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Review of Cobbs Hoffman, *American Umpire*

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Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman. *American Umpire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. 442 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-05547-6.



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Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman's *American Umpire* challenges the popular depiction of American foreign policy as imperial in nature.[1] In her concise but sweeping survey of the history of the United States' relationship with the wider world, she argues that the term "empire" fails to accurately describe the goals and outcomes of American actions. Rather, she contends, through a narrative overview of the nation's history, that the United States constitutes an umpirical power that steps in to guide global affairs when it deems the behaviors of the international community to challenge its ideals or interests. While she admits this is not a perfect metaphor, she presents several instances where "umpire" better illustrates the uneven results of pursuing a foreign policy based on the often conflicting models of self-interest and spreading democratic ideals (p. 3). Along with the big question of America's place in the global arena, Cobbs Hoffman brings her study through the modern era and questions the future of America's impact on foreign affairs in the post-9/11 era, which is sure to attract both scholarly and popular audiences, as

well as considerable debate, to this timely and captivating book.

According to Cobbs Hoffman, the trend toward democratic capitalism involved the three overarching goals of access to opportunity, arbitration of disputes, and transparency in government and business. She highlights these elements throughout as defining factors of American foreign policy due to their potential to serve a nation's material and cultural interests. In order to balance the self- and global interests created by this trend to democratic capitalism, the United States set out to forge a new means of acting as a superpower in the eighteenth century. The desire to act within a set of idealized principles while maintaining a pragmatic position in terms of security and economics from a geographically advantageous position often placed the country in a peculiar and contradictory position. By connecting these practices to the founders and events such as their early efforts to use arbitration to avoid war in 1812, Cobbs Hoffman makes a strong case that the young nation sought a role where it first attempted to handle international disputes without violence.

She does not, however, always glamorize the American position or assume exceptionalism in the face of not being a permanent "empire." Their experiments with access, arbitration, and transparency occasionally failed, as in the case of 1812 mentioned above. She does not argue that the United States solely established the new world order, but does place it as a leader in shaping and directing the world toward a more democratic-capitalist model. Its role, as it unfolds in the post-9/11 era, she argues, will likely change. Whether it will continue to act as the arbitrator of global conflicts or others will step in, she leaves up to the reader at this time when the debate over America's responsibilities in the international community is prominent in the news. Cobbs Hoffman points out that it is not the role of the historian to speculate about the future, but suggests that the United States has "compromised its ideals" in its pursuit of self-interest over the past century and its hopes to "transfer some of the burden of umpiring ha[ve] not materialized" (pp. 339, 349). Thus the struggle

with its position as a "player-umpire" who, Cobbs Hoffman asserts, by definition "cannot win," continues (p. 350).

Cobbs Hoffman presents her argument in a rough chronological format that aims to place policy decisions in their historical context. She argues that the founding principle of no entangling alliances drove policymakers in the early days of the nation to struggle over international affairs. The 1793 decapitation of French King Louis XVI and erupting war in Europe forced President Washington to make a decision regarding the nation's role in foreign affairs and reassess treaties such as the 1778 Treaties of Alliance and Commerce with France. Rather than involve itself militarily, Cobbs Hoffman argues, the United States accepted the new government in France but chose to use economic power to influence the situation in a move that would prove a standard first effort. The establishment of economic sanctions created a lasting strategy, with a mixed record of success in avoiding military conflict.

In the face of European imperialism, Cobbs Hoffman argues, the U.S. set to strengthen its borders by reaching beyond them. Through the passage of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, and the later addition of the Roosevelt Corollary in 1904, American officials sought prevent Europe from intervening in the Western Hemisphere. During the twentieth century, the U.S. rose to its height as a global moderator, but continued to struggle with its position. She points to American control over the Philippines from 1898-1946 as the nation's only sustained empire, but one the country took on reluctantly, and accompanied by an "adolescent identity crisis" (p. 173). She depicts U.S. involvement as unplanned and the exception to the rule of umpiring. For Cobbs Hoffman and those she contests in her book, however, this moment in American foreign policy history illustrates the importance of complicating the way historians broadly label behaviors which cannot possibly remain consistent over centuries of steadily changing leadership and evolving power.

In Cobbs Hoffman's critique of the label "empire," she challenges several scholars on their use of the term. She first challenges William Appleman Williams's classic argument of American imperialism and the "Open Door empire" from *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959). From this and his later *Empire as a Way of Life* (1980), she challenges Williams's description of American entry into foreign markets and reduced trade barriers as equal to exploiting and diminishing the sovereignty of less powerful nations. In challenging Williams, she also cites a league of other scholars from the Vietnam War era forward, whom she argues use the term "empire" too loosely, including John Lewis Gaddis, Richard Immerman, Paul Kramer, and several others (p. 357n22). Cobbs Hoffman, while convincing in her assertions that American actions were not overtly imperial, misses an opportunity by offering relatively little coverage on the meaning of America intervention in Vietnam, especially in light of her reference to Vietnam as a moment many of these scholars note as a point of depar-

ture. Rather, she turns her attention to Cold War interventions in nations such as Iraq and Guatemala, which clearly illustrate the compromise of American ideals after World War II, but which she asserts fit the conflicted role of player-umpire.

In addition, Cobbs Hoffman disagrees with those who claim that Manifest Destiny, or the later establishment and maintenance of the American overseas presence, such as military bases, constitutes imperialism. In a portion of the book that would benefit from more statistical evidence to prove her point, she claims that since the majority of the native population volunteered allegiance and did not require "long-term forced association," the process could not be considered imperial (p. 95). Regarding the nation's overseas presence, she cites Geir Lundestad's *Empire by Integration* (1998) argument for deeming the United States as an "arbiter," but where he feels "umpire" is too objective a term, she feels it better suits U.S. actions. Cobbs Hoffman asserts that "from Truman through George H. W. Bush, every presidential administration operated on the assumption that the only way to resolve persistent conflict over resources was to help the rest of the world catch up with America as quickly as possible" (p. 322). While some have dubbed this as cultural imperialism, she instead sees an umpire with self-interest forging alliances as tools for success. On this point, more work needs to be done. American intervention abroad to secure its international position might not fit under the traditional definition of an empire, but does seem to suggest more influence than even a player-umpire.

Overall, Cobbs Hoffman presents a compelling, and often convincing, challenge to those who simplistically describe American foreign policy, particularly through the twentieth century, as imperial. Her work will surely be controversial in its willingness to take on countless scholars. Whether or not readers will accept her notion of America as a player-umpire, the book succeeds in complicating our understanding of terms and the founders'

original intentions as she encourages a move away from the imperial paradigm.[2] The last chapters move quickly, with 1947-91 covered in one forty-page chapter, and the brief conclusion exploring the period from 1991 to the time of publication. As Cobbs Hoffman negotiates modern conflicts, the book loses a bit of the cohesion from the earlier chapters, with American intervention in Bosnia coming after a discussion of 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Covering the scope of American history in a relatively short 353 pages, the work relies largely on reevaluating secondary or published primary sources, leaving readers plenty of room to explore her thesis in more detail. In the years to come, this book will benefit from expanded editions that will allow for more discussion of the events of the last half-century and their meaning for America's role on the world stage, in particular with increased debate over expanded intervention in the Middle East. With sharp writing and such a clear challenge to the "America as empire" paradigm, this book is sure to attract the attention it deserves.

Notes

[1]. Cobbs Hoffman points to William Appleman Williams's *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, followed by American involvement in the Vietnam War, as a turning point when several scholars began to refer to U.S. foreign policy as a form of empire.

[2]. Cobbs Hoffman presents several pages illustrating the use of the term "umpire" by the American founders. When they used the term "empire," she argues, they clearly meant it as something "different in kind from all preceding empires" (p. 43).

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