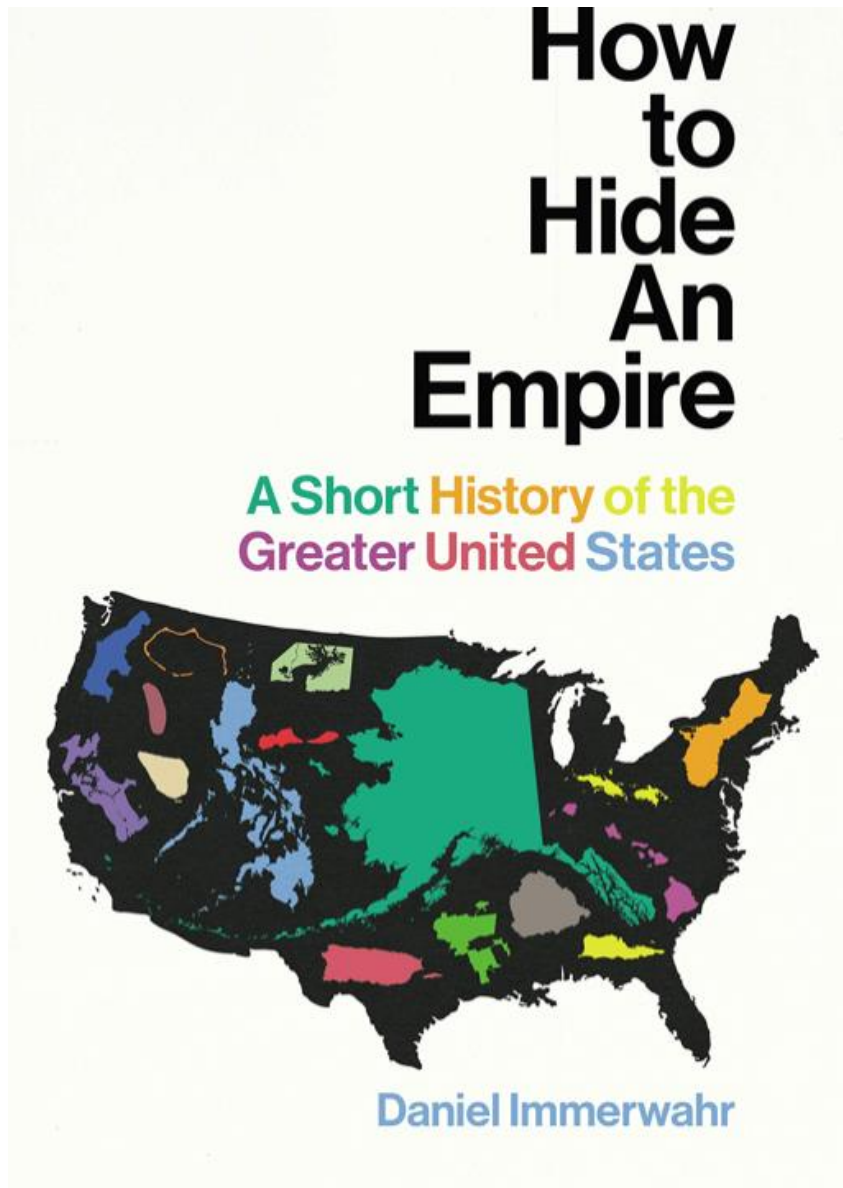


A review of 'How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States'

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Immerwahr, D *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States*. London : Vintage 2019. 516 pages, ISBN: 9781784703912 (paperback)

Abstract

The growth and decline of the British Empire, and the Roman Empire, are well documented but the American Empire less so. How is it 'hidden' from history and the inevitable criticism that comes along with any discussion of the history of imperialism across the world? *How to Hide an Empire* by Daniel

Immerwahr is a detailed and all-encompassing, but easily accessible and even occasionally entertaining read. With discussion turning towards the decolonisation of Geography; this feels a very timely publication. It uncovers a history that has been neglected, misunderstood or outright ignored. It is a vital study for Geography students as it exposes alternative perspectives and the very real impact of American expansion. As the US features so heavily in our daily lives, this is also an important book for any student who wants to better understand the background and development of one of today's largest global superpowers.

1. Introduction

There is scarcely a nation that does not have some form of US embassy, outpost or military base within its borders. In fact, 'the United States still maintains nearly 800 military bases in more than 70 countries and territories abroad' (Vine, 2015). The spread of American culture, English language, influence and money across the world is undeniable. Yet the USA is often still seen as quite contained and isolationist, with the common perception that Americans rarely travel outside their own borders. How can both these things be true? This dichotomy forms the basis for this book: Immerwahr details the often overlooked or unknown history of the US empire and aims to explore exactly how the US came to dominate global politics and the maps of the world today whilst maintaining the American belief that they are not imperialist in any way. He does not just refer to military and governmental outposts, but also covers trade, standardisation, globalisation and language and as such is a useful read for any Geographer who wishes to understand more about geopolitics, land borders and the evolution of the modern world. Immerwahr said in an interview that the colonies "are not usually emphasised when we talk about US history" (Democracy Now!, 5 March 2019) and he seeks to redress that by collecting together extensive archival evidence, anecdotes and work done by previous historians and presenting the US "differently than I had had it presented" (ibid). It encourages a shift in perception from the traditional idea of the US to considering and understanding the impact that American expansionism had upon the occupied territories. It is sometimes an uncomfortable read, brutal and unapologetically so, but feels like a necessary next step in accepting the realities of history from other viewpoints rather than just the victor.

Immerwahr is a history professor at Northwestern University. He is a scholar of US and global history who specialises in empires and their development. Although a History professor, Immerwahr's work is also a valuable read for Geography and Politics students as *How to Hide an Empire* is an exploration of global dominance, disruption and influence through historical events such as the development of the territories of Hawaii, the Philippines and the Marshall

Islands. Chapters on how the US holdings in the Pacific drew the US into the war (171), or on the technological and logistical developments after the Second World War (216) which allowed the US to rise in international prominence clearly show the links between history, politics and geographical borders. As those who are familiar with work from authors like Tim Marshall will know, power and influence are inextricably linked with land holdings and Immerwahr's analysis of these examples help to cement this knowledge. Of particular interest is the power that can be gained by giving up or signing over land ownership at the right time. After reading this book I found myself looking more deeply into the position of Puerto Rico and its population's viewpoints on US statehood or independence. The real skill of this book is to engage you with current events after reading the history, and you realise how complex and often ongoing the issues are. This makes it an excellent study companion for A-Level and beyond as it piques interest and brings new layers of understanding to modern US and global issues.

2. A comprehensive chronological pathway through complex geographical history

Immerwahr has written chronologically and accessibly, with each chapter discussing the next stage of US imperialism or event that impacted the empire and people within it. It begins with the first examples of westward expansion by Daniel Boone past the Appalachian Mountains and the line drawn by the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and ends with how the history of empire affected the US under President Trump. Rather than jumping between topics and concepts, *How to Hide an Empire* allows any student reader to gain the best overview and to see the changing face of geopolitics with its ebbs and flows. The book is structured in two parts to give even greater clarity, and divides the empire building in a useful way: first a land-driven dominance and second a more logistical, technological approach.

Part One covers the colonial empire typified by Roosevelt and the Spanish American war (69) or invasion of the Philippines in 1898 (67) – both events driven by Roosevelt in order to gain the US the most important resource of the late 19th and early 20th century: land. Controlling these areas would mean increased influence in the final years of the period of colonisation. This rush for land is best demonstrated in Chapter 5, 'Empire State of Mind', and the opportunistic nature of the building of the Greater United States is shown in the invasion of the Philippines which were formerly controlled by Spain. The President of the time, William McKinley, 'saw only one option: take the Philippines, educate and uplift them' (74). This is part of the 'hidden' nature – the US believed themselves to be freeing their conquests and not acting as imperialists. Whilst generally objective in tone, Immerwahr is critical of the United States in several areas, especially in its neglect and treatment of the

islands and their inhabitants during World War Two, such as the abandoning of the Philippines and lack of resources that were given to defend many of the islands from the Japanese (166 and 170) or the alleged cover-ups of the actions of Cornelius Rhoads in Puerto Rico (143-146). He details shockingly that many 'inhabitants of the US Empire have been shot, shelled, starved, interned, dispossessed and tortured' (19) but due to the well-known logo map skewing public perception, and the focus on the US mainland by US politicians and history-makers what the territories 'haven't been, by and large, is seen' (19). This book seeks to overturn that.

Part Two of *How to Hide an Empire* covers the post-war empire that emerged as technical, logistical and economic developments allowed the US to concentrate its power into military bases and strategic locations rather than controlling large areas of land as it had done previously. By the end of the war the USA held 'two thousand overseas base sites' and 'thirty thousand other installations' (19). When combined with increased global trade, synthetics development (discussed below) and other 'empire killing' technology it 'rendered colonies unnecessary' (279). Which, rather than mark the end of the empire, simply marked a new chapter in empire-building and shifted focus from land to technology and standardisation – of language, equipment and resources. These developments, reliance on US technology and leftover bases across the world allowed the USA to assert influence and power without needing direct territorial control (279). A power they retain today showing 'America's geopolitical power footprint' (Marshall, 2015). *How to Hide an Empire* is skilful in its explanation of how colonialism has shifted forms and instead focuses on systems and a network of interdependence.

Immerwahr is undoubtedly keen to expose the brutal impact on the oft-forgotten territories, to tell the real stories of the people affected, but he also refers to the developments made possible by empire and war. Japan invaded many territories of both the US and Britain during World War Two, this created a scarcity of raw materials crucial for manufacturing and industry. This scarcity forced greater scientific development outlined in the chapter called 'Synthetica'. One of the major developments of the wartime period within the USA was synthetic rubber. These and other technologies, such as radio development and increased use of plastics and finally the increase in mechanised production within the US removed the need for a fixed empire and instead many in the US pursued a policy of 'globalisation rather than colonisation' (264). Empire-building under another name. The synthetic materials developed are now part of our daily lives from synthetic rubber in tyres and rubber seals to the plastics of milk bottles and crucially in plastic packaging which revolutionised food preservation and hygiene. These developments further changed the policies of many former imperial colonies and changed the foreign policy and geopolitics of the 20th century as 'secure

access to raw materials- one of the chief benefits of colonisation-no longer mattered' (275). Immerwahr provides a great deal of context to many of the issues and topics found in Geography, especially the flow of trade and economics. These developments and others such as containerisation helped shape the world into what it is today. In total there are five chapters devoted to the topic of globalisation and trade, and this makes it especially useful for any Geography student.

In the final chapters Immerwahr asserts that the US 'put down the imperialist paint roller and picked up the pointillist's brush' (344). Describing the more subtle approach: changing from a metaphor describing large scale, perhaps clumsy, coverage with the more delicate Impressionist-inspired metaphor, shows Immerwahr at his narrative best. He writes in a skilful and engaging way, making *How to Hide an Empire* stand out amongst some of the more classical-style scholarly tomes. At times, this may seem a little too glib, as chapter titles such as 'Power is Sovereignty, Mister Bond' are clever and amusing but may come across as a little dismissive for the subject matter. 'Doctors Without Borders' is a deft title for the chapter on Cornelius Rhoads but the interplay between Médecins sans frontières and personal ethical borders might seem a little too light for a chapter that highlights murder, medical experimentation and a complete absence of regard for the humanity of the Puerto Rican subjects. However, since this engages debate then arguably the pitch is just right as engagement is Immerwahr's skill. Although fairly long, it is difficult to imagine anyone not getting something from this book. It also adds balance in that it documents the unbelievable fact of Rhoads' lack of punishment for his crimes but also highlights his legacy of discovering chemotherapy. History is rarely straightforward. The legacies of empire are both negative and positive, but either way deserve to be known. *How to Hide an Empire* is a book that makes you question everything and it seamlessly links the origins of the US empire with the US today giving much needed grounding for students of Geography, History and Politics. In Chapter 21, 'Baselandia', Immerwahr gives us a geographical and historical insight into where modern US foreign policy is born and develops and provides great contemporary references for those studying human geography.

3. Conclusion

Immerwahr successfully helps us understand the history of the United States and how this history influences today's America and the whole of the modern world. It shows the history of empire, but it also shows us that the concept of empire isn't one that just exists in history – empire is something that continues today. It may be under different guises as it's no longer just physical – the remaining territories and bases across the world are small enclaves of power – but empire now also spreads through currency, power, language,

influence and messaging. This book is compelling in its humanity and you are utterly convinced by Immerwahr's assertion that he "wanted to see the country differently, to map it differently" (Immerwahr, 2015). He passionately cares about his subject matter. In terms of decolonisation of Geography, it is invaluable for challenging common perceptions and addressing bias, racism, subjugation and politically and economically driven behaviour. This is a must-read for anyone who wants to challenge their world view and gain an understanding of what modern empire looks like and for all students of Geography is a useful book for adding context, developing analysis and quotable case studies. Plus, you will never look at guano in the same way again.

4. References

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