

**Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006)**

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**Commentary by Anna Nelson, American University**

This is one of many recent books that reflect the assertive foreign policy of the Bush Administration with its commitment to pre-emption, global democracy, and “unitary” government. In that sense it is a book of its times. But Charles Maier’s purpose differs somewhat from the authors who concentrate on current policy or even on American policy. *Among Empires* ranges widely over ancient history and modern European history. It is an attempt to use comparative history to answer two questions which reflect the events of the new century: What is an Empire? Is the United States an empire?

Maier does not require his readers to skip to the concluding chapters of his book to find his answer to the second question. He quickly states that he will avoid “claiming that the United States is or is not an empire” (p.3) because readers tend to never get past the definition. Instead, he offers a lengthy historiographical examination of the definition of empire, finally concluding that the U.S. does not *have* an empire because it does not control vast territories. Instead, he suggests that the U.S. established “multiple zones of control in its career as a great power.” (p.67) The first was hegemonic in Latin America and Europe; the next consisted of economic control buttressed by military power in the Caribbean and the third, temporary control through covert action and “military supervision” for short periods of time, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan. None of these constitute an empire.

The second question he raises is whether the U.S. is an empire “at home.” (p.69) He concludes that even here it is not an empire – yet. The caveat comes from his argument that empires can not only grow from the inside to the outside but their growth can also turn inward, eroding democratic institutions. Elections, he argues, can become no more than plebiscites, legislative bodies rubber stamps as they delegate decisions on war and peace to the executive. It is clear that Maier does not foresee a territorial empire in America’s future but regards the possible formation of an “empire” at home as a very real danger. But, he concludes, it is a future danger and not yet characteristic of the United States.

Finally, Maier points out that empires require military supremacy. The United States, he writes, built their power on nuclear policy. But he fails to note the very use of nuclear policy also inhibited the United States since it quickly lost its dominant position. Instead, the United States continued to build up its conventional arms as well as nuclear capability. Whatever its source, when a nation uses the military and political power within its grasp while declaring that its purpose is to bring peace to the world, Maier argues, it is carrying the attributes of empire.

Certainly the U.S. currently commands the world's air, sea and land space. It would seem to be this attribute above all others that gives the United States its imperial position and perhaps brings it closest to becoming an empire, although Maier does not pose that possibility.

If this book has a unifying theme it is that empires share common characteristics no matter their time or location. Even if the United States is not yet an empire, Maier argues, it shares many attributes with nations that have had empires. Part One of the book is devoted to those shared attributes.

Critical to empires, Maier states, are three "institutions": ruler, military and borders. In a chapter called "Frontiers," (i.e. borders) he argues that just as agents in the perimeter influence the center so policy makers at the center are influenced by activities on their borders. He sets out in the next thirty pages to examine the frontiers of the great empires of the past.

Historically, he writes, the function of the frontier was to control the movement of people, yet it was not to separate people so much as to serve as a zone of communication. Obviously boundaries on land had different attributes from those on sea or even nomadic empires. But all boundaries separate those who belong inside from outsiders.

Throughout history, he continues, the frontiers of land based empires had to assume a defensive function against a threatening power that wanted in. Empires often settled people just beyond their boundaries in defined border towns or colonies. These groups could be mobilized to defend the frontiers which were often subject to violence. Moving out from the boundary's edges was peaceful but extending frontiers in settled regions caused conflicts, especially when it involved peoples with great ethnic pride who were determined to protect their identity, whether North American Indians or Armenians facing the Romans, Ottomans, or Russians.

To clarify his point, Maier presents four types of frontiers: the proto-territorial frontier, a transitional form as the empire pushes outward toward other groups with weak territorial claims; the anti-incursive frontier designed to stabilize the territories and keep out intruders; a tributary frontier dependent on tribute (taxes?) from bordering communities; and anti-adversarial frontiers that border on enemies or potential enemies.

Where does America fit? Maier notes that the "quasi-imperial" role of the United States extends far beyond its geographic area and seems to have no boundaries. Its global influence ranges from banking to music to television shows (and, he might have added, the universal blue jeans). "Do[es] American power and influence," he asks, "...constitute a post-territorial empire in which frontiers have become irrelevant?" (p.109) Although this question, like others, is left unanswered, he seems to agree it is possible and even points to the fact that Britain functioned much the same way in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but on a much smaller scale. However, later in the book he concedes that the United States did and does have boundaries. Some were geographical such as the West Germany, Cuba, South Korea and Viet Nam. Others were (and are) ideological such as the Soviet Union, China and now the fundamentalist Muslim regimes in the Middle East.

In the chapter "Call It Peace," Maier writes that empires "are likely to inflict death and mayhem and pain, rape, expulsion from homes and destruction of property." (p.116). This, he

writes, is the “logic of imperial governance” even if not the intention of the ruler. In fact, while imperialist countries often claim that they wish to bring peace, more often they bring violence. He presents several reasons: the native race must be suppressed; even well meaning intervention provokes resistance which must be suppressed; peace at the center often is achieved at the price of violence at the periphery; the empire must keep itself in health and avoid death. Another kind of violence emerges from the end of empires. Nation-states emerge from the colonies designed by the imperialists with ancient hatreds which cause new wars.

He doesn't directly address the violence that American hegemony has contributed to the world, although it certainly shares with other empires the propensity to declare its peaceful motives even as it brings violence.

As Maier moves on to Part 2 of the book he leaves to his readers the task of summarizing the attributes of the U.S. that most closely resemble other empires. It seems clear, however, that it is military prowess and the desire for new “borders” or “frontiers” (Iraq is the latest), which in turn destabilizes countries on the border and leads to years of violence.

Presenting an organized summary of the points made by Maier gives a very misleading view of the chapters in Part I of this book. Each and every chapter contains a rich lode of countless examples from the history of other empires. In this part of the book we are unmistakably among empires. While the broad range of examples illustrate the extensive knowledge of the author, they can frustrate the reader who can get lost in all the analogies.

For example, following a sentence explaining that aggressive commanders on the periphery will serve authoritarian politicians, his examples include Sulla in the first century, Julius Caesar in his march on Rome, Napoleon's return from Egypt, Japanese army units in Manchuria, and even General MacArthur, who was included because he teamed with conservatives to encourage accusations of subversion and treason in the 1950s. While these examples or analogies are erudite and interesting, the thread of the argument is often lost as examples saturate the text.

Unfortunately, after being overwhelmed by examples or analogies that rang from 9 C.E. to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and from Rome to China and back to Hapsburgs, there is also a tendency to skip the next set.

Sometimes the historical examples appear to be “a stretch.” MacArthur, for example, was not serving an authoritarian leader, he was speaking for conservatives who were on the periphery of power. Furthermore, MacArthur had only a small and brief role during the McCarthy period.

In Part 2 of the book Maier turns to the United States and its rise to power after World War II. Since the other super power was the Soviet Union, he points out that Western Europe had little choice but to turn to the United States.

In “Frontiers and Forces in the Cold War,” one of three chapters in Part 2, Maier contends that the basis for American global power lay within Hiroshima and Highland Park.

Henry Ford's domain and the atom bomb represent to Maier the economic and military strength upon which American power was built. There is little new in this chapter even though he manages to put a fresh spin on many of the well known facts. For the most part he even abandons examples or analogies from history to concentrate on American Cold War positions. He does return to the importance of frontiers. As noted above, regardless of its world wide cultural or financial interests, the United States did have frontiers. The year, 1975, he argues, seemed to close the era of "frontier testing," i.e. after the withdrawal from Vietnam, Americans had no taste for any further U.S. intervention to establish new borders. At least not until the next century.

The final two chapters, "An Empire of Production" and "An Empire of Consumption" seem to bear little relationship to the rest of the book. Gone are the historical examples from the past. Here the examples are almost exclusively from post World War II America and Europe.

Maier argues that the United States became the post war hegemon through supplying global markets with the fruit of our production. Even more important to this hegemony was the role of the United States in international finance. The empire of production meant supplying the goods and then financing the world's purchases of them. American control came to an end in the 1960s he writes, which led to what he calls "imperial multipolarity," although he isn't clear about the composition of this multipolar group. Meanwhile, new economies emerged in Third World countries which had also learned the production skills pioneered by Ford in Highland Park.

The United States then assumed a new role reaching a "pinnacle of international influence as an empire of consumption." (p.240). It's own citizens saved no money as they became ardent consumers, the federal government ran a continual deficit and suffered from being on the short end of the balance of payments. Nevertheless, the country prospered from a different cycle. Now, Americans bought from other countries. These countries, China for example, took their surplus dollars from this burgeoning trade and invested it in the United States. Thus, Americas were allowed to flourish and remain a rich and hegemonic power.

Why are these nations content with investing in budget deficits, Maier asks? Could it be that "America was hegemonic and wealthy because less affluent and less powerful societies needed the United States wealthy to make themselves wealthy?" (p.241) Maier raises this provocative question but does not directly answer it, depending instead upon a long discussion with many points.

From time to time, Maier refers to the force of the military strength of the United States. But in these chapters on production and consumption he fails to give it a proper place in a study of the United States as hegemon. He does note that the United States still had an unparalleled "capacity for the projection of force from a distance and with superb accuracy..." (p.254) An Empire, hegemonic nation, or merely a global power requires a strong military stance in order to exert its will upon others. The potential use of this military strength not only protects but expands borders. A United States naval squadron showing up off shore at a critical juncture sends a message beyond that country's beaches. Few care that American military force is built upon the continued inflow of funds from foreign nations (\$400 billion in 2004) to finance the

American budget deficit. The military power of the United States is formidable and deserves more attention than it receives in the concluding chapters of *Among Empires*. It goes hand in hand with the economic power Maier describes.

This is a book that does not equal the sum of its parts. Chapters present different and interesting points but the book does not hold together or present the coherent picture the author intended.

Maier set out to write a comparative history and to examine other empires in order to better understand the United States and the threat of its possible transformation into a future empire. Then he seemed to change course, concentrating entirely on the United States in the second part of the book. However interesting and provocative his chapters on the empires of production and consumption, they seem to belong to another book in spite of the occasional reference to Great Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, when all is said and done, Maier leaves his reader with a lengthy answer to his first question, but no closer to answering the second question. Is the United States an empire?

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