

Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors. By Charles S. Maier. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. Pp. 373. Index, notes. Cloth, \$27.95)

Terms like “frontier,” “nation,” and “empire” have commonly recognized meanings within the framework of current or historical political boundaries. Taking these terms to a higher cultural level without regard to established borders, however, opens the way to studies of broader and more important concepts. An empire, for example, in that rarified atmosphere can be defined as originating with an upper class that taxes the middle and lower classes in blood and treasure to exploit other peoples in ways that profit only the ruling minority, not the nation as a whole. Such discussions of class economics can identify three types of super entity, the nation that is itself an empire (Russia, China etc.), the nation that becomes an empire (Rome, Spain, Holland, Aztec etc.), and the hegemon (Delian League of ancient Athens, Mongols, Ottomans etc.). A hegemon exerts its extensive power without controlling the day to day affairs of its member states. In all of the above, the soft power of coercion may be exerted if military force, or hard power, exists in reserve but a nation that holds its subject states by brute force usually loses in the long run.

Cultural dominance has also been a critical tool in holding together an empire or hegemon but as a common source of the resentment that fuels revolution. Within that context, a frontier exists as a societal boundary between cultures but also as an avenue for the merging of those societies. As such, it both produces rebels who would resist a dominating alien nation/empire and also dissident patriots who would overthrow their country to force stronger actions to preserve the state. Much of the American Revolution, from Florida to New Hampshire can be explained within that framework.

Such ideas open many lines of thought with regards to American history from colonial times to the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. For students of the traditional colonial American backcountry, do they explain how sectional conflicts like the Carolina Regulator rebellions represent inevitable conflict in the integration of a frontier into a general society? Could the Confederate States of America be seen as an empire that, as an imperial power, actually tried to conquer the same geographic area and lower classes that it already contained within its formal political boundaries as a country? Did the French and Indian Wars; the American Revolution; and the War of 1812 create the United States from the British Empire? Or, were those “wars” only “local” events in the transformation of America from an economic frontier into a member of the greater, cultural, and more important “Albion Empire” that exists today as Britain, Canada, India, Ireland, United States, and other nations? On another level, did the United States begin as a nation with an empire through Manifest Destiny before, in 1898, becoming a nation with an empire that has today become history’s greatest hegemon? Roughly half of *Among Empires* wrestles with that issue.

Dr. Maier there fails. This work goes far beyond his question of if the United States is an empire. Indeed, few scholars of American history would argue with accepting that premise as fact and moving on to use his discussion of empire to support that thesis.

That point made, this work serves as an excellent introduction to discussions of broad geopolitical concepts. It should be used in at least graduate history programs. Not only can *Among Empires* teach but it also inspires in ways that could make an important

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difference with students as they mature in years to come. In a time in this country when Americans question the importance of historical study, this work could elevate by example for students the meaning of the philosophy of history to illustrate what historians, at their best, try to do.

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