

East Asia “made everyone feel safe” (327). Cobbs Hoffman discusses Cold War-era policies carried out in violation of the principle of self-determination, as in Vietnam, for example, where fighting communism and assisting France were higher priorities. As the Cold War ended and the War on Terror began, the American umpire, Cobbs Hoffman concludes, made a good call when it intervened in the former Yugoslavia and a bad call when it invaded Iraq.

Cobbs Hoffman shows how the United States selectively enforced what she identifies as the goals and practices of democratic capitalism, including access to opportunity, arbitration of disputes, and transparency in government and business (6). For example, in contrast to its more forceful imperial competitors, the United States provided Japan with access to opportunity when Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in 1853 with “sweet reason” and a display of the commodities the Americans had on offer (114). In Latin America the United States played a more complex role, “part umpire, part policeman, and part banker,” as illustrated by the Roosevelt Corollary (168).

The Americans had a mixed record of support for the international arbitration of disputes. They proposed but did not join the League of Nations; they signed on to the United Nations; and they participated in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the World Trade Organization. As umpire, Cobbs Hoffman notes, the United States handed out penalties, using economic aid to reward good behavior and sanction bad. She also cites evidence of the American commitment to and abuse of the ideal of transparency. Under President Abraham Lincoln, the United States set a precedent of openness by publishing its diplomatic records. But covert operations conducted by the CIA—the first was called Project Umpire—violated the principle of transparency and cost the United States “much of the moral high ground it had won in World War II” (308).

Cobbs Hoffman’s study reveals the history of American ambivalence toward the “great game” of empire or umpire and shows the implications of that game for the principle of self-determination. She traces an Anglo-American relationship in which the United States emulated Great Britain as a global trader, but not as a global empire, and she describes the Monroe Doctrine as an “Anglo-American protectorate for republicanism” (106). She agrees with Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s depiction of the Atlantic Charter as an inspirational document rather than a legal one (253). She also notes that before the British and the Americans clashed over the Suez Crisis in 1956, they were optimistic collaborators in Iran, backing the overthrow of the Iranian government in the hope that “a better government would take its place” (306).

The United States delivered its most notable performance as a global umpire, according to Cobbs Hoffman, when it took over from the British the maintenance of pro-Western governments in Greece and Turkey. She recounts the congressional debate on the Truman Doctrine, which included Ohio Congressman George Bender’s comment that “if we go into this Greek thing we shall be pouring in money and the blood of our sons for generations” (288). She also examines drafts of President Truman’s speech announcing his policy to show how the administration chose to emphasize America’s humanitarian responsibilities rather than explain why Britain’s decline made it necessary for the United States to step in to maintain the status quo.

American Umpire contributes to a timely historical debate over the definition of the role of the United States

in the world. The exceptional role of player-umpire, Cobbs Hoffman claims, serves to inspire Americans to commit to the global responsibility of the United States “as the enforcer of what is, most of the time, the collective will” (337). Certainly, the perception of this aspiration as reality helps to explain why Americans, who see their actions as generous and self-sacrificing, feel such frustration when other players reject the umpire’s call or do not obey the rules. As Cobbs Hoffman shows, however, the United States has often been the sort of umpire who shows up late to the game or fails to attend at all, who plays favorites, who breaks or bends the rules or simply makes up its own. And, as the strongest player on the field, the United States has used its enormous power to get its way and has justified itself by saying that exceptions must be made for the exceptional. Although Cobbs Hoffman critiques William Appleman Williams by describing America’s global role as a triumph rather than a tragedy, she echoes one of Williams’ themes when she presents a United States that preaches what it does not practice. As for her characterizations of objective historical analysis and morale-damaging academics, they will no doubt prompt a lively discussion in many history seminars.

Review of Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *American Umpire*

Francis J. Gavin

For historians, scholarly texts are often windows into the worldviews of particular times and places. Today, we might read Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* or Charles Beard’s *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* as much to explore the intellectual milieu of King George III’s England or better understand class tensions in early twentieth-century America as to learn about Rome or the economic interests of the Constitution’s framers. New arguments by a familiar writer might also offer clues to larger changes in society. A future historian might identify shifting worldviews by analyzing, for example, how the arguments made by our most distinguished scholar of the Cold War, John Lewis Gaddis, changed over time. While new documents and accumulated scholarship no doubt explain many of the differences between Gaddis’s first book, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947*, and his later writings, it is also true that the decades since its publication have witnessed profound changes in the intellectual and cultural climate in the United States.¹

Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman’s engaging, wide-ranging synthesis of the United States’ role in the world, *American Umpire*, caused this reviewer to reflect upon how contemporary events and attitudes shape the choices and arguments we make as historians. Cobbs Hoffman’s book is very much of our time; it neither celebrates nor blames, and while it highlights the unique and critical role the United States has played in world affairs, it goes to great lengths to credit other global forces. Reading *American Umpire*, I found it hard to imagine it being written or finding favor in either the 1970s, a time of retreat and fear in the United States, or in a more confident, celebratory time like the 1990s.

Americans find themselves in a strange, uncertain place in 2013/14. Critiques that once caricatured the United States as morally equivalent to Stalin’s Russia or Mao’s

China have for the most part been relegated to, if not the dust-bin of history, then the discount bin of second-hand bookstores. On the other hand, the United States is currently disentangling itself from a generation of disastrous military involvement in the Middle East marked by hubris and miscalculation. While the post-Cold War triumphalism of the 1990s is thankfully long gone, the self-flagellation and navel-gazing that marked at least some of the historical work on America's role in the world during the 1960s and 1970s is largely ignored or discredited.

Where does that leave the reflective commentator of U.S. foreign relations? As the confused debate over the bloody civil war in Syria revealed, the United States is in what might be thought of as a grand strategic no-man's land: weary of its decades-long overseas engagements, yet unwilling to abandon completely what former Secretary of State Madeline Albright characterized as its role as the world's "indispensable nation." To those caught in this uncertain, liminal place—think, perhaps, of your typical member of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)—Cobbs Hoffman's thesis provides a lifeline. Covering 365 years of global and U.S. history, her narrative offers comfort for those who lament America's excesses but are unwilling to embrace calls for America to come home. One might think of it as the diet version of exceptionalism, or exceptionalism lite.

Cobbs Hoffman presents three big themes in the book. First, the United States was never truly an imperial power, no matter how that is defined. Second, it could instead be thought of as an *umpire* that acted "to compel acquiescence as necessary with rules that had earned broad legitimacy" (17). Finally, the United States both drove world historical forces and was shaped by them, in equal measure. The United States may have been the first and was probably often the most powerful advocate of the principles of access, arbitration, and transparency that mark the contemporary world system. But Cobbs Hoffman highlights the non-American origins of many of these ideas, even going so far as to credit Russian Tsar Nicholas II with being a father of Wilsonianism (185)! Regardless of parentage, these powerful and appealing ideas "achieved enough momentum to transcend their point of origin and the efforts of any one nation," as is illustrated by the fact that the rise of the United States occurred in tandem with the replacement of empires and monarchies by sovereign nation-states (10).

Cobbs Hoffman is most provocative and to my mind most persuasive on the first point. "Calling the United States an empire has yielded no practicable solutions because the nation and the world system in which it fits are simply not structured in this way" (336). Even its actual imperial efforts, like its disastrous policies towards the Philippines, were plagued by doubt and pursued half-heartedly. *American Umpire* takes sharp aim with the view, first propounded by two historians of the British Empire, John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, and applied to United States foreign policy by William Appleman Williams, that even when the United States was not taking formal colonies or conquering overseas territories, it was pursuing imperialism by other means, especially through its economic policies.

The continuing popularity of this view is one of the most baffling and frustrating aspects of historical scholarship on U.S. foreign relations. The proponents of this strand of revisionism do not even possess the most basic understanding of economics. The United States, with its massive internal market and abundant resources, has, since

its birth, relied on world trade less than any other major power in modern history and most often focused on its own internal development behind high tariffs and protections, not free trade. When the United States did engage the globe over the past two centuries, the overwhelming majority of its trade and capital flows involved highly developed economies in Europe and, in more recent times, East Asia. Even the postwar economic order it built encouraged Japan and Western Europe *not* to freely open its markets to the United States.² I am not trying to excuse aggressive and often indefensible policies towards the Philippines at the start of the twentieth century, Guatemala in the 1950s, Vietnam in the 1960s, or, more recently, Iraq; but if these policies were motivated by dreams of empire – explicit, implicit, or by invitation – then we need to add economic idiocy to the charges against their authors.

To be clear, I don't want to try and justify U.S. policy since 1776—far from it. Like other nations, the United States has been, at different times in its history, noble and wicked, and also like other nations, self-delusional about its motives. But it is sheer intellectual laziness to call everything the United States has done "imperialism"; doing so stretches the world to the point that it no longer has any

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linguistic power. A smart college undergraduate can tell that there is a profound difference between subjects as diverse as the Roman Empire, British policy in North America in the eighteenth century, Belgian atrocities in the Congo in the late nineteenth century, the global influence of Hollywood, America's westward expansion, the rule of the Habsburgs and the Ottomans in Central Europe, the World Trading Organization, Hay's Open Door notes, Japan's "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty

Sphere," and the Marshall Plan, to name a random assortment of policies and phenomena that scholars have labeled imperialism. Historians are at their best when they draw distinctions, reveal nuance and context, and explain important differences between cultures and polities over time: that is what separates us from, say, economists or political scientists. Surely, scholars can do better than to brand all the complex, dynamic and historically contingent intellectual and political forces that drove the United States "imperialism," and Cobbs Hoffman deserves credit for making a powerful argument that is at odds with the conventional wisdom.

Cobbs Hoffman's labeling of the United States as an "umpire," however, is more problematic. She perceptively recognizes the "federal umpire" mindset of constituent states in the early republic. She also captures the fascination American leaders had with the idea of arbitration at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth—an idea that influenced President Theodore Roosevelt's mediation of the Russo-Japanese war and drove the ideas of important statesmen such as Elihu Root and Charles Evans Hughes.³ By the conclusion, however, she recognizes the problems with this analogy. It would be folly to describe the United States as "objective . . . with no stakes in the outcome"; she suggests instead that a lack of global resources led the United States to become something akin to a "player-umpire." But anyone who has ever played neighborhood whiffle ball or pickup basketball or watched how the United States has "forum shopped" or manipulated international institutions to achieve its interests recognizes how weak and problematic this analogy is. The United States has a unique and important history, and its development and actions abroad have been extraordinarily consequential for the world. But many would argue that its

preeminence owes as much to its overwhelming material power as its unique vision for world order—and perhaps more.⁴

Finally, the United States, like all nations, views itself the way the citizens of Lake Wobegon do, as a place “where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” While the *American Umpire* analogy may resonate during cocktail hour at the CFR, I doubt it would sit very well among similar circles in Islamabad, New Dehli, Beijing, Lagos, Paris or even London.

What Cobbs Hoffman might really be describing is an idea first put forward by the economic historian Charles Kindleberger thirty years ago in *The World in Depression: the hegemonic stability theory*.⁵ Kindleberger argued that the United States had defaulted on the obligation of the largest power to help maintain the orderly function of the global economic system. The notion that a hegemon has both an interest and a duty to provide public global goods has been expanded to include areas beyond economics, such as global governance and international security. This view of America’s global role has been put forward most clearly by the political scientist John Ikenberry in *The Liberal Leviathan*.⁶ It has been increasingly challenged by those who wonder if the effort is wise or worth the candle.⁷

American Umpire is a creative, engaging book that will inspire much argument and discussion. As with all stylized, synthetic accounts of the past, there is much to like and much to argue with in Cobbs Hoffman’s book.⁸ Being of its time, however, can be a virtue. Our current debates over grand strategy and the role of the United States in the world would be much richer if they were historically informed and better still if historians were fully engaged with them. Whether you agree with her arguments or not, Hoffman is to be commended for contributing to this important conversation.

Notes:

1. Gaddis, for the most part, does not blame Washington or Moscow for the start of the Cold War in *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War*; he focuses instead on a variety of internal political and external structural factors, including the uncertainty and misperception endemic to an anarchic world order. This argument in many ways parallels the classic “security dilemma” arguments being made around the same time by Robert Jervis. See John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York, 1972); for the security dilemma arguments, see Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30:2 (January 1978): 167–74; and *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, 1978). The de-emphasizing of the moral culpability of nation or its leaders found a welcome audience among those weary of the ongoing acrimony over U.S. foreign policy. For an excellent account of the “ill-tempered and vituperative debate which broke out in the 1960s over the origins of the Cold War” and the role of orthodox, revisionist, and post-revisionist arguments in this debate, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, UK, 1988), 447–47. In his 1998 book, Gaddis places far more causal weight and responsibility on the (im)morality and actions of individual leaders, especially Josef Stalin, a view one might imagine future historians claiming mirrored the larger worldview of the mid-/late 1990s. John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford, UK, 1998). Interestingly (and more quietly), Jervis has also moved away from the security dilemma as an explanation for the origins of the Cold War. Robert Jervis, “Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3:1 (Winter 2001): 36–60. Jervis perceptively recognizes the “no-fault” quality of the security dilemma. Gaddis and Jervis are not alone here; Ernest May’s *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (Oxford, UK, 1975) effectively (if unknowingly) captures the particular zeitgeist of the mid-1970s, as Paul Kennedy’s *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York, 1987) does for the end of the 1980s. The fact that these texts reflect the eras in which they were written in no way undermines their long-term scholarly value.

2. I have made this point elsewhere. See Francis J. Gavin, *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958–1971* (Chapel Hill, 2004), especially pp. 197–202 (“No Way to Build an Empire”); Gavin, “Economists to the Rescue!” *Orbis* (March 2000): 324–332; and Gavin, “Free to be You and Me,” review of Thomas W. Zeiler’s “Requiem for the Common Man: Class, the Nixon Economic Shock, and the Perils of Globalization,” *Diplomatic History* 37:1 (January 2013): 1–23, on H-Diplo, February 13, 2013, at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR385.pdf>.

3. I am grateful to Philip Zelickow for making both points to me.
4. The massive size of the United States means that whether and how it acts can have an enormous influence on smaller states without its own citizens or decision-makers recognizing it; the small state might interpret these actions or non-actions as a form of unintended imperialism. I am grateful to Jeff Engel for making this point. Ironically, U.S. isolation—or lack of action—in the 1930s, by hastening the rise of protectionism and ending free trade, probably harmed those smaller countries far more than if the United States had chosen a policy of “imperialism” through free trade.
5. Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression: 1929–1939* (Berkeley, 1973).
6. G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, 2012).
7. The best argument against what is increasingly called liberal internationalism has been made by Barry Posen, “Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* (Jan/Feb 2013). Posen will expand the argument in a forthcoming book: *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY, 2014).
8. Among the one-volume histories of the United States that one might imagine assigning for an upper-division undergraduate class, Hoffman’s book is better than several recent competitors but still comes up short of what I consider the best in that field, Walter McDougall’s *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776* (New York, 1997). Unlike most authors of one-volume treatments, who focus on a singular theme (nation-building, nationalism, empire, spreading liberty and freedom, etc), McDougall wisely recognizes the many competing, often contradictory traditions and forces that drive the complicated engagement of the United States with the world.

Review of Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman’s *American Umpire*

Evanthis Hatzivassiliou

The dilemmas of the exercise of power are as old as our written sources, but none seem to be accompanied by debates as tense as those that surround the application of U.S. power in the twentieth century. Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman provides an excellent discussion of this important issue. She focuses on whether the United States has acted as an “empire” or an “umpire” and convincingly concludes that the nature of U.S. power and international conduct is by no means imperial, although the function of umpire may sometimes involve the application of hard as well as soft power. She argues that the United States served as the pivot in a larger historical process of modernity: the coming-to-fore of democratic capitalism and of its three distinctive characteristics: access, arbitration, and transparency.

The first part of the book discusses the rise of federal institutions, which played the role of internal umpire in the young United States. Cobbs Hoffman shows that the federal system, devised gradually and painfully over many years—the last stage of its evolution occurred during the Civil War—created a union based on institutions that proved enduring precisely because they were able to evolve. The role of these institutions in a “new,” value-oriented union such as the United States was markedly different from what it was in a traditional (European) nation-state, whose cultural links are centuries old and are regarded as indissoluble or “eternal.” In other words, ideals and institutions were the very fabric that created and preserved the cohesion of the United States. Naturally, they gave rise to an American worldview that the United States