

How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States

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How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States, by Daniel Immerwahr. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2019. ISBN: 978-0-374172-14-5, 528 pages (hardcover).

Daniel Immerwahr's *How to Hide an Empire* makes what seems an obvious point: that much of the United States' global power rests on direct political control of overseas territories and peoples. Aimed at a general readership, *How to Hide and Empire* is a compelling precis for an as-yet-to-be-written American history textbook. For Pacific scholars it stands as confirmation that their work is reshaping the way American history is understood and, potentially, taught. Immerwahr urges readers to look "beyond the logo map," what Immerwahr calls the familiar silhouette of the lower-forty-eight states. This set of ideological blinders excludes the territories and their peoples from the national field of vision, and produces distorted and dangerous understandings of race, democracy, and American power. As an experiment, I opened up the eleventh edition of a popular American history survey and found a political map of the United States containing the lower forty-eight with inserts of Alaska (not to scale), Hawaii (only the eight largest islands) and, surprisingly, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Perhaps Guam will appear in the next edition.¹

As Immerwahr demonstrates in an engaging set of chapters on industrial standards and English-language diffusion, the United States also projects power through post-World War II international institutions and with, to varying degrees, consent. He contends; however, it has been the places, or "points," acquired prior to and following World War II that have undergirded such institutions and have formed the hard infrastructure of America's global influence. Another recent work claiming to be an imperial reinterpretation of American history, A.G. Hopkins slab-like *American Empire*, presses the long-standing view in American historiography that following World War II the United States exchanged an overseas empire of physical places for global hegemony.² Immerwahr, much more economically, shows how such analyses miss the point. The United States not only retained most of its overseas empire, an independent Philippines being the notable exception, it acquired new postwar possessions, significantly ones to which its responsibilities to and the administrative costs of were minimal. The approximately eight hundred overseas military bases, including basing rights on the independent Philippines, gave the United States "semi-autonomy," and, as Immerwahr points out, a legal grey zone in which rights were and remain conveniently contingent. These places were intended to serve not only as platforms for military power projection, but also as centers from which American culture and commerce radiated – that so-called soft power. Immerwahr delivers snapshots of postwar Liverpool and Tokyo in which he makes an at times muddled case that the rise of the Beatles and Sony, in part, resulted from their respective founders' close proximity to American military bases.

While the impressive network of mid-twentieth century American overseas bases, what Immerwahr evocatively calls a "pointillist empire," has attracted a great amount of scholarly

¹ David Emory Shi and George Brown Tindall, *America: A Narrative History*. vol. 1, tenth edition (New York: Norton, 2016)

² A.G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018.)

attention, *How to Hide and Empire* traces their origins partly to familiar story of continental empire building, but more directly to the mid-nineteenth century, when the United States seized, exploited, and articulated a retro-fitted legal status for Pacific and Caribbean guano islands. The 1857 legislation that declared United States' authority over uninhabited but valuable overseas possessions contrasted sharply with the contemporaneous political battles over statehood that produced the Civil War. The Guano Islands Act classified overseas places as "appertaining" to the United States, an obscure word meant to make guano islands and those who came to labor on them bound by American law, but not protected by it.³ That laborers on guano islands tended in the Pacific to be Hawaiian and in the Caribbean to be black synthesizes an established historiography on the connections between America's domestic and overseas racial colonialism.

Following the Spanish-American War, Immerwahr recounts how in the Insular Cases the Supreme Court used Guano Act language to declare that Congress alone decides whether or not federal protections are to be afforded to the largely non-white inhabitants of its recent acquisitions. The resulting lawlessness encouraged surveillance and medical experimentation regimes that reveal the American imperial project was never incidental but always central. Immerwahr illustrates this through a particularly urgent account of American policies in the Pacific during the Second World War. The secretary of the Navy in 1941 declared Hawai'i an "enemy country" and the military subjected its people to martial law, the first mass fingerprinting in the United States, mandatory identification cards, and the largest compulsory vaccination. While the incarceration of Japanese Americans on the West Coast is part of the traditional war narrative, it is traditionally identified as a shameful aberration. Immerwahr shows how mass imprisonment and displacement are better understood as common practice. The military displaced and imprisoned Aleuts in Alaska, people of Japanese-heritage in the Philippines (before the Japanese conquest) and following the war, displaced and removed Chamorus on Guam, and displaced, bombed, and poisoned Marshallese. Historians have been telling such stories for decades, and Immerwahr does much to synthesize them for non-specialists and integrate them into the American history survey.

How to Hide an Empire succeeds on its own terms. Immerwahr acknowledges the book does not offer archival contributions relying instead on the work of a diverse group of scholars to make the case to see a "familiar history differently." A history of American power that is anything but "soft" and an empire that is not, as historian Geir Lundestad⁴ would have it, "by invitation," Immerwahr is primarily addressing American and diplomatic historians for whom such narratives persist. Paul Kramer has offered the most comprehensive critique of Immerwahr's approach, albeit one levied prior to the book's publication when the ideas existed as a 2016 American Historical Association lecture and an essay in *Diplomatic History*.⁵ In "How Not to Write the History of U.S. Empire," Kramer accuses Immerwahr of propping up a strawman argument (scholars have ignored American imperial history) to using uncritically terms favored by turn-of-the-century imperialists in describing American overseas possessions ("Greater United States"), to adopting a far-too-narrow definition of empire (places directly administered by the United States), to ignoring the decades of regional histories produced by specialists (he concludes the essay with a works cited to provide a glimpse into the diverse scholarship on American colonialism in the Philippines and

³ The phrasing "bound by law, but not protected by it," is adapted from late political scientist Francis M. Wilhoit's description of American conservatism.

⁴ Geir Lundestad, "Empire by Invitation," *Diplomatic History*, 23, no. 2 (1999): 189-217.

⁵ Daniel Immerwahr, "The Greater United States: Territory and Empire in U.S. History," *Diplomatic History*, 40, no. 3 (2016): 373-91

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Puerto Rico).⁶ More so than Immerwahr's original lecture and subsequent essay were able, *How to Hide an Empire* addresses each of Kramer's criticisms. Kramer's most salient complaint, however, that the territories and peoples of Immerwahr's "Greater America" appear and recede according to their relationship with the mainland remains valid. *How to Hide an Empire* aims to be a blueprint for an American history textbook. Looking "beyond the logo map" might be insufficient because national history remains tethered to problematic narratives. Among other contributions, *How to Hide an Empire* reinforces the importance area studies and transnational approaches possess as perhaps the most effective fields in which to understand nineteenth and twentieth empire, American or otherwise.

⁶ Paul Kramer, "How Not to Write the History of U.S. Empire," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 42, No 5 (2018): 911-931.