilson, and Americans generally, tend to miss the point made several generations later by Sukarno of Indonesia at the Bandung Conference of 1955: “Colonialism does not just exist in the classic form.” There is also “a modern dress in the form of economic control...[and] intellectual control.”

This quasi-invisible American internationalism notwithstanding, Woodrow Wilson, more than any other single person, shaped the way Americans thought about their place in the world. Washington and Lincoln had been greatly admired abroad, but Wilson was the first American to be a world leader (a stature signified, perhaps, by the frequency with which one finds a street named for him in the world’s great cities). The now nearly century-long debate between advocates of his internationalist vision and those espousing unilateralism or the unbridled nationalist exercise of power is still a vital one, and consequential to Americans and to the world at large.

For Woodrow Wilson nineteenth-century imperialism carried a large double meaning. It implied outmoded forms of top-down politics of all kinds, and he was not surprised that autocratic rule and conflict among the imperial powers brought forth both a terrible world war and the Russian Revolution. Looking to the future and a world fit and safe for American ideals, he tried to position himself and the United States as a global alternative to both “atavistic imperialism and revolutionary socialism.” He repeatedly professed himself
thrilled and excited by the idea of the Russian people rising up against autocratic rule. The revolution was part of his justification for American entry into the war, “to make the world safe for democracy.”

The United States in 1914 was not what it became after the Second World War: the most powerful and consistent counterrevolutionary force in the world. Wilson invaded revolutionary Mexico twice in the hope of teaching Mexicans a proper politics, but the former professor of politics learned more than he taught. His experience there informed him that sometimes the deep social and economic roots of political issues required more than merely free elections to resolve. He was learning the same from radicals in the United States whom he befriended and with whom he repeatedly spoke and corresponded, from Jane Addams to Max Eastman. It was they who tugged him toward the internationalism that became central to his historical significance.

He could participate in these exchanges because the line between liberalism and socialism was not then so absolute as it became in 1918–20 and then, even more so, in the 1940s. He was open to the ideas of thinkers far more radical than he was or, as president, could be. Wilson opposed Bolshevism, but he never regretted the Russian Revolution, and he hoped a liberal Russia would emerge from the convulsion; he even lent military support to Siberian opponents of Bolshevism who, he hoped, might bring about that result.

Wilson and Lenin shared the world stage by the end of 1917. They both offered the world a new future of social justice at home and peace abroad, and they both directed their vision beyond established leaders to those whom Wilson called “the silent mass of mankind.” If in domestic affairs they defended radically different ideas about the proper roles of the state and of private property, their international proposals sounded strikingly similar. They were far more alike than one might expect from the nearly century-long global division that their overall differences first defined.

When Russia left the war in November 1917, Lenin offered the “Petrograd Formula” for ending it: “no annexations, no indemnities, free determination of nationalities.” This set of precepts was not far from the precepts in Wilson’s great Peace Without Victory address to the Senate in January 1917, nor from his Fourteen Points, which Lenin praised as “a great step toward the peace of the world.” In presenting the Fourteen Points to the Senate in January 1918, Wilson in fact specifically associated himself with the “largeness of view” and “universal human sympathy” articulated at Petrograd. He especially commended Lenin’s exposure to the public gaze of the secret war agreements that had been found in the Russian archives, and he joined Lenin’s plea for open diplomacy. The Petrograd Formula did not, as it turned out, guide Soviet policy, and the Soviet domestic experiments became a nightmare. But in 1918, Wilson and Lenin were in the same conversation. However different the liberal and communist visions of the world order, both proposed to drag the world from an imperialist past to a modern, progressive future.

Wilson’s vision was rooted in American tradition and it continued the American way of empire. His astonishingly smooth projection of historical American principles into a global future translated American ideals and interests ever so easily into presumed universal human ideals. Such were the foundations of a century of American liberal internationalism, compromised domestically only by a few recurring episodes not of isolationism but of American unilateralism.

Notes
The original chapter from which this excerpt was drawn includes extensive source notes. The interested reader is directed to the notes to chapter 4 of A Nation Among Nations.


11. Ibid., p. 1353.


