

An Interview with Daniel Immerwahr

Daniel Immerwahr is an associate professor of history at Northwestern University, where he teaches global history and U.S. foreign relations. His first book, Thinking Small (Harvard 2015), a history of U.S. grassroots antipoverty strategies, won the Organization of American Historians' Merle Curti Award for best work of U.S. intellectual history. Immerwahr's writings have appeared in the New York Times, Washington Post, The Guardian, Slate, The Nation, and The New Republic. His second book, How to Hide an Empire, a retelling of U.S. history with the overseas parts of the country included in the story, is a national bestseller and is discussed below.



Daniel Immerwahr

Interview by Alexander Poster

For those unfamiliar with the book, can you explain what you mean when you refer to the “Greater United States”?

Normally, when people talk about the United States, they’re talking about just the states and DC. But the United States also includes Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Northern Marianas. And in the past it’s included places like the Philippines and the Panama Canal Zone. “The Greater United States” is a term from the turn of the 20th century, which people used to clarify that they were talking about the whole country, not just the states or the mainland.

Can you discuss how the American empire took shape? How did our cultural, religious, and constitutional traditions help create it?

In a sense, the empire has been there from the start. By the time the treaty securing U.S. independence was ratified by both sides, the United States wasn’t just a union of states, it was an amalgam of states and territories. It was a country with territories from day one, it’s a country with territories today, and it’s had territories every day in between. Territories are thus in the Constitution, and the state/territory split has been an enduring feature of constitutional law.

But a really important moment was 1898, when the United States entered a war Spain was already fighting against its colonized subjects and, administering the

final blow to Spain, took Spain's colonies of the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico, plus the non-Spanish lands of Hawai'i and American Samoa. The sudden inclusion of some eight million new people into the United States, most of them understood to be nonwhite, was a jolt for mainlanders. It marked the transition from a mode of empire based on filling formerly indigenous land with settlers to one of administering large overseas colonies.

How would you respond to critics who say that a book that focuses in particular on the physical landholdings of the United States obscures narratives about race, class, and gender in the Greater United States?

Territory is never a question of land alone. Where the United States has placed its borders and how it classified the land within those borders has an enormous amount to do with a racially defined sense of who is or should be an "American." And once you understand the United States to be a differentiated polity, with a mainland and territories, there's a lot you can see about not only the history of race but of class and gender, too. In my book, I talk about how mainland doctors used Puerto Rico as an island-sized laboratory to test new birth control methods. The pill, back in the bad old days of too-large doses, was field-tested on Puerto Rican women, and the reason it was is that they were accessible test subjects with far less political standing and ability to resist.

Would review of more primary sources written by people within the fringes of the Greater United States, such as Puerto Rican and Filipino newspapers, have helped your analysis?

I do use some Puerto Rican and Philippine newspapers, as well as many other sources written by the inhabitants of U.S. territories. But my book differs from the standard historical monograph built up from primary sources. Its main contributions aren't archival, unearthing some never-before-seen document. They're perspectival, in that they show a familiar history in a new light. I leaned heavily on existing scholarship to write my book. There are hundreds of excellent studies of parts of the U.S. territorial empire, many grounded in all sorts of primary sources. What I tried to offer is a narrative that integrates all of that into U.S. history.

You have stated that aspects of the American empire have been forgotten by mainstream histories. Does your definition of mainstream include academic articles and monographs or just popular history?

The study of U.S. territorial empire is odd. On the one hand, we've got absolutely terrific monographs, articles, and dissertations. But when you look at the textbooks and overviews of U.S. history, you see that very little evidence of all that research.

Those textbooks and overviews tend to view colonial history as a peripheral topic, or maybe even not really part of “U.S.” history. The same is true for much of the popular historical writing that shows up in airport bookstores. The result, as I’ve found, is that there are a lot of U.S. history buffs who can tell you all about the spats among the founding fathers or military strategy in the Second World War but who, in all their reading, have encountered virtually nothing about colonial history. So that’s the sense in which research on empire has been largely excluded from “mainstream histories.”

Pedro Albizu Campos is a central figure in your book. Most people don’t hear about him in school, but he remains very important to certain communities in the United States. Why do you think mainstream history has forgotten him and why should he be remembered?

He’s a towering figure in Puerto Rican history, much remembered by Puerto Ricans today, and I think he deserves to be a major one in U.S. history more broadly. Albizu was the leader of Puerto Rico’s nationalist movement in the middle of the 20th century. He voiced a widely felt sense on the island that U.S. rule was more destructive than helpful, and his movement was at the center of the most dramatic events in Puerto Rican political history. In 1950, Albizu orchestrated a seven-city uprising that culminated in assassination attempts on the Puerto Rican governor and on President Harry Truman (who cited the attempt on his life as the reason he didn’t run for re-election in 1952). In 1954, Albizu’s followers took guns into the U.S. Capitol and shot up Congress, wounding five representatives. The fact that I haven’t found him mentioned in a single mainland textbook is, to me, an aggravating but telling example of how colonial history gets excluded. Even the *Journal of American History*, the flagship research venue in the field, has never discussed him.

You quote Jon Stewart as saying, “War is God’s way of teaching Americans geography.” Given how many people have forgotten about America’s hidden empire, which was often acquired through warfare, do you think he is correct?

That joke (which predates Stewart) names a central truth: U.S. mainlanders are, in general, clueless about geography. I count myself in that number. Quickly after I began writing this book, I realized that at no point in my education—from kindergarten to my doctorate—had I ever seen a map of the United States with Puerto Rico on it. So, that part of the joke seems right. The part that I doubt is whether warfare has any effect. The war in Afghanistan is now the longest in U.S. history, but how many people in the United States can locate Afghanistan on a map? The 1898 war with Spain did briefly generate new maps, showing the

recently acquired territories alongside the states. But those maps were just a fad, which is why they are rare today.

You discuss plastics at length. How did changes in technology change the nature of American empire?

A lot. The really important shift in U.S. Empire was the transition from a colonial mode, whereby Washington extended its power by seizing large swaths of land, to a pointillist one, in which it claims jurisdiction over tiny enclaves, usually in the form of overseas military bases. That happened in part because of a successful global revolt against colonialism, rooted in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Oceania. But it also happened because the United States pioneered new technologies that allowed it to meet its needs without large colonies. Plastic is a great example. Before World War II, militaries depended entirely on tropical goods like rubber and silk—try fighting a war without rubber tires or silk parachutes. But plastic could, in a pinch, substitute for nearly all of those critical tropical materials, replacing colonies with chemistry. Once the laboratory, rather than the land, became the most reliable source of crucial raw materials, resource-rich colonies got much less important in the geopolitical calculations of powerful countries.

I've asked about Pedro Albizu Campos. Why should Americans remember Cornelius Rhoads – a figure seemingly forgotten outside of Puerto Rico?

Rhoads, a medical doctor, is less of a central historical figure than Albizu, but his story is absolutely fascinating. First, he did research in San Juan. By all accounts, he treated his patients there as experimental animals, withholding treatment in some, seeking to induce disease in others. Then he wrote a letter in which he claimed to have purposefully murdered eight of them. That letter became a huge scandal and helped spur Albizu's form of nationalism to prominence on the island. What's most amazing, though, is that Rhoads was never tried or even fired from his job. He left the island for New York and continued to rise in status until he was made the chief medical officer in charge of a huge series of chemical weapons tests that the army ran. Those tests—damaging experiments with poison gases performed on at least 60,000 uniformed men without their informed consent—are in retrospect one of the U.S. military's major ethical lapses during the war. And many were performed on Puerto Rican soldiers. Yet again, Rhoads faced no punishment. Just the opposite. He was given a medal and made the first director of the Sloan-Kettering Institute. He used what he learned from those tests to become a pioneer of chemotherapy, and for decades he was remembered on the mainland only for that.

You use federal records and publications numerous times in your book. You cite the FDR Library, the National Archives, and the FRUS series, among others. How did these sources help your analysis?

Quite a lot. It was important to learn how leading officials up to presidents thought about U.S. territorial holdings. A particularly valuable collection was the Records of the Office of Territories, the federal agency charged with overseeing the territories (it cycled through various names and locations). It was a laughably small office—in 1949 it had only 10 employees above the clerical level—but it handled a lot of informational requests, which made its records a gold mine.

From your experience, what improvements could be made in access to federal records and publications to help a historian with his or her project?

The Freedom of Information Act process is an impediment. I faced serious obstacles in getting records from more than half a century ago that remain, in my view, improperly restricted. Then, the process of review and release can take years. There's also insufficient clarity about which documents have already been released. It's possible, as I found, to make a FOIA request on a document, learn that it will take years to get the document, and then discover that the same document has already been released to another researcher.

Your book contains many illustrations and photographs. Why did you decide to include them, and how do they further your argument?

I don't think the book would have worked without the maps. My main goal was to help readers re-map the United States in their heads. So it felt important to provide actual maps to prod them along. Beyond that, I think there's an immediacy about images that helps drive home the point. It's one thing to understand intellectually that the Philippines was part of the United States; it's another thing to see a 10-peso Philippine bill with George Washington's face on it that says "Philippine Islands, U.S.A."

Although your first book, "Thinking Small," dealt with U.S. diplomacy, it won awards as a work of intellectual history. What new priorities and historical problems did you encounter in your "transition" from intellectual history to diplomatic history?

Well, *Thinking Small* was, as you say, both diplomatic history and intellectual history, so I'd already been used to working in diplomatic history. The hard transition was moving partly away from intellectual history. Whereas *Thinking Small* was, as the title implies, about what powerful people thought, *How to Hide*

an Empire is in part about what they *didn't* think. It's a history of a blind spot. That turns out to be significantly harder to research. Keyword searches on digitized documents, for example, don't help you much.

You discuss a “cultural flow” from the Greater United States to the world. What was this cultural flow, when did it start to be reversed, and how was Japan involved?

It's pretty well understood that the United States has exported its way of life abroad. Europeans call this process “Coca-colonization.” My contribution is to observe that there is a territorial component. The foreign military bases have been important beacons of U.S. culture. And the people who lived in the shadow of the military bases have often been highly successful cultural brokers, mastering U.S. ways and capitalizing on them. The Beatles, for example, came of age in Liverpool, the closest city to the largest U.S. air base in Europe. That's why there were so many British rock bands coming out of that area. Similarly, Sony mastered the art of electronics in occupied Japan, exploiting its privileged access to U.S. technology that came from living cheek by jowl with U.S. occupation authorities. Starting in the 1960s, the British rockers and Japanese firms got good enough to “invade” U.S. markets and outcompete local producers there. By 1980, U.S. consumers were listening to *Abbey Road* on their Walkmen, and that seems to be a moment worth marking.

The Smithsonian National Museum of American History recently exhibited artifacts related to the guano islands. Not long ago, the mainstream media discussed a proposed purchase of Greenland. Do you think events like these are changing the way the public thinks, geographically, of the United States?

What was so striking about Donald Trump's announced desire to buy Greenland was how nakedly the president was talking about annexation. If you think of the United States as only the states, then it's easy to forget that it's been a geographically dynamic polity with moving borders for its whole history. The guano islands—the first U.S. forays into overseas empire—are another example of that. While I wouldn't support an annexation of Greenland, I think it's useful for mainlanders to get intellectually jostled a little as they are reminded that the United States is the sort of place that expands and contracts.

You discuss the “pointillist” American empire today, which consists of many military bases, some owned, some leased, many on islands. Is there an advantage to a pointillist empire because of the exclusive economic zone rights present in the Law of the Sea treaty, which America has not ratified but mostly adheres to? Do you see the same dynamic with the “pointillist” artificial islands China has constructed in the South China Sea?

One benefit of annexing an island, these days, is that even a small pinprick island claim can come with a fairly extensive claim to the waters surrounding it. But annexed islands aren't the only form of pointillism the United States has pursued. Many of its hundreds of overseas “points” today are leased bases that aren't on islands but are located in foreign countries. Those inland points tend to kick up local resistance, though, so the military prefers islands and remote basing sites when possible. China has perfected this strategy with its artificial islands. Arrive late to the imperial race? Just manufacture your own synthetic islands, and you'll be all right—you won't even have to worry about indigenous populations.

What other books on this subject do you recommend?

Julian Go's *Patterns of Empire* is a wide-ranging academic book that I think does a wonderful job opening up the topic. That's the place to start. I really like two recent monographs on particular episodes in U.S. colonial history: Rebecca Tinio McKenna's *American Imperial Pastoral* on the U.S. hill station of Baguio in the colonial Philippines and Sarah Miller-Davenport's *Gateway State*, about Hawai'i statehood. The journalist Ed Morales just wrote a book, *Fantasy Island*, that covers the recent history of Puerto Rico well. And my favorite book on 19th-century settler colonialism is James Belich's *Replenishing the Earth*.

The opinions expressed here are those of the interviewer and do not necessarily represent the policies of the Department of State.

© Society for History in the Federal Government. Readers can download *Federal History* articles and share them but must credit the journal and author. They cannot change the articles in any way or use them commercially. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND).

