

Introduction

In the 1850s and 1860s, the United States took its first cautious steps toward developing an overseas empire in the Pacific. In the end, the empire would help the United States defeat Japan during World War II. The bloodiest and most infamous battles of the Pacific War were fought on possessions gained by American imperialists. The first American shots of the war were fired at Pearl Harbor; the first major invasion of American territory happened in the Philippines; the first major US victory occurred at Midway; and Samoa was a linchpin in the allied communication line, running from Hawaii to Fiji, to continue supplying US forces in Australia. To American strategic thinkers, the islands were the advanced bases that kept Americans fighting in the Pacific, rather than on the West Coast. Thousands died – both American and Japanese – to attack or defend America's possessions.¹

America's Pacific Empire, by any standards, was large and important. It included large populations in the Philippines, Hawaii, and Samoa. At that time, the Philippines contained over seven million people and Hawaii about 154,000. This made the Philippines about the size of the State of New York, which was the largest US state by population. Hawaii, though much smaller, was by itself larger than several US territories and states, such as Arizona and Wyoming. The geographic size of the US Pacific Empire was even larger. The Pacific Ocean covers 32 percent of the Earth's surface. The United States acquired its northern reaches with the acquisition of Alaska and competed for

¹ John Costello, *The Pacific War, 1941–1945* (New York: Perennial, 1981); Francis Pike, *Hirohito's War: The Pacific War, 1941–1945* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Ian W. Toll, *Pacific Crucible: War at Sea in the Pacific, 1941–1942* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012); Ian W. Toll, *The Conquering Tide: War in the Pacific Islands, 1942–1944* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015).

possessions on its western edge and in the center, overseeing a territory almost three times the size of the continental United States.²

The 1940s may have demonstrated the strategic value of the Pacific, but it was not apparent in the eyes of its architects almost a century before. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, few who traveled to the islands were imaginative enough to foresee World War II. In fact, the United States began to acquire territory before the Meiji Restoration, when Japan was still feudal and before it had industrialized. To nineteenth-century eyes, the islands were nearly worthless to the US military and negligible to its economy. Yet, the empire grew every decade. By the 1840s, American citizens helped run the Hawaiian government, trying to steer a course toward eventual annexation. The first territories were taken in the 1860s and included places like Midway Island. By the 1880s, the US government was directly helping oversee affairs in Samoa, in an imperial condominium with the British and German governments. And in the 1890s, the United States began to formally annex territory and rule over millions of people in the Philippines.

Why did the United States develop a vast empire in the Pacific, especially so early in the nation's development? The conventional wisdom among historians is that forces within the continental United States yearned to expand. US manufacturers and farmers sought markets for American products, churches wanted to bring Christianity to the Pacific islanders, and the Navy needed advanced outposts for future wars. These views emphasize how powerful forces of expansion organized themselves and pressured expansionists in the White House and the Senate.³ International Relations (IR) scholars concur, making the United States an example of broader themes. Realists, such as John Mearsheimer, argue that patterns of US expansion relate to the needs of a growing power, calling the United States during the period a "poster child" for realism; others emphasize how conquest pays, making expansion profitable; and still others emphasize Manifest Destiny and how that affected American foreign policy.⁴

This book presents a different view about the origins of America's Pacific Empire. Commodity booms, we argue, were at the heart of American imperialism. We make three central arguments. First, American policymakers had little interest in developing a Pacific Empire before 1899. Most of the territories the United States acquired had virtually no foreseeable strategic significance and, at best, only minor commercial importance. Of course, some in the United States favored imperial projects and trade abroad, but very few focused on the Pacific; there were more pressing issues, such as building the Panama Canal and

² This paragraph is indebted to Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

³ These views are described in detail later in this introduction.

⁴ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

managing American relations with the Caribbean and South America. This book builds on this conventional wisdom: No large metropolitan imperial lobby was driving expansion in the 1870s and 1880s.

The second argument is that small entrepreneurs were the key players in the creation of America's Pacific Empire. They went abroad because of their economic interests. The nineteenth century was a time of dynamic commodity prices; commodities like cotton, rubber, and sugar went through booms and busts. This boom-and-bust cycle generated brief periods in which there were incredibly lucrative incentives for individuals to go abroad in search of commodities. When there was a commodity boom, entrepreneurs raced to Pacific Islands to set up shop, creating farms and plantations or staking claims for mining. These entrepreneurs created the first sustained US interests in the islands. They also became a loud lobby for American expansion. When their profits were threatened, usually by foreign competitors who followed them to the islands, they demanded the United States to come to their rescue. They lobbied the government, manipulated the press, agitated in churches, and lied on Capitol Hill to get the United States to formally acquire the islands. Our second argument thus presents an entrepreneurial theory of the origins of American imperialism.

The third argument is that the course of American imperialism changed in 1899. The structure of the American economy and state changed dramatically over the nineteenth century. The state expanded as its bureaucracies grew and became more professionalized, the military expanded as it built a modern Navy, and the American economy dramatically expanded and industrialized. These changes led to two dramatically different imperial patterns during the nineteenth century. We refer to these patterns as forming two different Pacific Empires.

The transition in 1898 – the Spanish-American War – takes on a new significance viewed through this lens. Our central argument is that until 1898, the flag followed the entrepreneur across the Pacific. We refer to this period as the First Pacific Empire. It included about 100 islands, including those in Hawaii, Samoa, and the Guano Act islands, most famously Midway Island. The era of the small entrepreneur began when the United States entered the Pacific in the early nineteenth century and ended around 1899. Small entrepreneurs were successful during this period because the state was weak, lobbying relationships were informal, and the Navy was not professionalized. This is the period primarily described in this book. In the conclusion, we turn to the Second Pacific Empire, which began with the first shots of the Spanish-American War. At the war's end, the United States acquired new large holdings, including the Philippines and Guam, and entrepreneurs now began to follow the flag. Few American entrepreneurs preceded the US Army to these locations, but the entrepreneurs did follow. This led to a naval empire: jingoism fused with economic interests to drive the United States abroad to create military colonies.

The next section explains why treating the US Pacific Empire as a single empire has proven so difficult. We review the primary arguments for the empire – markets, missionaries, and naval outposts – to show they are incapable of explaining variations in American patterns of Pacific imperialism. Then, we briefly outline the argument for an entrepreneurial theory of imperialism, showing how rising prices led American entrepreneurs into the Pacific, and threats to those profits led to agitations for imperial entanglements. Finally, we assess why this matters for IR scholarship more generally.

1.1 THE PACIFIC PUZZLE

By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States had developed a significant empire in the Pacific Ocean. The American empire has long drawn historians, political scientists, and others into acrimonious debates over whether, when, and why the United States was an empire. Some argue it became an empire after 1945, when the Cold War led it to interfere in other polities with global ambition. Others believe it ceased to be an empire around 1945, when most territories either joined the United States as equals (e.g., Hawaii) or decolonized. Still others deny that the United States was ever an empire.⁵

Many of the most frequently discussed cases of American imperialism, such as American policy toward Afghanistan, Cuba, or Iraq, often meet one of several standards associated with empire: control of domestic affairs, control of international affairs, and the right to garrison.⁶ This has led to the controversial American Empire debate, as instances of empire have sometimes only a family resemblance to classic cases of empire, especially during the Cold War and in the post-Cold War period. The historical cases in this book are different in kind because they often meet several, or all, of these standards. First, in each case between 1856 and 1899, the United States claimed some responsibility for the administration of another country's domestic affairs. It might control the

⁵ This literature is too vast and complex to summarize here. Representative examples include Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963); Paul K. MacDonald, “Those Who Forget Historiography Are Doomed to Republish It: Empire, Imperialism and Contemporary Debates about American Power,” *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 1 (2009): 45–67; Daniel H. Nexon and Thomas Wright, “What’s at Stake in the American Empire Debate,” *The American Political Science Review* 101, no. 2 (2007): 253–71; Christopher Layne and Bradley Thayer, *American Empire: A Debate* (New York: Routledge, 2007); William Appleman Williams, *The Roots of the Modern American Empire: A Study of the Growth and Shaping of Societal Consciousness in a Marketplace Society* (New York: Vintage, 1969); Michael Cox, “Empire by Denial: The Strange Case of the United States,” *International Affairs* 81, no. 1 (2005): 15–30; Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire*.

⁶ Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

court system, or attempt to control the land and labor policies of an island or island chain. The United States also attempted to settle islands, moving workers or naval personnel to the islands as part of an explicitly described colonization project.⁷ In every case throughout this period, the United States later decided to make the territory more directly subordinate through annexation or similar means. Second, the United States attempted to control the foreign affairs of the target island or island chain. The islanders had no independent foreign policy or agency. Finally, the United States explicitly or implicitly viewed itself as having the right to garrison the islands, control the economic and tariff policy, control the military, or annex the territory as a colony while denying the people living there equal rights. These are the elements of an empire, by any definition.⁸ We discuss these features in each case later in the book.

Most IR scholars and many historians have noticed the similarities between American and European empires.⁹ Many believe that explanations borrowed from Europe make sense in the US context. This section shows why the US Pacific Empire does not easily fit these explanations. The arguments that follow flow from one central difference: The Europeans largely knew they had an empire. It was the subject of debate. London had a well-developed imperial policy, state agencies tasked with managing the empire, and an attentive public. Berlin was at times desperate to find its “place in the sun” and avoid being locked out of Africa by the British. It developed a conscious imperial policy, aided by civil society organizations and backed by the German Army and Navy.¹⁰ Scholars of the British Empire – the most studied empire in the nineteenth century – often concentrate on the British “official mind.”¹¹ By this, historians usually mean the conventional wisdom among British policy-makers about the empire and its role in the world. In contrast, the United States had developed an empire without a clear “official mind.” One significant contention of this book is that during this period, the “official mind” was not as important for American Pacific imperialism as it was for British actions. This

⁷ Ty P. Kawika Tengan, “Of Colonization and Pono in Hawai‘i,” *Peace Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 157–67.

⁸ Paul K. MacDonald, “Embedded Authority: A Relational Network Approach to Hierarchy in World Politics,” *Review of International Studies* 2017, 1–23.

⁹ See, for example, Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); A. G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, n.d.); Bernard Porter, *Empire and Superempire: Britain, America and the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2006).

¹⁰ Charles Stephenson, *Germany's Asia-Pacific Empire: Colonialism and Naval Policy, 1885–1914* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2009); Shelley Baranowski, *Nazi Empire: German Colonialism and Imperialism from Bismarck to Hitler* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹¹ Ronald Robinson, John Gallagher, and Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Climax of Imperialism in the Dark Continent* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961). cf. Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

does not mean the First Pacific Empire developed by accident. Instead, understanding the opportunities provided by American imperialism requires looking beyond the “official mind” to focus on the agents who would profit from imperialism.¹²

This section reviews three claims about US motives, showing the evidence is at best limited. First, some posit that the United States sought markets to sell its products. Other scholars argue that the United States acquired territory for strategic defense in the Pacific, especially against a rising Japan. Finally, others argue that American ideology drove it abroad, led by missionaries. In each case, a fresh look at the historical record shows a need to explore US motives in more detail. No official policy or popular wisdom linked these motives to acts of expansion.

1.1.1 Markets and Imperialism

One central debate over the causes of imperialism centers around state economic aims. British thinkers believed Britain tended to overproduce manufacturing goods. This overproduction led to rapidly decreasing prices at home. Economic elites thus had an incentive to encourage empire. Imperialism created foreign markets that might purchase goods, reducing the problems associated with overproduction. The first generation of scholarship on American empire extended these British economic arguments to explain US expansion. There are three versions of this argument.

The first version of this argument posited that American manufacturers, like the British, needed markets to sell goods. Hobson, the most prominent proponent of this as an explanation for British policy extended the argument to America.¹³ If this argument is correct, then the markets the United States acquired (e.g., in Guam, Hawaii, and Samoa) must have been important for American goods. Today, scholars generally agree that little evidence supports this account. First, the economic claims underlying Hobson’s account do not translate to the American experience. The British wanted to export manufactured commodities, such as textiles, and import raw materials, such as cotton. For the British, empire lowered the costs of imports and increased the costs of exports. For the United States, the case was different. For most of the nineteenth century, America was a net exporter of raw materials and a net importer of

¹² This is a crucial problem in discussions about whether the United States was “reluctant.” See, for example, Bacevich, *American Empire*; G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Order and Imperial Ambition* (London: Polity, 2006). While the administration was often indifferent to empire, there were forces within the United States – private actors – who marshalled American power for imperial ends.

¹³ John A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London: J. Nisbet, 1902). Also see Kevin Narizny, *The Political Economy of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Peter Trubowitz, *Defining the National Interest: Conflict and Change in American Foreign Policy*, 1st edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

manufactured products. Powerful metropolitan elites thus favored protection of American industry through tariffs, rather than market expansion.¹⁴ Second, even if manufacturers and banks wanted to expand, they would likely not have begun in Guam, Hawaii, and Samoa. These markets were simply too small.¹⁵

The second argument comes from New Left historians of the 1950s, who recognized that the structure of the US economy differed from European economies and emphasized agriculture. William Appleman Williams developed one of the earliest and fullest theories of American nineteenth-century imperialism.¹⁶ He suggested American farmers wanted to pursue market expansion because of constant overproduction in agriculture. His central argument is that when prices for agricultural commodities fell (e.g., cotton in the South or wheat in the West), farmers agitated for the United States to expand its exports. He links this to debates about US expansion in the Pacific, including Samoa and Hawaii, trying to show that these maneuvers reflected the interests of agrarian expansionists in the United States. Williams' work is important because he firmly roots American empire in its economic and political systems; he acknowledges and demonstrates that an economic theory of empire must be related to the specific domestic situation of the imperial power.

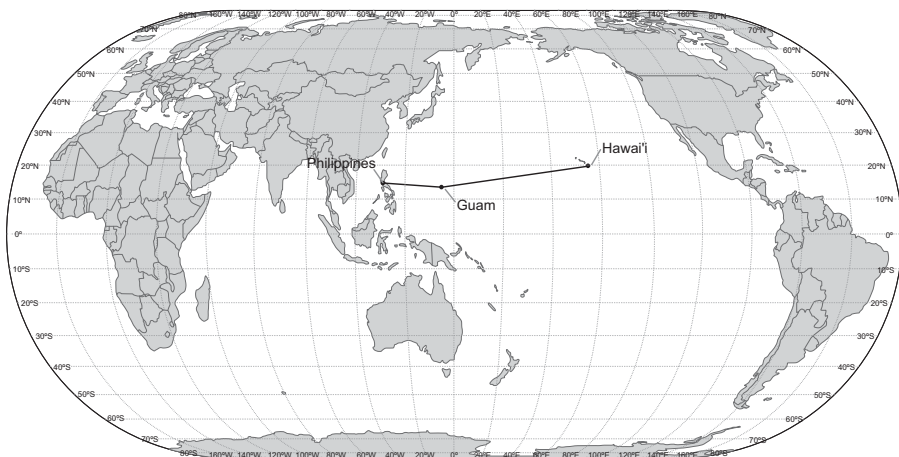
The agrarian account of the origins of empire, however, suffers from not being able to connect the search for markets to specific US acquisitions. The evidence is extraordinarily weak when Williams discusses debates about expansion in the Pacific. For example, he curiously claims that the meat industry was behind US expansion in Hawaii and wheat was responsible for Samoa. He provides no evidence for either claim. In discussing these cases in Chapters 4 and 5, we show these explanations are simply incorrect and, to be honest, the idea of a wheat lobby agitating for Samoa or a meat lobby in Hawaii is wholly unsupported by the empirical record. Overall, Williams cannot explain US interests in the Pacific; his best evidence relates to US concerns regarding European markets, where US farmers worried about being shut out due to systems of imperial preference. The European markets were enormous. Why would American farmers care about small and usually self-sufficient island nations? They are not ideal candidates to export American food products. This argument may accurately capture the influence of major economic interests on American foreign policy in Latin America in the twentieth century, but it cannot account for expansion so early.¹⁷

¹⁴ William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 1959; William Appleman Williams, *The Roots of the Modern American Empire: A Study of the Growth and Shaping of Societal Consciousness in a Marketplace Society* (New York: Vintage, 1969).

¹⁵ This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

¹⁶ For modern restatements of Williams' thesis, see Andrew J. Bacevich, "Tragedy Renewed: William Appleman Williams," *World Affairs* 171, no. 3 (2009); Binoy Kampmark, "William A. Williams's Tragedy Fifty Years On," *The Historical Journal* 53, no. 3 (2010): 783–94.

¹⁷ Noel Maurer, *The Empire Trap: The Rise and Fall of U.S. Intervention to Protect American Property Overseas, 1893–2013* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Antonio



MAP I.1 Map of three holdings, describing conventional wisdom.

The third economic interpretation treats the islands as stepping stones to China.¹⁸ This view acknowledges the problem with the previous two accounts: The islands were not large markets. This argument posits that following the depression in the 1890s, the United States developed an interest in trade with China as a means to reduce the severity of future economic shocks. In 1899, the United States declared its support of an Open Door policy in China. The newly acquired Pacific Islands were thus important stepping stones to support US economic interests across the Pacific.¹⁹

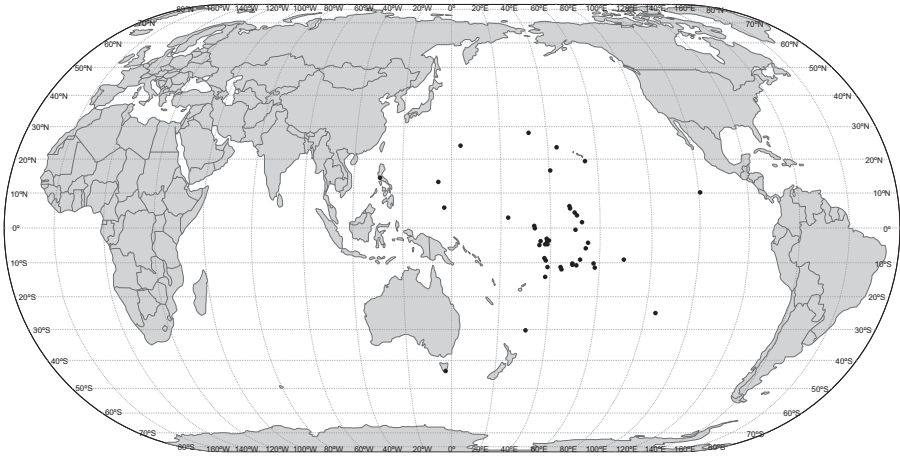
The primary benefit of the stepping stones account is that it explains why islands without markets might be subject to imperialism. These accounts concentrate on specific acts of expansion, usually on Hawai'i, Guam, and the Philippines in the late 1890s. Map I.1 plots these acquisitions on a map. Viewed spatially, these islands appear like stepping stones to China.

On closer examination, however, the stepping stone theory faces a number of insuperable problems. The first is selection bias. American imperialism was not limited to these three possessions. Map I.2 provides a fuller depiction of US holdings. The more complete map undermines the focus on Chinese trade or naval power as most US acquisitions are in the Southern Hemisphere and

Tena-Junguito and Maria Isabel Restrepo-Estrada, "Power Politics and the Expansion of US Exports, 1879–1938," *The Economic History Review*, Advance Online Publication (2023).

¹⁸ See Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*, 1st edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Jeffrey A. Frieden, "The Economics of Intervention: American Overseas Investments and Relations with Underdeveloped Areas, 1890–1950," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 1 (1989): 55–80.

¹⁹ Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*; LaFeber, *The New Empire*.



MAP 1.2 A more complete map of US holdings, 1850–1900.

thousands of miles from direct access to Asian markets. Furthermore, as described in the case studies, many possessions did not have safe anchorage for naval vessels or trading ships. In short, to make it appear the American Pacific Empire was coherently assembled, as a set of stepping stones to China, requires narrowing our focus to three or four of the approximately 70 islands acquired by about 1900.

The perhaps more serious problem with the stepping stone theory is that the lens via which it views the Pacific is too broad. If one examines the detailed history of imperialism on any specific island, as we do in this book, one quickly discovers that Chinese trade had little role. No shipping magnates demanded harbors in Oahu or Upolo. The timing is also wrong. Stepping stone theories presume that American imperialism began in the 1890s and was solely reducible to the China trade. In reality, US commercial interests entered the Pacific almost a century before, in the case of Hawaii, and formal imperialism had begun a decade before the Open Door policy, in the case of Samoa.

1.1.2 Advanced Outposts

A second explanation of America's Pacific Empire highlights the perceived need to develop advanced outposts to defend the West Coast. Realists argue that antebellum security concerns were an important source of expansion.²⁰ This was especially true for American naval thinkers. American strategic thinking was strongly influenced by Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power*

²⁰ Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

upon History (1890), which highlighted the importance of command of the seas for the United States. His writings, which captured the US strategic imagination during the 1890s, called for a ring of bases around the United States to defend against maritime threats to its coasts.

Unlike the economic interpretation, the advanced outpost thesis provides an explanation for some of the possessions the United States acquired during the nineteenth century. Mahan believed the US Pacific Coast was strategically vulnerable, including the soon-to-be-built Panama Canal.²¹ Writing in 1893, he explained that Honolulu was one source of this vulnerability. If another great power obtained Honolulu, it might menace the Pacific Coast. Conversely, if the United States obtained the island, it would provide a forward base for US operations.²² Oahu wasn't the only island with a valuable harbor in the Pacific. Some connection between Mahan's thinking and imperialism in Guam and Samoa has also been advanced.²³ The benefit of the advanced outpost thesis is that it explains the timing of US annexation. The annexation of territories in the late 1890s is consistent with the development of the canal, growth of the Pacific Navy, and the first hints of the emergence of Japan.

Like the economic interpretation, however, the advanced outposts thesis focuses only the final phase of Pacific imperialism, which prevents it from understanding the underlying causes of Pacific imperialism. The islands with valuable harbors (e.g., Hawaii and Samoa) were partly or even largely under the thumb of American rule a decade or more before American naval enthusiasts persuaded the US government to officially annex the islands. Even then, Congress refused to appropriate funds for their harbors, unable to identify their strategic significance.²⁴ Several islands important in the Pacific War against Japan, such as Midway, were acquired more than 60 years before the first military installations were built; their military significance was discovered following acquisition, not preceding it.

This is a serious problem for any Realist interpretation of the Pacific. Large portions of the American Pacific Empire were acquired before Mahan's influence in the 1890s. Many of the islands that would make up the American

²¹ On Mahan's views, see especially Michael J. Green, *By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Michael Green, "I Wish to See the United States the Dominant Power on the Shores of the Pacific: Grand Strategy in the Era of Theodore Roosevelt," in *By More Than Providence*, ed. Thomas Christensen, Mark Philip Bradley, and Rosemary Foote, *Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 78–109.

²² A. T. Mahan, "Hawaii and Our Future Sea-Power," *Forum* (New York; London: Forum Pub. Co.; M. Kennerley, 1893).

²³ Stephen Kinzer, "Cruel Realities: The American Conquest of Guam," *World Policy Journal* 23, no. 2 (2006): 100–4; Paul M. Kennedy, *The Samoan Tangle: A Study in Anglo-German-American Relations, 1878–1900* (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1974).

²⁴ See Andrew Yeo and Stacie Pettyjohn, "Bases of Empire? The Logic of Overseas U.S. Military Base Expansion, 1870–2016," *Comparative Strategy* 40, no. 1 (2021): 18–35.

empire would likely have become part of the British, German, or Japanese empires decades earlier had not a generation of pre-annexation American imperialists staked their claim.

1.1.3 The American Mission

Another argument credits ideational interests, specifically missionary zeal, with the origins of the Pacific Empire.²⁵ American missionaries traveled to Asia and the Pacific. Their enthusiasm for bringing God and America to “savage” people led them to lobby for US involvement in far-flung territories. The Pacific Islands, in this view, were part of a global missionary campaign. Missionaries often served as mouthpieces of empire, justifying imperial projects.

A focus on missionaries addresses several problems with the economic and advanced outposts explanations of American empire. Missionaries were present in many parts of the Pacific well before the growth of US imperialism; therefore, they are a potential source of early imperialism. In histories of US imperialism, missionaries loom large as important characters.

Yet, there is no clear link between the presence of American missionaries and US imperialism. A robust American missionary presence was not sufficient to generate an imperial project. The American missionary movement was global in scope. Map I.3 plots all the stations of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in 1890.²⁶ Viewed geographically, the link between missionaries and US imperialism is unlikely. For example, the vast majority of American missions, in modern-day Bulgaria, India, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Turkey, produced no US acquisition of land. This makes a direct correlation between missionaries and imperialism untenable. The flag rarely followed the Bible, partly because missionaries had mixed views about whether imperialism was useful for their purposes. Some British missionaries, for example, developed an antiimperial mindset and resisted expansion of the British Empire. Others aided the empire by justifying and encouraging imperialism.²⁷ The US case is no different.

²⁵ See Jeffrey W. Meiser, *Power and Restraint: The Rise of the United States, 1898–1941* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015); Richard W. Maass, *The Picky Eagle: How Democracy and Xenophobia Limited U.S. Territorial Expansion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

²⁶ We chose the ABCFM because it was the largest missionary organization in the United States; has excellent records, making a full description of stations possible; and had the largest presence in the Pacific islands.

²⁷ John Darch, *Missionary Imperialists? Missionaries, Government, and the Growth of the British Empire in the Tropics, 1860–1885* (Colorado Spring, CO: Paternoster, 2009); Andrew Porter, “An Overview, 1700–1914,” in *Missions and Empire*, ed. Norman Etherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 40–63; Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).



MAP I.3 American missions across the world.

American missionaries encouraged imperialism in some cases and resisted it in others.²⁸

The presence of stations associated with different empires in the same island or island group makes the link between missions and empire even more tenuous. In all the most significant regions of Asia (i.e., China, India, Japan, and the Philippines), American missionaries competed with British, French, and other missionaries. The landscape of Pacific missions was no different, and most of the time, American missionaries were outnumbered.²⁹ Moreover, the detailed histories of missionaries and imperialism undermine the claim that conational missionaries were necessarily the best sources of imperial agitation. In some cases, American missionaries agitated for British annexation; at other times, British missionaries agitated for American annexation. Therefore, the presence of an American mission cannot explain the growth of a specifically American imperialism.

I.1.4 In Sum

Existing accounts of American Pacific imperialism struggle to understand its early phases. The collection of islands is too disparate for a coherent

²⁸ Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Jennifer Graber, *The Gods of Indian Country: Religion and the Struggle for the American West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 13–14.

²⁹ For the comparative size of US, British, and Continental missionaries, see Harlan Page Beach, *A Geography and Atlas of Protestant Missions: Statistics and Atlas* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1903).

economic or strategic logic, and the history of social actors – especially missionaries – simply is unable to explain the timing and location of American missions. However, each explanation has an important element of truth. We build on each explanation. The economic discussions of American empire point correctly to the need to think about the specific nature of the nineteenth-century American economy, largely focused on agriculture. The strategic explanations point to the importance of thinking about specific endowments on specific islands; not all islands had the same value to American investors or strategic thinkers. And a focus on missionaries points to the importance of local interactions, where individuals struggled to pursue their goals in an island context. What is missing is a coherent theory that links studies of island politics into a framework that makes sense of nineteenth-century American politics, economics, and empire.

1.2 THE ENTREPRENEURIAL ORIGINS OF THE FIRST EMPIRE

This book focuses on the emergence of America's first Pacific Empire. The first empire refers to the territorial holdings the United States began to collect between its independence and 1899. It includes approximately 80 different islands. Contemporary US holdings (e.g., American Samoa and Hawaii) also owe to this period. The histories of many of the other islands are often storied and unusual. For example, some of the most famous battle sites in the Pacific War against Japan, such as Midway Island, were originally US possessions from this period. Important military installations were also created on other US possessions, such as Baker and Jarvis islands and Palmyra Atoll during the war. These islands were so important that the Department of Commerce was tasked with colonizing many of them in the 1930s. The American Equatorial Islands Colonization Project saw young men from Hawaii sent to the islands to claim them under international law. They remained there, with little support, even after the Japanese began attacks on these important strategic possessions at the beginning of the war. Some died at the hands of the Japanese before others were rescued. The strategic significance of these islands, however, was unrealized for decades after their acquisition.³⁰

In the nineteenth century, the first lobbies demanding the United States take Pacific Islands were focused on profits. But these were not the "Big Businesses" that featured in the history of European imperialism or later episodes of American imperialism. This book shows that America's *first* Pacific Empire was driven by small entrepreneurs – gamblers, grifters, castaways, and con artists. They were drawn to the islands in hopes of getting rich. The nineteenth century was a period of commodities booms (and busts). When a commodity boomed, small American entrepreneurs chased high prices across the Pacific.

³⁰ This is described in Chapter 2.

When sugar prices boomed in the early 1800s, American entrepreneurs began to plant, harvest, and mill sugar. When copra prices boomed (copra is made from coconuts), American entrepreneurs planted palms and began drying their husks for export in Samoa. When guano prices boomed (guano is dried bird droppings), American ship captains and merchants began claiming Pacific Islands in order to mine deposits left by migratory birds. In short, the islands themselves were valuable for the small entrepreneur.

In many ways, small entrepreneurs raced ahead of the United States' desire to acquire new territory. They established the first plantations in Hawaii and Samoa, for example, within the sovereign territories of the native government. So long as profits were high and times were good, there was no need for the United States to become more formally involved in the islands. The US government, certainly, expressed almost no interest. In the case studies that follow, we show that the flag did not enthusiastically follow investors abroad. The government's official view was usually that it did not mind Americans finding beneficial opportunities for commerce, but this would not affect the strategic or economic interests of the United States. In the 1830s and 1840s, a coconut plantation in Samoa or small sugar operation in Hawaii was a negligible economic interest. So long as profits were increasing, small entrepreneurs acted with seeming indifference to the inattention of the US government.

However, times were not always good for the small entrepreneur. Threats to profits usually emerged, sometimes quickly. The small plantation owner or guano miner lived a precarious existence. If commodity prices fell, the local government became unfriendly to American entrepreneurs, or a foreign empire set its sights on an island, the small entrepreneur risked losing the entire investment. These threats to profits motivated small entrepreneurs to become ardent imperialists. In some cases, they began to prod local government officials – ship captains who passed through the islands or local consuls who represented the US government – for more official support, and even annexation. They shouted in the press and on Capitol Hill, often making up sensational claims of mistreatment and abuse in order to win government support for their enterprises.

These entrepreneurs were the first and most successful lobby to advance Pacific imperialism in the United States. They secured legislation, like the Guano Act, that enabled them to make claims quickly with US government support and little oversight. They made the issues of Hawaii and Samoa national news, inviting US imperialism a decade or more before formal annexation of the islands.

1.3 WHY IT MATTERS

The first contribution of this book is to correct the historical record about American expansion as discussed by IR scholars. IR scholars tend to date American expansion beyond North America to 1898. Only by this point, they

argue, was the United States prepared to expand, in part, because the American West was closed, American military and economic power was rising, and expansionists were in control of the White House and Senate. IR scholars describe 1898 as a turning point when the United States looked abroad.

The emphasis on 1898 is a problem. As Buzan and Lawson explain about these kinds of benchmark dates in general, “By what they highlight and what they silence, benchmark dates shape how history is understood, funneling attention towards particular events and processes, while downplaying others.”³¹ We hope that by the end of this book, readers will agree that treating 1898 as the beginning of American expansion is a problem. The year 1898 certainly marked a turning point, but it was not a turn toward expansion because expansion was already well underway. Instead, 1898 changed the mode of expansion. Before 1898, economic actors led the way, and the state followed when those actors were threatened. After 1898, the state led the way, and economic actors followed in their wake.

One fundamental reason for this change was the dynamic nature of the nineteenth century. The United States began the century with a small economy, relative to European countries, that was primarily focused on agriculture. By the end of the century, the Industrial Revolution had shaped it into a major manufacturing power. Political change was almost as important. Over the long nineteenth century, American political power became increasingly centralized, and the government substantially expanded its staff and field of operations. Changing patterns of imperialism follow from changing economic and political relationships. The opportunities provided by the less formal structure of government mid-century were closed by the end of the century.

Only by rethinking dates, can we begin to understand the origins of America’s rise as it entered the twentieth century. Scholars have noted that the legacy of the nineteenth century has largely been omitted from the understanding of politics in Europe.³² It was a transformative century. Our argument shows the same is true in North America and the Pacific. As we describe in the following chapters, the basis of America’s power in the twentieth century – the shape, scale, and location of its Pacific assets – was fixed by its pre-1898 policies. If IR scholars continue to ignore the legacy of the nineteenth century for America’s political development, we will struggle to understand the next 100 years as well.

The second contribution is theoretical and contributes to studies of American empire. Most theories of American empire are, in the words of Michael Doyle, metrocentric.³³ By this, he means the action in the theory comes

³¹ Barry Buzan and George Lawson, “Rethinking Benchmark Dates in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 2 (2014): 437.

³² Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity, and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

³³ Doyle, *Empires*.

from the imperial power, rather than the peripheral territories, such as colonies or protectorates. IR scholarship takes this view to an extreme. Very few IR scholars seriously consider how politics in Cuba, Hawaii, or Puerto Rico affected the prospects of American imperialism on those islands. This is part of a broader pattern of presuming that all the causal forces in America's rise are largely internal to the country, perhaps combined with a permissive international environment shaped by European wars. It rarely takes seriously – even as a potential alternative explanation – any politics that happen beyond the water's edge.

This book posits the first economic theory of American empire that concentrates on the politics in the periphery.³⁴ We focus on early alliances between American entrepreneurs and indigenous elites in Pacific territories. We discuss how those elites – or other powers often neglected by IR scholars, such as Peru – could pose threats to American interests. We show how these elites framed intervention for official Washington, whether it was the US Navy or politicians on Capitol Hill, often dragging in the US government as a powerful ally to win an argument on a remote and sometimes even barren island. In each case – except perhaps some Guano Act islands – the field of action begins abroad, and it is abroad where the interesting politics are happening.

Shifting the field of action from the capital to the American periphery is important for theoretical and normative reasons. Theoretically, it opens new areas for thinking about international politics, emphasizing the borderlands where early American expansionists met, traded, and fought. Historians of the period frequently argue that the borderlands mattered decisively for understanding imperial histories; what happened in the borderlands provided opportunities and constraints for the empires moving into their territory.³⁵ IR scholars' neglect of borderland contexts leave them at a disadvantage, unable to grapple with the voluminous historical material emerging that shows a reactive United States, struggling to come to grips with the actions of settlers and entrepreneurs across North America and the Pacific.

Normatively, this shift reinserts non-white people into the story as more than objects for conquest. This book – to be clear – is about entrepreneurs who moved abroad, most of whom were white. In this sense, the agency in the story

³⁴ For a noneconomic pericentric explanation of British Empire, see Paul MacDonald, *Networks of Domination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³⁵ Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History," *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 814–41; David A. Chang, "Borderlands in a World at Sea: Concow Indians, Native Hawaiians, and South Chinese in Indigenous, Global, and National Spaces," *Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (2011): 384–403; Alan Taylor, *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006); David Thelen, "Of Audiences, Borderlands, and Comparisons: Toward the Internationalization of American History," *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 2 (1992): 432–62.

still rests in white hands. In addition, we do not explain expansion through a racial lens. American racism is central to the story of expansion. We want to acknowledge here that racism was most likely a necessary condition: American entrepreneurs only made profit through coerced labor, which was racialized. But, we are interested in exploring variations in expansionist behavior and because racism is a constant, it has difficulty explaining varying patterns.

While we do not treat race as an independent or dependent variable – primarily because it does not vary in the cases we examine – this book is a step toward developing an account of racial dynamics in the Pacific. Unlike most discussions of American expansion in IR scholarship, we do not treat the Pacific as an unpopulated expanse of ocean where indigenous people did not matter. Put bluntly, in each empirical chapter, we point to the ways Americans attempted to rule foreign people decades before the Spanish-American War. In two chapters, the struggle over local control of the political economy, often between whites and non-whites, or between whites in alliance with non-whites, is central to the story. We begin the next chapter, for example, by focusing on the way entrepreneurs were viewed as a “thin white line” of civilization, bringing commerce and religion to ungovernable areas of the world. In doing so, we point to the human cost of American empire for non-white peoples in the Pacific.

This point deserves belaboring. IR scholars often ask how the findings generalize to contemporary cases with higher security stakes, or about the policy lessons for the exercise of American power. For historical scholarship on American imperialism, this is not the first question we should be asking. The first question is whether we are enlarging the story of the American experience, ensuring the story of America’s rise captures the myriad of experiences felt by white and non-white people who experienced American power, often at the point of a gun. Asking why the United States conquered foreign peoples, many of whom are Americans today, especially when so little was at stake, is essential for rethinking America’s responsibility to Pacific people today.

The final contribution is our intervention in debates about the relationship between economic actors and national security politics. Many IR scholars believe economic actors do not have a significant role in national security policy. They argue that decision-makers are typically well informed, relatively inaccessible, and focused on pursuing national, rather than parochial, interests.³⁶ While perhaps largely true, this book shows that this argument is conditional. A variety of conditions make economic agents influential, depending on the case and time period. We point to three critical factors that varied over the course of the nineteenth century: the role of small entrepreneurs

³⁶ This point applies primarily to the executive branch. See Stephen D. Krasner, *Defending the National Interest: Raw Materials Investments and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978); Helen V. Milner and Dustin Tingley, *Sailing the Water’s Edge: The Domestic Politics of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

in the economy, the capacity and professionalism of the foreign service to collect information on areas of concern, and the ability of legislators to resist lobbying from self-interested economic actors. Much has changed in the intervening almost two centuries, but it remains important to understand the economic and structural conditions that explain the influence of economic units over foreign policy. In conclusion, we speculate on the connections between contemporary lobbying groups and continued patterns in the United States.

1.4 PLAN FOR THE BOOK

The next chapter outlines a theory of Pacific expansion that emphasizes the role of entrepreneurs. It makes three arguments. First, American entrepreneurs chased rising commodity prices across the Pacific, outracing the American state to important outposts. Second, these entrepreneurs became the first and loudest lobbyists for American expansion. When their profits were threatened, they turned to the US government to protect their interests. Finally, their lobbying paid dividends. Entrepreneurs took advantage of the US government's inattention to foreign policy abroad, framing and shaping American policymakers' views of the world. In doing so, they secured US support.

The empirical chapters first focus on cases of US expansion. Chapter 2 describes the Guano Act islands. These were the first major land grab in the Pacific. Beginning in the 1850s, the rising price of fertilizer led American entrepreneurs to look for "get rich quick" schemes in the Pacific. They sought immediate rights to mine guano, claiming islands as possessions of the United States. Fearing foreign competitors would undermine their claims, they manipulated the US government into claiming territorial jurisdiction over otherwise useless islands. Chapter 3 describes Samoa. This is the hardest case to explain for IR scholars. The first (and only preimperial) American entrepreneur arrived in Samoa in the 1870s, chasing rising copra prices. He established a plantation to grow coconuts. When his profits were threatened – by rising German interests in the islands and declining copra prices – he began to lobby for US action. The chapter traces how he influenced the US Navy to engage in brinksmanship to secure American rights in Samoa and eventually convinced the US government to stake a claim and enter an imperial condominium to rule the islands. Chapter 4 focuses on Hawaii, which is the most difficult case to empirically tease out the role of entrepreneurs. Between 1800 and 1850, American entrepreneurs chased boom-and-bust cycles in the price of sandalwood, whale oil, and sugar. When these profits were threatened by declining sugar prices and resurgent Hawaiian nationalism, one entrepreneur began to lobby the US government for assistance. The chapter traces how he influenced the US and Hawaiian governments to enter commercial reciprocity in exchange for US territorial rights to Pearl Harbor.

A further chapter examines cases where the United States did not expand; we find this occurred for three reasons. First, we examine a set of cases where

islands did not have an abundance of a commodity with rising prices during the period. This demonstrates the price mechanism. Second, we examine cases where foreign control over the island had already occurred and did not threaten American enterprises. This emphasizes the threat mechanism. Finally, we look at cases where enterprises were established and threats to profits occurred. These are deviant cases because they disconfirm our theory. We explore these as episodes of enterprise failure, where entrepreneurs died or their businesses collapsed (and they were jailed or killed) before the period in which we anticipate lobbying would have been successful.

The concluding chapter explores lessons for understanding American political history and American empire. We argue that viewed through an economic lens, there were at least two waves of imperialism in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.