The United States after 1783: An American or a British Empire?

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Abstract

This contribution outlines a case for reconsidering US history in the nineteenth century. The standard approach tells the "story of the nation" after 1783 from an internal standpoint that minimizes external connections. Historians of empire, however, distinguish between formal and effective independence and trace the lines of continuity that lead from one to the other. If applied to the newly decolonized United States, this perspective reveals that important ties of commerce, finance, politics, and culture with the former colonial power remained both vibrant and persistent. Some contemporaries formulated alternatives that would reduce Britain's informal influence; others cooperated with what would later be called neocolonialism. The ensuing debate set out arguments and policies that were to be carried forward into the twentieth century. Effective independence, defined as the recovery of key aspects of sovereignty, was not achieved until the late nineteenth century, after the Civil War, and when industrialization increased the power and confidence of the newly united nation. This argument suggests that existing studies need revising to recognize that the United States was the first important decolonized state in what was becoming the modern world; as such, it was the precursor of states in other parts of the world that were to follow its lead.

Keywords

United States – Great Britain – imperialism – empire – decolonization – independence
1 Introduction

Historians of empire have long accepted a formal approach to the history of the United States. Before 1783, the mainland colonies were undeniably part of the British Empire, and they are included in all studies of the subject dealing with the eighteenth century. After the achievement of independence in 1783, the United States ceases to feature in the standard literature on imperial history. Specialists studying the United States focus on internal developments in the newly independent state and minimize international relations before the war with Spain in 1898 and the subsequent acquisition of overseas territories. Imperial historians accept the loss of territory and abandon the former colonies until 1941, when the attack on Pearl Harbor signaled the appearance of the United States as a permanent and predominant influence on international affairs, including the European empires.

The division of labor between specialists seems self-evident and has been endorsed by time and repetition. Yet, it contains a large anomaly. In the case of other colonies, historians have generated substantial debates about the reality of independence. As far as the twentieth century is concerned, the literature has centered on “neocolonialism,” the idea that constitutional independence masked the continuing dependence of the new state on external forces. A typical example is one where the connections established by the former colonial power remain after formal independence has been conferred. In the case of the nineteenth century, the preferred term is “informal empire,” a concept that has been attached to the independent republics that arose in Latin America after Spain lost control early in the century, though in that case the dominant new power was Britain. Elsewhere, the term has been applied to states like China and the Ottoman Empire that had not previously been ruled by a foreign power but were subject to penetration by developing countries in the Western world.

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1 It is a privilege to contribute to this set of essays honoring Shigeru Akita’s extensive contributions to our subject. The range of his work, across continents and themes, is hard to match; his energy is unbounded. In addition to his substantial list of publications and teaching commitments, he has devoted an immense amount of time to fostering relations among the international community of scholars. I am one of the many historians who have benefited from initiatives he has taken and conferences he has organized. Despite his achievements, Shigeru remains as unassuming as he was when we first met nearly thirty years ago. That meeting has developed into a valued friendship that has undoubtedly made me its primary beneficiary.
The history of the United States, however, has not been approached in this way. On the contrary, after 1783 specialists on the United States have focused on producing a chronicle for the nation, which has been told largely within the expanding borders of the country. The historiography is consistent with the literature on other former colonies, whose scholars concentrate on creating a national story to celebrate the birth of the new state and provide a guide to its future. In the case of the United States, the effort has aligned the study of history to the unifying themes of liberty and democracy. On this telling, the past is conceived as an illustration of an evolutionary process, whereby, despite interruptions, great historical events mark successive steps toward progress. The road has turned out to be a long one; the journey continues today.

Dissenters have, of course, challenged this approach, as they have in other ex-colonial states. A long-established radical school of historians has questioned the emphasis on liberty and democracy. There is evidence to show that US presidents and state governors have not always lived up to the ideals of the founding fathers – or in some cases made much of an effort to do so. Nevertheless, the mainstream or orthodox view continues to predominate. Indeed, the flood of books telling the “national story” continues to drown dissenting voices, which are less influential today than they were in the 1960s and 1970s. Other ex-colonial states have challenged this perspective more effectively. Disillusion with the probity and competence of the first generation of leaders who brought their countries to independence has shown how quickly proclaimed ideals can be abandoned and has encouraged critical views of the initial national story. In some cases, especially where small states were especially vulnerable, the persistence of colonial influences and institutions was too apparent to be ignored. The United States, however, has been distinctive in this regard, partly because of the enduring power of the myth of US exceptionalism – the idea that the country has a special mission that distinguishes it from other states – and partly because of its immense size and resources, which have given it a much greater degree of self-sufficiency than other former colonies could hope to achieve. Moreover, because most US history has been written during the twentieth century, when the state achieved superpower status, many historians have been tempted to read the dominance of the present into the past.

An Alternative View

The standard approach, however, is not only insular but also anachronistic. The United States was not alone in developing the idea that it was an exceptional
nation. Britain, France, Russia, and Japan were among many other states that supposed they possessed special qualities that included a mission to spread their values to the world. Moreover, the United States was far from being self-sufficient in 1783, despite its size and rich resources. A substantial degree of self-sufficiency was not achieved until the 1880s and was being eroded by the 1980s.

These considerations suggest that it might be illuminating to consider the United States after 1783 as a newly independent state that, like other former colonies, struggled to give substance to formal independence. Historians of decolonization are familiar with the distinction between formal independence, which involves constitutional and political change, and effective independence, which involves recapturing key elements of sovereignty over the economy, defence, education, the law, and cultural life. In principle, formal and effective independence may be acquired simultaneously or with little delay. In practice, it takes time to accomplish the transition; even then, it is usually qualified and incomplete.

Viewed from this standpoint, the priorities of the new rulers of the United States were not liberty and democracy, which were desirable, but development and viability, which were essential. The distinctive feature of US history during this period, though it has still to be recognized, is that it was the first important former colony to grapple with these issues. While it did so, the influence of Britain, the former colonial power, continued to feature prominently in the economic, political, and cultural life of the new republic. The evidence suggests that the United States had still to attain effective independence by the time the Civil War began in 1861.

Seen in this way, the United States appears in a new guise as the first important example of Britain’s emerging global informal influence, and also the first to devise and dispute strategies for achieving genuine independence. The mounting quarrel between Northern and Southern states over the character of the new federal republic provides the most dramatic illustration of the contest between progressives and conservatives over which type of society would prevail. Northern interests advocated ideas of development that ranged from tariff protection to ambitions for attaining cultural independence. The political dominance of Southern interests, however, entrenched a dependent free-trading relationship with Britain that was reinforced by a sense of cultural affiliation derived from their Anglo roots.

4 Economic, Political, and Cultural Dependence

The absence of this approach is particularly surprising because the issues raised are not retrospective impositions, but ones that preoccupied contemporaries.
Examples of continuing economic, political, and cultural dependence are easily found, though they can be dealt with here only in a summary manner.

Politicians and economists in the United States constructed the first development debate in the Western world, and in doing so anticipated some basic arguments between, for example, protection and free trade, that are familiar today. Hamiltonians and Jeffersonians devised different strategies for attaining effective independence. Henry Clay (1777–1852) advocated a protectionist “American System”; Jeffersonians campaigned for agrarian, free-trading republics. Britain’s aim, so Clay claimed in 1820, was to maintain the United States as “independent colonies of England – politically free, commercially slaves.”

Twelve years later, he remained convinced that the United States had still to break free from what he called “the British colonial system.” According to Henry Carey (1793–1879), the foremost economist of the period, the version of free trade advocated by the South, if adopted, would lead “substantially to the recolonization of these States, under the commercial dominion of Great Britain.” The route to independence, Carey held, lay through protecting infant industries in the United States by imposing tariffs on imported manufactured goods. Even as late as 1865, Carey thought that the United States was still subordinated to “the precise system ... required for retaining the colonies in a state of vassalage.”

The Atlantic economy provides a notable illustration of economic dependence. Current scholarship assumes that the vibrant Atlantic world of the eighteenth century disappeared or was greatly reduced after independence. Yet, trade between Britain and its former possession not only survived 1783 but also underwent a massive expansion following Jay’s Treaty (1794/95), which normalized relations between the two countries. Commerce between them was characteristically colonial in exchanging manufactures for raw materials, principally cotton, tobacco, and later wheat. Cotton (and slavery) expanded rapidly in the United States from the 1820s and were boosted further in 1846, when Britain adopted free trade.

Given the embryonic state of the US capital market, export development depended heavily on British finance.

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2 Brauer 1988, 24. Brauer’s innovative article was ahead of its time and still awaits both appreciation and pursuit.
3 Clay 1832.
4 Carey 1865, 24, 27.
5 Ibid. 49.
The City of London was vital not only to trade, but also to the construction of the new state. British investment underpinned the viability that was essential to the survival of the United States and fueled its westward expansion. The firm of Barings helped to finance the massive Louisiana Purchase in 1803, broker the peace after the War of 1812, and fund the Mexican War in 1846. These developments occurred behind the protective shield of the Royal Navy, which enabled the fledgling state to develop its resources while economizing on its defense costs. Nevertheless, full political independence was complicated by the federal structure agreed to in 1787, which made it difficult for the central government to claim the undivided allegiance of its citizens. Indeed, the Constitution was designed, not as the basis of a national government, but as the means of ensuring stability and harmony among the Republic's diverse constituents. As the prominent Southern politician, John C. Calhoun, declared in 1849: “I never use the word ‘Nation’ in speaking of the United States. I always use the word ‘Union’ or ‘Confederacy. We are not a Nation, but a Union, a Confederacy of equal and sovereign States.”6 His political stance was strengthened by the continuing economic dependence of the Southern states on exports of raw cotton to Britain. The huge wealth accumulated in the slave-based plantations of the South was directly linked to the region's control of Congress for most of this period. Jefferson's ideal of multiple republics filled with sober yeomen gave way to the prospect that the South might establish a free-trading, patriarchal, dynastic state in alliance with Britain.

Increasing international integration meant that conditions in British markets affected political fortunes in the United States. The years of economic “panics,” as they were called, in 1819, 1837, and 1857, were prompted initially by crises in overseas trade and had their outcomes in changing political fortunes in the United States. The relationship can clearly be seen in the 1820s, when the panic of 1819 provided an opening for Andrew Jackson, the Donald Trump of the time, who led a populist, nationalist movement that carried him to the presidency in 1829. Jackson declared that the national debt, much of which was in British or other foreign hands, was “incompatible with real independence.”7 Astonishingly, he succeeded in eliminating the debt, though only for a year. After 1835, the debt increased again and foreign investors, headed by Britain, quickly resumed their previously prominent role.

The most telling example, however, comes from the Civil War, which split the United States from 1861 to 1865. The Southern states were the world's leading supplier of raw cotton at this time, and Britain relied on them to supply

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6 Quoted in Huntington 2004, 114.
7 Lane 2007, 70.
its booming textile industry. The South was confident that cultural affiliations, a powerful publicity campaign, and economic self-interest would draw Britain into backing the Confederacy. Yet, Britain remained neutral. The disruption caused by the war and the consequent high price of raw cotton in the United Kingdom undoubtedly created difficulties for Manchester’s textile manufacturers, but the industry adapted by increasing supplies from India. In addition, the South underestimated the strength of antislavery opinion in Britain and overlooked Britain’s considerable commitment to other parts of the United States. Most British exports went to the North, and British investments helped to finance the westward movement and its products, notably corn exports from the Midwest. The moral of the story is that mutual interests are not necessarily equal interests. The South depended far more on Britain than Britain depended on the South.

The United States also found it hard to develop what the literature on decolonization refers to as a national “counter-culture,” which is to say the recovery of indigenous customs, values, and forms of artistic expression that were either repressed or denigrated under colonial rule. The creation of a counter-culture is especially difficult in colonies of white settlement, where values, norms, and aspirations are essentially those of the home country exported abroad. There is a case for saying that Canada, Australia, and New Zealand did not experience their own cultural renaissance until after the Second World War. The United States, of course, had left the empire long before then, but still struggled to establish its cultural independence.

At the close of the eighteenth century, Noah Webster had ambitious plans for producing an independent American version of the English language. By 1828, when he published his famous dictionary, he had parted from his youthful ambitions and was more concerned to produce conservative guidance to help stabilize a society that he thought had strayed from the correct path of progress. Even so, the most popular dictionary was not his, but one produced by Joseph Worcester in 1830 that conformed closely to British English. The poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, was so steeped in the classics that Walt Whitman referred to him, dismissively, as being a mere imitator of European forms. Some critics even called the novelist, James Fenimore Cooper, an “Anglomaniac.” In 1837, the famous writer and thinker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, acknowledged the continuing dependence of the United States when he

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8 Trachtenberg 2004, ch. 1; Ferguson, 1978: 187–215. Whitman appears to have overlooked Longfellow’s ambition, which anticipated Emerson, of helping to create a genuine American literature.
9 Wendell 1901, 187.
confidently predicted that “our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close.”10 His prediction was frustrated.11 Ten years later, he observed that: “The American is only the continuation of the English genius into new conditions, more or less propitious.”12

The nascent sense of cultural identity that Tocqueville observed in the 1840s and 1850s had still to be fused in an allegiance to the Union as a whole.13 Tocqueville himself habitually referred to the citizens of the United States as “Anglo-Americans” or “the English race in America.” Both phrases captured the sense of a nationality that was still only half formed. Meanwhile, the poet, Henry Timrod, was busy elaborating a specifically Southern sense of identity. He welcomed the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 with a poem specifically called “Ethnogenesis”:

Hath not the morning dawned with added light?
And shall not evening call another star
Out of the infinite regions of the night
To mark this day in Heaven? At last we are
A nation among nations. And the world
Shall soon behold in many a distant port
Another flag unfurled!

5  The Argument Further Explored

The interpretation offered in American Empire invited historians to consider a fresh view of an established subject. The approach was intended to be sufficiently plausible to merit consideration while acknowledging that it lacked the scope and scholarship to be authoritative. Among the comments made so far on the period 1783–1861, three make substantial contributions that should persuade other specialists to reconsider standard approaches to the subject.14

Patrick Griffin has explored the current debate on the character of the post-revolutionary state during the early years of independence.15 His particular

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10 Emerson 1837.
11 Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882). Tennenhouse (2007) makes the general point with a wealth of learning and a refreshing selection of literary illustrations.
12 Emerson 1909, 1980: 332.
13 Kramer 2011 develops this theme.
14 The contributions by Griffin, Edling, and Sexton discussed in this section are also available in Akita 2022, which contains a total of ten contributions on the subject of American empire.
15 Griffin 2021, 414–30.
focus is on the claim that the new state was more powerful than the long-standing minimalist position allowed, and that its assertive expansionism justifies referring to it as an “empire.” This argument, he suggests, overlooks the possibility that the newly United States might also, or alternatively, be seen as a postcolonial state. The character of this state, Griffin suggests, was profoundly shaped by lines of continuity inherited from the colonial period, and by British influence in particular. One conclusion is that the “empire of liberty” was greatly circumscribed by continuing dependence on Britain. Another is that the dilemmas of mobilizing and managing the postrevolutionary state can be better understood by placing them in the context of the continuing postcolonial relationship with Britain. Griffin goes on to argue that issues that have been treated in a self-contained, insular context can be further illuminated by seeing them as forming part of the anticolonial struggles taking place elsewhere.

Griffin develops his argument with the authority of a specialist, explores its implications for the historiography of the period, and adds greatly to the interpretation outlined in American Empire. His handling of a comparative approach is especially illuminating in underlining differences as well as similarities. While similarities between the United States and other decolonizing states of the time can clearly be seen, differences allow particularities of outcomes to be understood too. The United States was in the exceptional position of having access to almost unlimited land that, crucially, was potentially productive and contained rich mineral as well as agricultural resources. The United States could also develop with British support. Elsewhere, new states emerging from this, the first great decolonization, might have wide open spaces but could rarely draw on such rich resources. Britain often stepped in, most obviously in Latin America, but did not do so effectively until later in the century and then in circumstances that were less propitious than they were in North America. Griffin provides a neat answer to the question of whether US westward expansion resulted in the creation of an empire by saying that “America could act imperially because it was part of another empire.”16 The underestimated “special relationship” enabled the United States to mobilize its resources in the way it did. The result, however, was not an empire but rather a sovereign and expansive settler state.

The issue of empire and westward expansion has been taken up directly by Max Edling.17 The treatment of the subject in American Empire does no more than touch on the subject. The difficulty was either saying nothing, which would have been an unacceptable omission, or saying enough to do justice to

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16  Ibid. 425.
17  Edling 2021, 431–58.
the subject, which would have taken the book further into US history than its main theme required and my competence allowed. Edling's incisive reappraisal of the subject departs both from “the story of democracy” and the unreflective use of the term “empire.” As he points out, empires characteristically seek to manage different ethnicities, as the British did when they ruled the mainland colonies, were already doing in India, and were to do elsewhere in Asia and in Africa later in the nineteenth century. Incorporation was limited to the degree of acculturation required of selected groups that fitted Britain's interests. The expansion of the United States was different. The policy of removing Native Americans from their home terrain, and later of confining them to reservations, was designed to eliminate them from the process of development, which was conceived as being one led and dominated by white settlers. Moreover, the United States expanded by cellular reproduction. That is to say, each new state within the federation acquired rights that were identical to those accorded to the states that drew up the Constitution of 1787. Subordination, expressed in territorial status, was temporary; the aim was equality. The result, Edling argues, was not an empire, but an expanded sovereign state.

The distinction between empire and state rests on definitions that are not easily fixed because meaning of the terms used evolved with the polities they described. What can be said in this case is that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the term “empire” was used principally to describe an expanding sovereign state. This was the meaning Washington and Jefferson attached to the term. It was only later in the nineteenth century that this usage was replaced by the meaning commonly understood today, whereby empires impose constitutional inequalities and effective subordination. When the United States defeated Spain in 1898, the overseas territories it acquired in the Caribbean and Pacific were treated differently. Far from being cellular extensions of the homeland, they were treated as subordinates, governed from Washington, and were debarred from incorporation. The only exception was Hawai'i, which was offered the prospect of incorporation because, unlike the other territories, it had become a home for white settlers from the mainland. As the number of Asian settlers increased in the nineteenth century, however, Washington retreated from its obligation. Even though Hawai'i was well qualified for incorporation, it was not until 1959 that statehood was reluctantly conceded. Domination and empire are not synonymous. By 1900, a nation-state was being created on the continent and an empire was being established overseas.

*American Empire* explored the continuities that bound the United States to Britain after formal independence had been attained, but did not deal with the return trade, namely the influence the United States had on Britain and the
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wider world during this period. Jay Sexton accepts the essential argument about the continuity of British influences on the United States and underlines the extent to which transactions of all kinds expanded after 1783. The United States became Britain's most important single supplier of raw materials and consumer of British manufactures, the principal destination for Britain's foreign investment, and the recipient of some twenty-two million immigrants from the British Isles between 1815 and 1914, a total that far exceeded arrivals from any other country.

The corollary, which Sexton explores in his wide-ranging account, is that the United States had a reciprocal influence on Britain. The massive trade between the two countries boosted shipping and great ports on both sides of the Atlantic. The penetration of US manufactures into the British market in the late nineteenth century helped to drive British goods into less attractive markets in Asia and Africa. In this way, US commercial expansion influenced the growth of the British Empire. Communication networks encouraged exchanges of all kinds. The antislavery movement became a joint effort. Radical ideas, often prompted by Irish immigrants, found their way into British politics. Some of the lessons of 1776 and 1783 had lodged themselves sufficiently in British minds to influence attitudes toward discordant elements in other settler colonies, notably the value of federation as a device to defuse discontent. Notions of racial unity (and racial supremacy) gave rise to a grand, cosmopolitan plan for uniting the Anglo-Saxon (subsequently English-speaking) world. This prospect became entangled with the countervailing force of nationalism but lived on in the concept of the Commonwealth and, later, the “special relationship.”

Sexton’s contribution raises an important issue of chronology. At what point did the return trade in products and ideas from the United States match and then outweigh Britain’s influence on the United States? Some connections, such as those expressed by trans-Atlantic cooperation in the antislavery movement, were evident before the Civil War. Others, notably the penetration of US manufactured goods into British markets, did not appear until later in the century. Put in the terms adopted in this essay, when did formal independence become effective independence? The answer to this question requires a separate essay, or rather book, and lies outside the limits of the present article. Nevertheless, it is worth sketching the outlines of an answer not only to complement the argument about continuities after 1783 but also to provoke other scholars to ponder a question that has rarely been asked.

18 Sexton 2022, 459–80.
Attaining Effective Independence

Independence is a concept that defies precise measurement. Some economic indices can be measured but not all; politics and culture have to be assessed more generally. Nevertheless, it is possible to suggest an answer to the question of when the United States achieved effective independence that accords with the historical record. On the eve of the Civil War, the United States was still hampered by political fragilities. State building itself continued to rely on British finance. The army was minuscule; the navy was limited. Attempts to create a nation out of a state, or rather a set of states, had foundered on divisions between North and South that widened with the passage of time. The colonial character of the economy, far from diminishing, had become more pronounced as raw cotton became the increasingly dominant export. Efforts to create a counter-culture had made little progress, not least because values shaped by and exported from Britain continued to be willingly accepted as the standard to be emulated. Of course, this summary account can be punctuated with many qualifications. What matters, however, is not when alternatives made their appearance, but when they started to outweigh inherited external influences.

The victory of the North in the Civil War ended the prospect of the South becoming a separate state. Peace, however, was not synonymous with unity. It was not until the Compromise of 1877 that the two sides drew together in a deal that was agreed by political elites but still awaited acceptance at the grassroots. It was only in the 1880s that more positive signs of national unification appeared, and only in the 1890s that they established themselves permanently. This was when the national flag and anthem, advocated by veterans’ associations and other patriotic organizations, gained popularity. Uncle Sam became the undisputed symbol of the nation; the Pledge of Allegiance was composed; Thanksgiving was on its way to becoming a national holiday. The term “Union,” which had spectacularly failed to represent unity in 1861, was relegated to the mundane duty of describing labor organizations. “America,” an assertion that has long offended the populations of Central and South America, took its place – and stayed there. Historians were on hand to set these developments in a grand narrative that gave exceptionalism a scholarly foundation. It was in the 1890s, too, that the emerging nation-state created its own fleet of battleships to defend its sovereignty and reduce its dependence on the Royal Navy. Simultaneously, the United States defied Britain during the Venezuela crisis in 1895, and gave substance to the Monroe Doctrine shortly afterward. In 1907, President Roosevelt sent the new US fleet around the world. The sixteen battleships were painted in white to symbolize peace. They were also heavily armed. It was apparent that the United States had become a global power to be reckoned with.
Political unity and economic development reinforced each other. Once the Civil War had destroyed the South’s grip on the federal government, and with it the prospect that the slave-based plantation system would spread across the continent, Northern interests were free to develop the domestic market behind a wall of import tariffs. The United States began to industrialize rapidly in the 1870s. By 1900, the country had ceased to be a net importer of finished goods and had penetrated the British market with its own manufactures.\(^{19}\) It was at this time that British commentators, who were already alarmed by the rise of Germany, began to describe the success of US exporters as an “invasion.” Causes were plumbed; solutions were canvassed. Influential voices began to argue that Britain needed to expand to avoid being dwarfed by larger rivals. One proposal, made with the example of the United States in mind, was to federate the existing empire; another held that Britain’s problems could be solved by expanding the empire into new territories. Meanwhile, the United States continued its rapid progress. By 1914, the United States had become the largest producer of goods and services in the world, and had broken free from the colonial inheritance that had characterized its foreign trade down to the Civil War. Its GDP was over twice that of Britain and almost double that of Germany.\(^{20}\) Moreover, US financial markets had developed to the point where they had achieved parity with the City of London in defending the gold standard, opposing exchange controls, managing liquidity problems arising from the close ties established between Wall Street and the City, and supporting Britain financially during the Anglo–South African War. The reversal of fortunes was complete.

By the close of the century, a new tone had entered most forms of cultural expression, which had become homegrown instead of extensions of styles imported from the great metropolis. The precursor was Walt Whitman, who protested against “second-hand” imports that had been detached from their original homes.\(^{21}\) Whitman’s collected poems, _Leaves of Grass_, first published in 1855, rejected what he called the “feudal” literature of Scott, Tennyson, and Shakespeare, and expressed an independent American voice in both subject and style. Emily Dickinson also spoke with a distinctive voice, though in an economical and introspective style that contrasted with Whitman’s unrestrained extroversion.\(^{22}\) Her poetry, like Whitman’s, was distinctively American, and

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19 Lipsey 2000, 703.
20 Broadberry and O’Rourke 2010, 33, 39.
21 Whitman 1871.
22 Dickinson 1924; 1993. It was not until 1955 that all of her poems were published, and only in 1998 that they appeared with the original punctuation and spelling restored.
her use of meter and rhyme sufficiently innovative to disconcert critics. Yet, she also spoke in universal terms:23

I felt a cleavage in my mind
As if my brain had split;
I tried to match it, seam by seam,
But could not make them fit.

The thought behind I strove to join
Unto the thought before,
But sequence ravelled out of reach
Like balls upon the floor

Mark Twain provided a very different but still wholly American account of what Whitman called the “native, the universal and the near” in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876) and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884), which described a world far removed from that inhabited by East Coast elites, who wrote about themselves. In 1904, the notable British journalist, William Stead, observed that “the old, almost pathetic humility with which American writers listened to the criticisms of Europe has disappeared.”24 As advocates of “cultural uplift” struggled to propagate the merits of classical music, numerous styles of popular music – folk, country, ragtime and others – were being produced by, and for, what the novelist, Cordwainer Smith, called the “under-people.” By the turn of the century, what Australians were later to call “cultural cringe” had ceased to shackle artistic expression in the United States.

No single date can mark the achievement of effective independence without imposing specificity on a process that was imprecise and evolving. Nevertheless, dates can serve a useful purpose in such cases if they attract attention to an issue that might otherwise lack focus. If it is assumed, as is conventional, that the United States became independent in 1783, no further questions arise, apart from tracing the subsequent rise of the nation. If, however, a distinction is drawn between formal and effective independence, there is a problem that requires investigation, and the “story of the nation” needs to be adapted to incorporate material that is otherwise treated separately.

American Empire suggests that the best single date to represent this profound transition was 1898, the year the United States went to war with Spain and acquired a clutch of colonies and subordinate territories in the Pacific and

23  This poem, like all her poems, was untitled.
24  Stead 1901, 277.
Caribbean. The merit of this date is that it brings together the constituent elements of effective independence as no other single date does. Economic development enabled the United States to apply power to international affairs in ways that were previously inconceivable. Economic change, however, had also produced sectorial and social inequalities that threatened the cohesion of the recently united nation. War with Spain was a means of solidifying unity under the guidance of the Republican Party, while also defusing radical challenges to economic and political orthodoxy. In addition, the war added a cultural dimension to the concept of the nation by promoting racism as a key component of national unity. The idea that all white Americans belonged to a superior race found militant expression through conquering other people and trumped alternative claims on loyalties, such as those based on divisions of class.

7 Conclusion

The key argument of this essay is that the concept of independence, as applied to the United States, needs to be rethought in the light of the distinction between formal and effective independence derived from the literature on empires and decolonization. The implication of this suggestion is that the study of US history could benefit from extending its frontiers beyond current limits to incorporate relevant comparative literature. The interpretation offered here suggests that formal independence was consistent with continuing British influence, which expanded after 1783 across a range of indicators. If this argument is accepted, it becomes necessary to determine when effective independence was achieved. The answer, following the trajectory of economic, political, and cultural trends, is in the closing years of the century. The war with Spain in 1898 provides a vantage point that shows how new developments coalesced and found expression for the first time in an assertive venture beyond US borders.

These findings raise even wider questions about how to categorize US expansion and British influence during in the nineteenth century. Students of the United States have tended to apply the term “empire” far too generally, and typically without showing familiarity with the considerable literature on the subject produce by imperial historians. Westward expansion can be regarded as imperialist in its assertive determination to subdue or bypass Native Americans. Imperialist methods, however, do not necessarily result in the creation of an empire. In the case of the United States, the desired result was not a series of states held in permanent subordination, but a set of white
polities, cloned from the original model, that attained constitutional equality and substantial independent powers under the federal government. The outcome was a greatly expanded sovereign state. The United States did indeed create an empire, but only after the war with Spain in 1898, when it acquired overseas possessions in the manner of nations like Britain and France. This was the real empire, even though it has received little attention from specialists in US history.

It is more difficult to find a term that fits Britain’s role in the United States. The case for continuity, which is underlined by evidence that British influence was not dwindling after 1783 but becoming more extensive, might suggest that the United States was part of Britain’s informal empire. There are two problems with this view. First, the concept of informal empire was devised as a heuristic device to make the point that there are types of domination that can follow the end of formal empire. Although the idea achieved a remarkable degree of influence, it was never clearly defined, with the result that practitioners lack an index against which to measure the extent of influence in a particular country. It is entirely reasonable to speak of informal influence, but “informal empire,” the stronger term, requires robust evidence of the extent of the diminution of sovereignty if it is to achieve parity of status with the formal empire. The second, related problem is that evidence of continuing foreign influence needs to be set against the degree of real independence that the United States undoubtedly gained after 1783. In these murky circumstances, perhaps the wisest course is to conclude that the claim that Britain’s informal empire in the nineteenth century included the United States is a considerable exaggeration, but that it is an even greater exaggeration to equate formal independence with effective independence.

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