Review Article

William Appleman Williams and the 'American Empire'

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During the last decade William Appleman Williams has become one of the most influential of contemporary American historians. In particular, the comprehensive interpretation of United States foreign policy which he originally expounded in The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (Cleveland and New York, 1959; revised edition, New York, 1962) has attracted many adherents in these years of the Vietnam war and the rise of the 'New Left'. A school has developed and in a number of monographs and articles Williams's interpretative framework has been applied to various episodes and aspects of American foreign policy. Williams has edited a volume of essays, largely by members of this school, which 'can be used as the basic guide for a course in American foreign relations'. Its appearance, following the recent publication in this country of Williams's own substantial work on the background to the Spanish-American War and America's acquisition of the Philippines, provides an appropriate occasion for a general review of the interpretation.

1 See, particularly, Walter LaFeber, The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion 1860-1898 (Ithaca, N.Y., 1963); Lloyd C. Gardner, Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy (Madison, Wisconsin, 1964); Thomas J. McCormick, China Market: America's Quest for Informal Empire 1893-1901 (Chicago, 1967); and the essays by Gardner and Robert F. Smith in Barton J. Bernstein (editor), Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History (New York, 1968).

2 Other works which show Williams's influence include Gar Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam (New York, 1965); Walter LaFeber, America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945-1966 (New York, 1967); N. Gordon Levin Jr., Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution (New York, 1968); Lloyd C. Gardner, Architects of Illusion: Men and Ideas in American Foreign Policy 1941-1949 (Chicago, 1970).

3 From Colony to Empire: Essays in the History of American Foreign Relations (New York, 1972), p. 2. Hereafter cited as FCI.

4 The Roots of the Modern American Empire: A Study of the Growth and Shaping of Social Consciousness in a Marketplace Society (London, 1970). Hereafter cited as RMAE.

5 In the past few years the Williams thesis has also been sympathetically presented to a wider audience on both sides of the Atlantic. See Christopher Lasch, 'The Cold War, Revisited and Re-Visioned', New York Times Magazine, 14 January 1968; David Horowitz,
Baldly stated, the Williams thesis is that the United States has always been an expansionist, imperialist power. Until the Civil War this expansion was primarily territorial in form — the seizure from European powers, Mexico and the Indians of land in North America. Thereafter, and particularly after the apparent 'end of the frontier' in the 1890s, the mode of expansion was economic — the acquisition of overseas markets for America's 'surplus' industrial and agricultural production. The promotion of this commercial expansion has been the constant and overriding aim of American foreign policy. In some cases, as with Alaska, Hawaii and the Philippines, this has led to the further acquisition of territory and an exercise in traditional colonialism, but generally the United States has preferred the technique of 'informal empire' — the exercise of control over the economic and political life of other countries without the assumption of direct administrative responsibilities. The key to this strategy is to be found in the Open Door Notes of 1899 and 1900 which called upon other nations to respect the principle of equal commercial opportunity in China. Confident of the superior efficiency and power of their economy, Americans were sure that, given 'a fair field and no favour', they could achieve predominance in the markets of the world. 'The philosophy and practice of secular empire that was embodied in the Open Door Notes became the central feature of American foreign policy in the twentieth century.' In the last analysis, it explains American involvement in both World Wars, the misnamed 'isolationism' of the inter-war period, the origins of the Cold War and the global interventionism of the past two decades. The overall thrust of the argument is graphically illustrated by the end-papers of From Colony to Empire — the first showing the territorial expansion of the United States in North America, the second depicting the world in 1972 with the partners in America's various alliances in the same shading as the United States. In the conclusion to the book, Williams makes the point explicitly: 'The essence of American foreign relations is so obvious as to have been often ignored or evaded. It is the story of the evolution of one fragile settlement planted precariously on the extreme perimeter of a vast and unexplored continent into a global Empire.'

This apparently monolithic interpretation in fact involves separable claims. The first is that of the essential continuity of American policy from the eighteenth century to the present. Much of the force of this point seems to derive from a loose use of the key words, 'expansion' and 'empire'. Walter LaFeber is at pains to demonstrate that the Founding Fathers, particularly Franklin and Madison,
dreamed of an 'American Empire'. Yet he surely does not mean to suggest that what they had in mind bore much resemblance to that heterogeneous collection of allies and clients with which President Nixon has to deal. The use of the word 'expansion' to describe not only the acquisition and settlement of new lands in North America but also the development of overseas markets gives rise to a more subtle and serious confusion. The common description leads naturally to the assumption that the two processes performed similar economic and social functions, and that therefore the latter could serve as a replacement for the former. As Williams puts it, after the 1890s, 'the new frontiers would be supplied by the continued overseas expansion of the American marketplace.' But in what sense were export markets a substitute for virgin acres? The one provided an outlet for production; the other was a source of it. In this respect they were complementary, and so it is not surprising that 'the Western farmer became structurally involved with the export market no later than the early 1850s' or that a concern with overseas markets can be traced back throughout the nineteenth century. These facts are cited by Williams as evidence of the continuity of American expansionism, but they hardly support the conception of overseas markets as an alternative frontier on which the logic of the argument rests. Of course, it is true that production and consumption are mutually dependent and that both more land and more markets contribute to their increase. This is presumably what Williams means when he writes that American farmers 'sought to enlarge the marketplace by acquiring more and cheaper resources in the form of land, and by increasing the profitable demand for their surpluses'. But, if 'expansion' is to be interpreted to mean economic growth, it loses its specifically geographical connotation. The dynamism of the American economy was related to such factors as increased population, improved technology and capital accumulation as well as to the availability of fertile land and overseas markets.

The tracing of a continuous theme of 'expansion' in American history thus involves a semantic sleight-of-hand. It also leads to a peculiar interpretation of evidence. Perhaps the most striking example of this concerns the ideas of James Madison, who is seen as being the prophet, if not the architect, of the modern American empire. The basis of this view is Madison's bold rejection of the conventional wisdom of his day, as expressed by Montesquieu and other authorities, that republican government suited only small states, and his ingenious argument that, on the contrary, liberty could be made secure against the peculiarly republican danger of an oppressive majority by 'extending the sphere' of the polity.
Madison first advanced this argument in explaining to Jefferson why he had favoured a proposal in the Philadelphia Convention to give the federal Congress the power to veto state legislation; he used it later in The Federalist papers in recommending the ratification of the new constitution. He would surely have been surprised to learn that 'the dynamic thrust of the principle itself was expansionist and imperial in the fundamental sense of tying republican government to an ever-expanding system' — particularly since he made a point of observing that 'this doctrine can only hold true within a sphere of mean extent... in too extensive a one a defensive concert may be rendered too difficult against those entrusted with the administration.' The Madison who had recently proposed the introduction of a tax on exports would also seem to have been unaware that it was as 'one of the key leaders of the Southern export-dominated agricultural economy' that he advanced this argument and that its persuasiveness was 'powerfully augmented by the need and desire for more markets.'

II

Despite the emphasis placed upon it, however, the theme of continuity is not an essential element in that interpretation of modern American foreign policy which has engaged most of the attention of the Williams school. (It is perhaps significant that, apart from LaFeber's essay, the pre-Civil War period is covered in From Colony to Empire by Richard W. Van Alstyne, an older scholar, who, though critical of the aggressive character and 'pharisaical flavour' of American diplomacy, is not a member of the Williams school and is not committed to a fundamentally economic interpretation.) In its original form, the Williams thesis viewed the 1890s as a 'major turning-point in American history' and linked the development of the American overseas empire to 'the effects of the industrial revolution on United States foreign policy.' This view would seem to have been somewhat modified by Williams's discovery that 'the long battle of the agricultural businessmen for overseas marketplace expansion played the principal role in the development and adoption of an imperial outlook and policy.' Even so, it is not necessary to see twentieth-century American diplomacy as a logical consequence of the adoption of the Federal Constitution in order to interpret it in terms of economic expansion.

But even this narrower version of the Williams thesis proves on closer examina-

14 The Federalist, No. 10. 15 RMAE, p. 51.
16 Madison to Jefferson, 24 October 1787, Papers of Thomas Jefferson, p. 278.
17 RMAE, pp. 50, 51. In his essay in FCtE LaFeber mentions both Madison's view that republics could be too large and his proposal for an export tax ('a true measure of Madison's nationalism, particularly given the dependence of his home state and section on the exporting of cotton and tobacco'), but nonetheless goes on to attribute to him 'in 1787, a theory of how dangerous factions within an empire could be controlled by making it even more extensive on land and sea', FCtE, pp. 28, 26, 37.
18 Richard W. Van Alstyne, The Rising American Empire (New York, 1960), p. 7.
19 TAD, p. 21; LaFeber, The New Empire, pp. vii, 6-9.
20 Always concerned with 'the relevance of history', Williams draws a sombre lesson from the prime responsibility of 'the agricultural majority' for American imperialism. 'There was thus no elite or other scapegoat to blame and replace. There are only ourselves to confront and change.' RMAE, pp. 45-6.
tion to be rather elusive. At times, the claim seems to be that overseas economic expansion was an imperative need of the American 'political economy', and that the only alternative to it was radical domestic reform — in a word, socialism. After the imperial decade of the 1890s, Williams tells us, 'the future could only have been different if more agricultural businessmen had followed the lead of those once Republican farmers who . . . began the arduous task of evoking such a new social consciousness behind the leadership of Eugene Debs.' In this vein, an expansionist foreign policy is seen as being an attempt to escape from America's domestic problems, an evasion of the responsibility to confront them directly, a process of 'externalizing evil'. At the same time, given their commitment to capitalism, American leaders were acting rationally in pursuing such a policy — the Williams school make a rather ironical point of defending their 'realism' and 'statesmanship' against modern critics of the 'legalistic-moralistic' tradition of American diplomacy.

This argument is clearly quasi-determinist in its implications — so long as America remained wedded to capitalism, overseas expansion was an objective necessity. As such, it is open to empirical objections similar to those which have been advanced against Marxist theories of imperialism. In the case of the United States, the most formidable of these relate to the remarkably self-sufficient character of its economy. Except during the First World War, American exports have never exceeded 10 per cent of the Gross National Product and have generally constituted no more than 5 per cent. The particular emphasis on the need to open up markets in the under-developed world for American manufactured goods has to contend with the further facts that even in the twentieth century the great preponderance of America's trade has been with other advanced countries, and that at the time of the emergence of 'the modern American empire' in 1898 half of American exports consisted of primary products and almost half the rest of processed foodstuffs.

Professor Williams has not disregarded these facts. His recent emphasis on the way in which farmers' concern with overseas markets contributed to the creation of 'an imperial outlook and policy' does, of course, take account of the preponderance of agricultural exports at the time. But the long-standing character of this concern raises the question of why American imperialism did not emerge earlier, and the explanation of the 'delay' in terms of political contingencies (such as the murder of President Garfield) undermines the determinist thrust of the argument. Williams has also sought to discount the significance of global percentages in estimating the dependence of the American economy on overseas expansion. He points out that such statistics may conceal the importance of foreign sales or imported raw materials to 'key industries' and that 'overseas

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21 RMAE, p. 445; cf. pp. 23-4, 202, 375.
22 TAD, pp. 11, 34. Cf. RMAE, pp. 379, 417; FCIE, pp. 176-7.
23 FCIE, pp. 222, 258; LaFeber, The New Empire, pp. 8, 327. See also Lloyd Gardner's essay, 'American Foreign Policy 1900-1921: A Second Look at the Realist Critique of American Diplomacy', in Bernstein, Towards a New Past, pp. 202-31. The classic 'realist' critique is, of course, George F. Kennan's American Diplomacy, 1900-1950 (Chicago, 1951).
24 U.S. Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957 (Washington, D.C., 1960), p. 542.
25 Ibid., pp. 550, 544.
26 RMAE, pp. 246-50.
economic operations which seem small on paper may mean the difference between survival and failure to a given firm. However, the crucial role of such firms or industries in the national economy is neither demonstrated nor considered essential to the argument, which relies more on the implication that the businessmen involved are able to bring pressure to bear upon policy-makers. Williams and his followers produce evidence to show that in a number of cases, mostly of a comparatively minor character, American foreign policy has been influenced by businessmen with particular overseas interests. But they also admit that such pressure is not always successful, and Williams carefully distances himself from the crudely demonological view that the American government is in the control of special interests. So the question of why overseas economic expansion should be seen as the driving force behind American foreign policy remains.

In the last resort, Williams answers this question in terms not of economics or politics but of ideas. His basic claim, as he makes clear on a number of occasions, is that, whatever the realities of the situation, 'Americans thought their domestic welfare depended upon overseas economic activity...and their actions followed from that supposition'. Most of the evidence adduced by the Williams school is designed to show the prevalence and significance of this belief; their works, as Ernest R. May has pointed out, are largely devoted to 'the intellectual history of American foreign policy'. This emphasis on the fact that men's actions are shaped by their perceptions of reality enables Williams to make persuasive replies to some of the objections to his thesis which have already been mentioned. Thus, the fact that Asia was to remain a comparatively minor outlet for American manufactures does not mean that 'the myth of the China market' can be discounted as an influence on American foreign policy. Then again, the different economic functions performed by the western frontier and by export markets is no more relevant than is the continued availability of free land to the assertion that 'in the Crisis of the 1890s, when Americans thought that the continental frontier was gone, they advanced and accepted the argument that continued expansion in the form of overseas economic (and even territorial) empire provided the best, if not the only, way to sustain their freedom and prosperity.' The whole question of

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27 TAD, pp. 45, 47.
28 E.g. in Samoa, 1872, and Brazil, 1893-4. RMAE, pp. 150, 365-6. See also TAD, pp. 28-9, 33-4, 46-7, 165; RMAE, p. 314; FCE, p. 194.
29 E.g. the attitude of the Theodore Roosevelt administration to E. H. Harriman's projects in Manchuria in 1908. FCE, pp. 212-13. See also TAD, pp. 29-30, 173.
30 For example, in his analysis of the causes of the Spanish-American War, he makes it clear that his purpose 'is not to argue or suggest that McKinley went to war because important economic leaders told him to do so'. TAD, p. 37.
31 TAD, pp. 186-7. See also pp. 11, 166-7, 206, 218, 232, 238-9, 267-8, 274; RMAE, pp. 298-9; The Great Evasion, p. 37.
32 'The Decline of Diplomatic History' in George Athan Billias and Gerald N. Grob (editors), American History: Retrospect and Prospect (New York, 1971), pp. 417-21.
33 TAD, pp. 35, 46-7; RMAE, pp. 87-8; FCE, p. 193. On the influence on American thought of other mirage markets, see RMAE, pp. 95, 261-2.
34 TAD, p. 21. Cf. RMAE, p. xiv. Williams goes so far as to claim that 'the consideration most directly pertinent in comprehending Wilson's handling of foreign policy is his commitment to the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner'. TAD, p. 65.
the influence of special economic interests on foreign policy also becomes, as Williams puts it, 'beside the point', if political leaders operated on the basis of 'an internalized understanding' that overseas economic expansion was necessary 'if the free enterprise or capitalist system was itself to survive'.

III

However, in claiming that this 'internalized understanding' is the key to the whole of modern American foreign policy, Williams is faced by two major problems. The first is that Americans have frequently discussed their diplomacy in terms of considerations other than economic interest — national security, prestige, liberal ideals, racist prejudices, religious duty, emotional attitudes to other countries, and so on. Clearly, to the extent that these other ideas have been both significant and autonomous the concern with overseas economic expansion has been less decisive. These non-economic ideals, anxieties and prejudices are treated in various ways in the writings of the Williams school. Sometimes they are seen as independent factors and allowed a role in explaining some aspects of American policy — for instance, McKinley's refusal to recognize the Cuban rebels is attributed to 'the sense of Anglo-Saxon superiority manifested by most Americans'. Wherever possible, however, they are related in some way to economic expansion. Thus, the Anglophobia of midwestern farmers is seen as arising from their resentment of their 'colonial' economic dependence upon the 'metropolis'. The concept of national security, it is argued, became extended by the concern with economic expansion — 'policy makers viewed the control of strategic areas such as Hawaii or Guantánamo Bay in the same light as they viewed the Philippines, that is, as strategic means to obtaining and protecting objectives which they defined as economic'. As for the concern with international peace after the First World War, that is explained on the grounds that 'American policy-makers concluded that peace was the sine qua non of any effort to implement the strategy of the Open Door Policy. Without stability and peace, there could be no economic expansion, which all of them considered the dynamic element in producing America's well-being'.

The most significant of these connexions is the one Williams makes between the drive for overseas expansion and the idea of America's mission to promote liberal ideals in the world. The character of this connexion is neither simple nor unambiguous. In the first place the liberal tradition, deriving from John Locke and Adam Smith, is seen as having always involved a commitment to the values of capitalism. Americans in particular have considered free enterprise to be a vital

35 TAD, pp. 71n-72n. See also pp. 29-30, 37, 79, 173.
36 RMAE, p. 433. Such factors are more often seen as influencing the attitude of groups of Americans to specific issues. Thus, the hostility of many Southern congressmen to intervention in Mexico in the 1920s is linked to their anti-Catholicism, while, conversely, the indifference of the AFL to the fate of the Spanish Republic is attributed to the influence of Roman Catholic trade unionists. FCE, pp. 277, 324.
37 RMAE, pp. 25, 37-8, 140, 160, 198-200, 300, 314, 324-5, 330-1, 364-5, 373; FCE, pp. 138, 267.
38 LaFeber, The New Empire, p. 411. Cf. RMAE, Chapter 9; FCE, p. 280.
39 TAD, p. 124.
aspect of liberty and have therefore been prone to view the extension of capitalism as the extension of freedom. Furthermore, the drive to reform the world in America’s image coincided with ‘the inherent requirements of economic expansion’ since ‘the underdeveloped countries were poor, particularistic and bound by traditions which handicapped business enterprise’. Indeed, American policymakers occasionally showed themselves fully aware of this fact. In these ways, Williams claims, there was a ‘convergence’, a ‘marriage’, even an ‘integration’ of economic and ideological expansionism. However, it remains unclear to what extent these are to be regarded as distinct impulses. On the one hand, the idea of an American mission is allowed to have independent roots in America’s Puritan and Revolutionary heritage. It also seems to be possible to assess the relative weight attached to one or the other by individual Americans—thus, certain business leaders differed from Woodrow Wilson in that, though they ‘stressed…expansion of the American economic system’, they were ‘less immediately concerned with the political and ideological aspects of that imperial growth’. On the other hand, not only was the ideology ‘based on an economic definition of the world’, but it seems to be in a dependent relationship to the economics. As the exigencies of their own economic position led them to become convinced of the need for overseas economic expansion, men became ‘enthusiastic converts to the mission to reform the world’. Although we are assured that there was ‘no hypocrisy’ involved, that ‘American policy-makers were quite sincere in assuming that the expansion of that empire meant an expansion of human freedom’, the implication is that the ‘ideological baggage’ was essentially the rationalization of an economic impulse.

The ambiguity in Williams’s argument at this point may be seen as reflecting a logical difficulty. If the idea of the American mission is admitted to have an independent force of its own, the relationship between it and economic expansionism must be contingent. In this case, it cannot be discounted as a causal factor until it has been shown not only that it has objectively benefited American economic expansion but that it has always been designed to do so. The primacy of economics can surely only be assumed on the basis of one of two deterministic alternatives. The more obvious is a vulgarly Marxist interpretation according to which ideology is to be seen as the product of objective conditions which circumscribe and shape men’s thoughts in ways of which they themselves may not be aware. But it is only

40 RMAE, pp. xiii, 15, 60-4, 259, 271. These themes are more fully developed in Williams's general work, The Contours of American History (Cleveland, 1961).
41 TAD, p. 57.
42 TAD, pp. 58-60.
43 E.g. TAD, pp. 50, 56, 58-60, 74, 92-3, 163, 200; RMAE, pp. 43, 361; FCIE, pp. 254, 294.
44 TAD, pp. 53-4.
45 TAD, p. 117.
46 It ‘organized data around economic criteria’. TAD, pp. 229, 30.
47 TAD, p. 200. Cf. RMAE, pp. 271-2, 314.
48 RMAE, p. 436; FCIE, pp. 212, 208.
49 It is only on this basis that it makes sense to say, for instance, as Williams does, that ‘China was by 1937 firmly established in the minds of most policy-makers, and even below the level of conscious thought, as the symbol of the new frontier of America’s ideological and economic expansion’. (TAD, p. 190, italics in original.) Cf. Gardner’s description of the
the appeal to 'objective conditions' which gives this argument its plausibility. If one replaces 'objective conditions' by men's (often mistaken) perception of them, the axiom that these are always the determinants becomes merely arbitrary. The only way of avoiding this conclusion would be to assert a purely psychological determinism according to which men's economic motives are invariably the dominant ones, and this Williams explicitly repudiates.50

In any case, either of these alternatives would make the whole exercise of intellectual history in which Williams and his school have been engaged irrelevant. After all, if the explicit reasons given for a particular foreign policy are no indication of the underlying forces involved, this must apply as much to the idea of the need for overseas markets as to any other idea. But if neither of these reductionist positions is adopted, we become involved in an empirical enquiry in which there is no justification for the a priori assumption that statements concerning the importance of commercial expansion should always be given greater weight than references to the American mission, national security, or any other consideration.

However, just such an assumption seems to guide Williams and his followers in their interpretation of evidence. Thus, while President Wilson's call for 'the conquest of foreign markets' in an address to the National Council of Foreign Trade is described as 'a candid statement of policy', his public repudiation of American participation in the six-power bankers' consortium in China is seen as 'an obvious maneuver to win favor with the progressives in both parties'.51 In The Roots of the Modern American Empire, Williams has garnered quotations from hundreds of newspapers and trade journals to demonstrate the widespread concern in the late nineteenth century with the promotion of agricultural exports and the way this concern was related to nearly every major issue of the time, including not only the tariff but railroad regulation and the monetization of silver. However, he does not furnish us with much critical assessment of the context in which these quotations appeared or the comparative amount of attention given to other concerns.52 We have to take it on authority, for example, that the degree of support in Congress for recognizing the Cuban rebels in 1870 can be taken to indicate 'the seriousness of the agricultural concern with the expansion of the American marketplace economy', or that, while petitions from the St Paul Chamber of Commerce and the Cincinnati Board of Trade are evidence of 'the broad agricultural support for a modern navy' in the 1880s, 'the opposition memorials from farm states originated in small pacifist and religious groups, and

1928 prospectus of the Federal International Investment Trust as 'a classic example of the pervasive, yet seemingly unconscious, and therefore all the more interesting influence of the frontier thesis on foreign policy assumptions'. Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy, p. 19.

50 TAD, pp. 29-30; The Great Evasion, p. 27.

51 TAD, pp. 79, 77.

52 It is not altogether reassuring that the two occasions on which Williams explicitly refers to the 'vast amount of primary evidence' on which his account is based concern points which would surprise few students of late-nineteenth century America — the broad agrarian support for silver in 1893, and the desire of eastern leaders to secure an international agreement on bimetallism. RMAE, pp. 363, 364, notes 69, 74.
in no way represented the views of the majority of the farmers’. More broadly, it can surely only be on the assumption that economic issues are invariably of first importance that the sources of the hostility felt by American leaders towards the Axis Powers can be traced to their economic competition in Latin America, or that the opposition of the United States to Russian control of Eastern Europe can be seen arising primarily from a desire to secure equal commercial opportunities in that part of the world.

IV

The second major problem which confronts this attempt to explain the whole of modern American diplomacy in terms of a commitment to overseas economic expansion is the relationship between that general idea and specific acts of policy. This problem is dramatized by the fact that neither continuity nor consensus would seem at first glance to be striking characteristics of American attitudes to foreign policy in the twentieth century. The immediate impression of United States foreign policy since the 1890s is that it has veered between phases of involvement in world politics and periods of ‘isolationism’. Moreover most of the more important decisions, from the acquisition of the Philippines to entry into the Second World War, were the subject of considerable contemporary controversy. Clearly, both the fluctuating course and the contentious nature of American policy present a problem to a thesis which seeks to explain it in terms of an idea which is seen as having been both persistent and pervasive in American thought.

The manner in which the Williams school seeks to resolve this problem is by making a distinction between the ‘strategy’ and the ‘tactics’ of American foreign policy. The goal of economic expansion has been constant and virtually unquestioned; the means by which this could best be achieved have been the subject of debate and have varied over time. This argument has been most thoroughly developed in relation to two of the most notable foreign policy controversies of the early twentieth century – those over ‘imperialism’ and the League of Nations. Having attributed the support for the acquisition of the Philippines to the desire to promote American commerce with the Orient, Williams and his followers point out that many of those who opposed this exercise in ‘traditional colonialism’ nevertheless believed in the importance of Asian markets to the American economy. So, ‘one fruitful way to approach the “imperialist versus anti-imperialist” clash in the 1890s is to view the struggle in terms of a narrow and limited debate on the question of which tactical means the nation should use to obtain commonly desired objectives. Schurz’s view of overseas empire differed from that of Mahan in degree, not in kind.’ Similarly, while Wilson

53 RMAE, pp. 144, 265. For a more detailed critique of the way the late-nineteenth-century evidence is interpreted by the Williams school, see Paul S. Holbo, ‘Economics, Emotion and Expansion: an Emerging Foreign Policy’ in H. Wayne Morgan (ed.), The Gilded Age (revised and enlarged edition, Syracuse, N.Y. 1970), pp. 201–13.
54 FCIE, pp. 297, 295–6. See also TAD, p. 189; The Great Evasion, p. 45.
55 TAD, pp. 211, 231–2, 245, 257–8.
56 TAD, pp. 37–42; LaFeber, The New Empire, pp. 410–17; RMAE, pp. 438–42; FCIE, pp. 197–8.
57 LaFeber, The New Empire, p. 416.
saw the League of Nations as a means of averting the threat of a world divided into economic blocs, his opponents' objective was to preserve the principle of the Open Door without assuming the extensive commitments involved in Article X of the League Covenant. They were no more truly 'isolationists' than the opponents of the acquisition of the Philippines were really 'anti-imperialists'. So the fight over the League of Nations, too, was no more than a 'tactical skirmish'. An essentially similar analysis is applied to the debates over the adoption of the Constitution, a number of late-nineteenth century political issues such as the tariff, railroad regulation and the currency, and a host of other foreign policy questions including the acquisition of Alaska, the annexation of Hawaii, military intervention in Russia in 1918-19, the adoption of a pro-Japanese or pro-Chinese posture in the Far East, and the 'Good Neighbour' policy in Latin America.

It is perhaps ironic that in so frequently employing this analytic framework, the Williams school lay themselves open to one of the chief criticisms which has been made of the 'consensus' school of American historiography. By drawing the ideological perimeters so broadly, they reduce the significance of conflict in American history. For instance, Williams tells us that the famous election of 1896 'involved primarily a dispute over which methods of market expansion would most promptly and permanently restore prosperity and thereby resolve the social and political crisis'. Such an approach makes it hard to understand the passions aroused by the Bryan campaign.

A more fundamental criticism is that this sort of analysis does not solve the problem of explaining the contentious and fluctuating course of American foreign policy in terms of a concern with overseas economic expansion. In a sense, it even makes it more difficult. What might seem to be a natural connexion between, for instance, a belief in the importance of Asian markets and support for the annexation of the Philippines is brought into question if that belief was shared by opponents of annexation. In this case, it is true, LaFeber has attempted to show that the 'strategy' ultimately determined the 'tactics'. He maintains that 'by agreeing that a constantly expanding trade was vital to the economic and political well-being of the nation, the anti-annexationists had opened themselves to the devastating counterargument that this trade could not find the crucial markets in Asia and Latin America without the security which the Philippines and Hawaii would provide'. This argument is not altogether convincing – the 'devastating' character of the imperialists' logic seems to have escaped not only the anti-imperialists themselves but the growing numbers of Americans who quickly

58 FCIE, pp. 242-4, 246-7; TAD, pp. 106-8.
59 See Williams, 'The Legend of Isolationism in the 1920s', Science and Society, 18 (Winter 1954), 1-20; TAD, Chapter 4, cf. Chapter 1; FCIE, pp. 354-68, cf. p. 197.
60 TAD, p. 123.
61 FCIE, pp. 27, 478.
62 RMAE, pp. 37, 223-4; FCIE, pp. 171-2, 157, 179-83.
63 RMAE, pp. 137-8, 356; TAD, pp. 111-12, 142-3, 147-55; FCIE, pp. 272, 291-2; Gardner, Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy, p. 61.
64 Cf. John Higham, 'The Cult of the "American Consensus": Homogenizing Our History', Commentary (February 1959), pp. 93-100.
65 RMAE, p. 42. Also Chapter 14
66 LaFeber, The New Empire, pp. 414-15 at 415.
became disenchanted with their adventure in colonialism. It remains difficult, to say the least, to account either for divisions of opinion or the outcome of debates in terms of a commonly-agreed objective. For the most part the attempt is not really made. Indeed, some of Williams's disciples seem to be quite indifferent to the connexion between a concern with overseas markets and the favouring of particular foreign policies. For example, in an essay which seeks to throw light on the debate over involvement in the Second World War from the 'unusual perspective' of the attitude of American labour leaders towards Latin America, Harry W. Berger records that whereas John L. Lewis, a last-ditch isolationist, believed in the necessity of overseas markets, Matthew Woll, 'who had so vigorously challenged the foreign trade-domestic prosperity thesis throughout the 1930s', was 'sufficiently shocked by the fall of France' to favour intervention in the war.67 This implicit admission that concerns other than economic expansion have determined attitudes to crucial issues, and by extension policy decisions, is to be frequently found in the writings of the Williams school. Thus, Robert F. Smith, in discussing the 1920s, remarks that 'the policy makers of the period... worked under a variety of domestic constraints that helped to shape and to limit policy tactics. For example, the growing disillusionment over World War I and the opposition to high taxes for military spending were reflected by the Congress.' 68 In this, as in other instances, the account given of why the United States adopted specific 'tactics' at various times does not differ radically from more conventional historiography.69

However, even if many of what one might regard as the most important questions of policy are reduced to the level of tactics, it still remains possible that, by excluding certain options from serious consideration, the concern with overseas economic expansion has determined the broad contours of American diplomacy. In its irreducible form, Williams's argument is that American foreign policy has operated within limits set by a continuous commitment to the establishment of 'an open-door empire'.70 The chief difficulty about this proposition is that the concept of 'open-door imperialism', like that of 'the imperialism of free trade' from which it may have been derived, does not seem readily susceptible of precise definition.71 In its fullest version, it refers to a process by which the concern to

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67 *FCtE*, pp. 5, 329–33, 326.
68 *FCtE*, p. 265. Cf. Williams's disclaimer after analysing the causes of the War of 1898 in terms of 'the general and active support for economic expansion' — 'It should be made clear, however, that in suggesting this explanation of the war there is no direct or implicit argument that other considerations were non-existent or unimportant'. *TAD*, pp. 28–9.
69 See, particularly, Lloyd C. Gardner's essays on United States foreign policy since 1945 in *FCtE*, pp. 338–474. It should be pointed out, however, that, in his introduction, Williams expresses his personal dissent from Gardner's emphasis on 'the extent to which American policy makers were coping with external events rather than moving to impose their will upon reality'. *FCtE*, p. 6.
70 This seems to be the thrust of Williams's general survey in the Conclusion to *FCtE*, pp. 476–87. It is also Gardner's argument in his introduction to the paperback edition of *Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy* (Boston, 1971), especially pp. xii–xiii.
71 For Williams's acknowledgement of his debt to the literature on 'the imperialism of free trade', see *TAD*, p. 90n. For an introduction to that literature, see John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, *The Imperialism of Free Trade*, *Economic History Review*, Second
extend and maintain the principle of the Open Door led to the political domination of other countries, and 'ultimately took on military significance'. Few would dispute that such a process might be described as a variety of imperialism, though many might question whether this pattern encompasses the entirety of American foreign relations. However, it appears that neither the military element nor even the political involvement in the affairs of other countries are to be regarded as essential aspects of such imperialism. For, in claiming that nineteenth-century American farmers 'increasingly agitated for explicit imperial policies', Williams cites as examples demands for improvements in the diplomatic and consular service, growing support for reciprocity treaties, and greater interest in the American merchant marine and the project for an isthmian canal. It would seem, then, that just as the British abolition of the Corn Laws has been seen as a crucial part of the attempt to establish 'an Empire of Free Trade', so any political action designed to promote foreign trade is to be interpreted as an example of open-door imperialism. (In the American context such a perspective leads one to wonder whether the persistent strength of protectionist sentiment might not be viewed as evidence of the rather limited character of American concern with expanding overseas trade. Apart from emphasizing the countervailing pressure for reciprocity treaties, a cause which has had only intermittent and partial success, Williams and his followers do not devote much attention to this question.)

In the last resort, however, it does not seem that any form of political action is necessarily involved in Williams's concept of imperialism. Operating on the basis of Adam Smith's analysis that in trade between a metropolis and the countryside, or between a commercial and manufacturing country and a primary-producing one, the balance of advantage will always lie with the former, Williams sees all such trading relationships as intrinsically imperialistic. Indeed, he extends even this purely economic version of imperialism by maintaining that the boom in American agricultural exports to Europe in the late nineteenth century showed that farmers, too, 'could be imperial expansionists in their relationship with weaker agricultural businessmen in other nations'. Here, 'imperial expansion' seems to be synonymous with successful economic competition, and hence to be involved in most

series, 6 (1953), 1-15; Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London, 1961); D. C. M. Platt, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade: Some Reservations', *Economic History Review*, Second series, 21 (1968), 296-306; Bernard Semmell, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism: Classical Political Economy and the Empire of Free Trade* (Cambridge, 1970).

72 *TAD*, pp. 155-6.
73 *RMAE*, p. 238.
74 *Semmel*, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism*, p. 202.
75 *RMAE*, pp. 62, 118; *TAD*, p. 172. Williams attributes this view to Marx. See *The Great Evasion*, p. 40.
76 *RMAE*, p. 209. Also pp. 22, 103. W. N. Mathew has pointed out, in another context, that 'to argue that dominance alone is sufficient token of economic imperialism, that the heavy dependence of one country on another for its markets, its imports, and its capital is representative of colonial status...would, for example, necessitate viewing the United States as a British colony of sorts for most of the nineteenth century and would take much of the bite out of the concept', 'The Imperialism of Free Trade: Peru, 1820-70', *Economic History Review*, Second series, 21 (1968), 562-79 at 563.
forms of international trade. Since very few Americans have ever advocated, or
even contemplated, complete economic autarky, the claim that such 'imperial
expansion' has been a continuous theme in American foreign relations is hard to
contest on an empirical basis, though the suggestion that this is to be explained by
the search for overseas markets has by this point become a tautology.

V

It may be observed from this review that Professor Williams and his disciples
are not committed to any simple hypothesis about either the character or the
causes of American foreign policy. Their apparently bold statements are much
qualified and modified. The United States has been continuously and consciously
'expansionist' — but the forms and techniques of that expansion have varied so
greatly that antithetical policies can be seen as 'tactics' for achieving it. The basic
reason for this expansion has been economic, but this does not imply that the
American 'political economy' has actually depended upon overseas activity and
trade, that American policy has always been the servant of particular American
economic interests, or that American policy-makers have always consciously
assigned a higher priority to economic goals than to strategic, political or ideo-
logical concerns. With the instinct of a modern theologian, Professor Williams
seeks to incorporate all empirical objections into his theoretical framework. The
result is that, by the time all the qualifications have been made, it is difficult to
conceive of any American policy, or any evidence about the reasons for its adoption,
which could not be incorporated into the Williams interpretation. The hypothesis
has come perilously close to being non-falsifiable.

This is, of course, not to deny that American foreign policy has in fact often
been designed to protect and promote American economic interests overseas. It is
to maintain that in order to assess on what occasions and to what extent this con-
sideration has been decisive, we must adopt a mode of analysis which makes it
possible to isolate it. Nor is it to deny that American policy has not infrequently
been aggressive and exploitative in its attitude to other countries. It is merely to
suggest that, in characterizing that policy, it is useful to have criteria for distin-
guishing 'imperial expansion' from international trade and the propagation of
political ideals. Finally, since Professor Williams describes the approach of From
Colony to Empire as 'critical' rather than 'celebratory' of United States diplo-
macy, it may be wise, though it should not be necessary, to point out that one does
not have to see the record of American foreign policy as one of unblemished
wisdom and altruism in order to believe that the sin and folly involved therein
are not adequately explained by this interpretation.