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String of Pearls: The Archipelago of Bases, Military Colonization, and the Making of the American Empire in the Pacific

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The United States basked in its own hemisphere for 150 years, rolling around like an Atlantic and Pacific great whale in the free national security afforded by its continental breadth and isolation, the absence of any credible threat, and the shelter of oceans on which the friendly British navy was dominant. (Bruce Cumings, *Dominion From Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power*, p. 389)

World War II was the seminal moment when the United States experienced for the first time a direct territorial threat from across the Pacific (albeit only in relationship to its recently acquired Hawaiian territory) and in turn assumed pre-eminence in the Pacific. But this was hardly the beginning. This article re-examines the historical formation of the American archipelago of bases and territories across the Pacific from the 1850s and 1860s to the present to highlight unique features of American imperium, specifically, post-World War II American security imperialism, and gauges the character of the U.S. as a Pacific power.

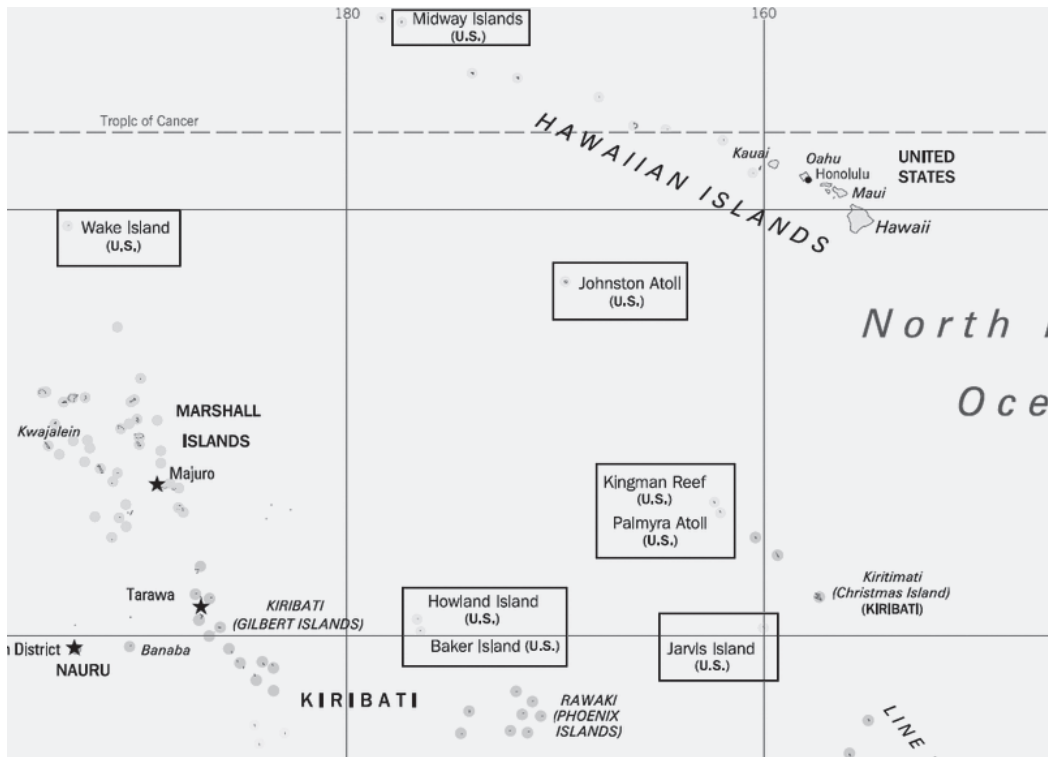
Even as American settlers were preoccupied with conquering the North American continent, extending their reach from the Atlantic to the Pacific prior to the closing of the frontier in the nineteenth century, whalers and merchants made their way across the Pacific. The first stage in setting the string of pearls across the Pacific dates from the 1850s and 1860s, when American clipper ships were already the fastest in the world. Initially, the moves were appropriately modest in keeping with an era in which Britain ruled the seas and primary American preoccupations were continental. In the 1850s, the U.S. quietly secured the first of what the Geneva-based International Organization for Standardization would subsequently classify as “minor outlying islands.”

The “Minor Islands”

The United States eventually claimed more than one hundred uninhabited islands in the Pacific and the Caribbean following the 1856 passage of the Guano Acquisitions Act. Their acquisition challenged no power, nor did it involve subjugating residents or going

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Map 1. Map Showing the Minor Islands West of Hawai'i.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:United_States_Minor_Outlying_Islands.png

to war. Yet those actions began to place an American stamp on the Pacific. Assets (guano fertilizer) went hand-in-hand with establishing layover points with good anchorages and harbors for U.S. whalers and traders. Some islands, their guano exhausted, were subsequently abandoned. If the minor islands were initially just that, with limited strategic or economic consequences, and with names unrecognizable to most Americans then and now, by the time of the Asia-Pacific War, the strategic significance of some would grow. Indeed, acquisitions made almost inadvertently would take on significance with the passage of time and become, in some instances, permanent U.S. territories with far-reaching geostrategic and economic consequences.

The United States presently holds eight such minor islands in the Pacific, with a total area of 31 square kilometers. As of 2008, all were uninhabited in the sense of having no permanent residents.¹⁾ Inhabited or not, the U.S. claims 200-mile territorial waters in each case, extending American claims across broad swathes of the Pacific. The names, dates of acquisition, and area and jurisdiction of the Pacific Islands, all presently classified as U.S. possessions with no indigenous population and under Federal control, are:

Baker Island, 1857, 1.6 sq. km., wildlife refuge under U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior;

Howland Island, 1856, 1.8 sq. km., under U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior;
Jarvis Island, 1856, 4.5 sq. km., halfway between Australia and Cook Islands, under U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior;
Johnston Atoll, 1859, 2.7 sq. km., 1,400 km. west of Hawai‘i, under U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior;
Kingman Reef, 1860, 0.012 sq. km. (largely submerged);
Midway Islands, 1867, 6.2 sq. km., under U.S. Department of the Interior;
Palmyra Atoll, 1912, 12 sq. km, under Nature Conservancy and various U.S. government departments; and
Wake Island, 1899, 2.9 sq. km, under Office of Insular Affairs.²⁾

Alaska

It is a curious artifact of geography that the 1867 purchase of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands was and remains widely understood in terms of a North American territorial extension by the United States. Alaska indeed became an important North American possession. But for our purposes, viewed above all in geopolitical but also in economic terms, the primary significance of these purchases lay in their extension of American power into the northern Pacific, with the 300 small volcanic islands extending across 1,200 miles from Alaska to Russia and forming a line between the Bering Sea and the Pacific Gulf of Alaska. In short, the U.S. achieved the territorial foundations for dominance of the northern Pacific, though it would be decades before it attempted to exercise that power. Indeed, the territory’s significance would only become plain during the Asia-Pacific War and its aftermath. Above all, Alaska and the Aleutians placed the U.S. in a commanding position in the northern Pacific while transforming the relationship between Russia and the U.S.

The Hawaiian Islands

“Discovered” by the English Captain James Cook in 1778 at a time when American whalers were already active in the Pacific, Hawai‘i would be conquered over the next century by Americans through the persistent inroads of missionaries (as early as 1820) and businessmen. Hawai‘i was the first major Pacific island territory that Americans conquered, subjugating and incorporating the indigenous Polynesian population. Like the Indians of North America, the Hawaiian population was decimated by disease and epidemics by the arrival of these visitors, the population plummeting from 300,000 in the late eighteenth century to 60,000 by 1850 and just 24,000 by 1920. Hawaiians also swiftly lost access to their land and way of life. In contrast to the Indians of North America, however, they were not hunted down and killed or confined to reservations. Nor were they captured and enslaved like the Africans. Rather, they were “civilized,” Christianized, and

educated in missionary schools, then incorporated as plantation labor on the giant sugar plantations that dominated the economy by the mid-nineteenth century or marginalized in peripheral areas.

American and European settlers, not the U.S. military or the government, took the lead in subjugating Hawai'i and calling for annexation from 1854 forward. Given the shrinking indigenous population and the reluctance of many native Hawaiians to undertake the backbreaking labor of sugar cultivation, the political and plantation oligarchs imported plantation labor—some 17,000 Chinese, 13,000 Japanese, and 13,000 Portuguese in 1890—while preserving haole (white) monopoly on political and economic power. Annexation, spearheaded by American and European settlers, took place by stages with landmark events including the 1887 acquisition of Pearl Harbor as a naval base and a constitution that weakened the power of the king, and the 1893 overthrow of Queen Lili'uokalani abetted by the landing of the *U.S.S. Boston* to support the coup engineered by U.S. businessmen who controlled almost all the prime land and sugar wealth.

The formation of the Republic of Hawai'i took place the next year, followed by formal annexation by the United States as the Territory of Hawai'i on July 7, 1898. By the early twentieth century, power was squarely in the hands of a small corporate oligarchy strengthened by U.S. military backing given plausibility by the Congressional appropriation of \$2 million to dredge Pearl Harbor to allow large warships to enter and create a Pacific fleet in the years 1907–1911 (Cumings, pp. 175–92; Crocombe, pp. 24–25). Nevertheless, U.S. military interest in the islands was sporadic at best.

The Philippines

The year 1898 marked the largest U.S. advance into the Pacific, allowing it to attain full membership in the ranks of the imperialist powers in the acquisition by conquest of large colonies and dependent territories. At the very moment that the annexation of Hawai'i (2,551 miles from Los Angeles) capped a century long settler effort to dominate the islands, the U.S. acquired the second treasure in the string of pearls that was, together with Alaska, extending power from the West Coast into the Pacific. This was the Philippines, 7,952 miles from Los Angeles. Rather than the result of a grand strategic plan, the U.S. in 1898 seized a target of opportunity in the wake of the “fortuitous” sinking of the battleship *Maine* in Havana Harbor and the subsequent surge of populist anger at Spain fanned by yellow journalism led by William Randolph Hearst. Fortuitous indeed, the U.S.-staged incident set in train two characteristic patterns that have undergirded the American way of war since 1898. The first of these concerns the rituals of going to war. For the U.S., this repeatedly required arousing nationalist passions, a result of attacks out of the blue (while we slept): at Pearl Harbor, across the 38th parallel in Korea, at the Tonkin Gulf in Vietnam, and at the World Trade Center on 9.11, leading to war in Afghanistan, to name but the most important examples.

In the first instance, U.S. naval forces in the Pacific seized on the sinking of the *Maine*

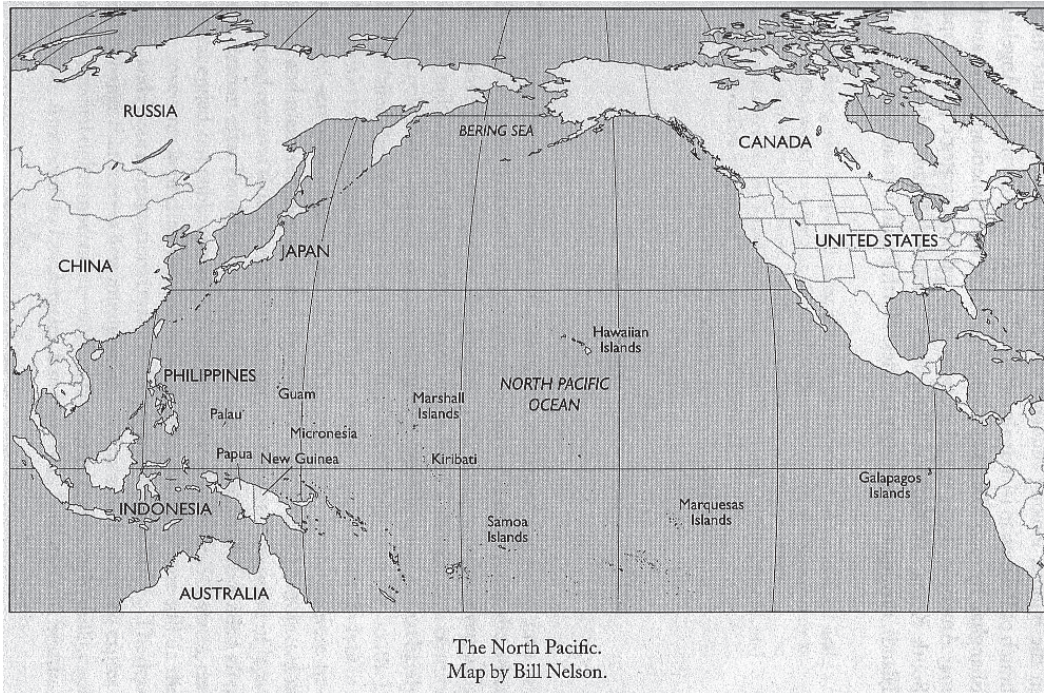
to dispatch a naval force to crush the weak Spanish fleet in Manila Bay while Cuban insurgents liberated their country. The second is the characteristic benevolence and altruism of American actions. It was well expressed by President William McKinley who explained to a group of Methodist church leaders in 1899 his decision to annex the Philippines: “. . . we could not give [the Philippines] back to Spain—that would be cowardly and dishonorable . . . there was nothing left to do but take them all, and educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize them, and by God’s grace do the very best by them as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died” (LaFeber, p. 200). The combination of American innocence, God’s grace, and the civilizing mission, with only rare mention of the mailed fist, would characterize the American global mission from 1898 forward.

The War of 1898 ended Spain’s territorial presence in both the Caribbean and the Pacific. This was the first great American colonial war beyond the continental United States. By the Treaty of Paris of 1898, Spain ceded the Philippines as well as Guam and Puerto Rico to the United States for \$20 million while Cuban independence also ended Spain’s colonial presence in the Americas.

Easy victories against the Spanish fleet in both Manila and Havana cost just 770 American lives, but the real fighting was yet to come. The U.S. Army, 27,000 strong on the eve of the U.S.-Philippines war, quickly expanded to more than 200,000. The war took the lives of 4,234 American military personnel. Estimates of Filipino deaths range from 200,000 to 1.2 million out of a total population of seven to eight million.³⁾ This would not be the last Asian war in which expectations of imminent victory gave way to protracted and bloody counter-guerilla warfare as U.S. forces were effectively challenged by Philippine independence fighters led by Emilio Aguinaldo, who proclaimed the Philippine Republic on the eve of the landing of U.S. forces. Nor would it be the last in which the U.S. Army, applying lessons from the Indian campaigns, laid waste to land and people in a war in which local people (goo-goos, the term anticipating the Vietnam War era gooks) were slaughtered, towns set ablaze, and surviving civilians forced into “protected zones,” essentially concentration camps. As Paul Kramer documents, the guerrilla war developed “into a war of racial exterminism in which Filipino combatants and non-combatants were understood by U.S. troops to be legitimate targets of violence” (Kramer). It became “a natural extension of Western conquest, the organic expression of the desires, capacities and destinies of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ peoples,” and a perfect expression of the “White Man’s Burden” as elaborated in Rudyard Kipling’s 1899 poem articulating the civilizing mission that U.S. leaders would proclaim.

Mark Twain, the most eloquent of the anti-imperialists of the era, referred in his diary to American troops as “our uniformed assassins” and described their killing of “six hundred helpless and weaponless savages as a long and happy picnic with nothing to do but sit in comfort and fire the Golden Rule into those people down there and imagine letters to write home to the admiring families, and pile glory upon glory.”⁴⁾

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Map 2. The North Pacific.
Source: Cumings, *Dominion*, p. 195.

The Pacific as an American Lake

The year 1898 made the United States a full-fledged imperialist power with island territories extending across the Pacific and the deployment of military force to seize and consolidate its power. Whitelaw Reid, ambassador to France, longtime editor of *The New York Tribune*, and a core member of the group of imperialists and internationalists, in 1898 grandiloquently framed the case for Pacific expansionism, coining a phrase that would be echoed over the century ahead:

Practically we own more than half the coast on this side, dominate the rest, and have midway stations in the Sandwich and Aleutian Islands. To extend now the authority of the United States over the great Philippine Archipelago is to fence in the China Sea and secure an almost equally commanding position on the other side of the Pacific—doubling our control of it and of the fabulous trade the Twentieth Century will see it bear. Rightly used, it enables the United States to convert the Pacific Ocean almost into an American lake.

Nevertheless, despite the acquisition of major Pacific territories in Alaska, Hawai'i and the Philippines and the emergence of the U.S. as the leading industrial power, the Pacific was far from becoming an American lake. United States colonial acquisitions were small compared with those of the leading colonial powers of the era. Between 1870 and 1900,

Great Britain added 4.7 million square miles, France 3.5 million, and Germany 1.0 million to their empires. Japan had also embarked on empire building, which, over the coming decades, would bring well over 1 million square miles under its control in Korea, Micronesia, Manchukuo, and China. By contrast, the U.S., although a large continental power, between 1870 and 1900 added only 125,000 square miles, and these territories were far from being the predominant concern of policymakers in the decades ahead.⁵⁾ Equally important is the fact that, as in all previous wars, the U.S. military immediately downsized following the crushing of Philippines resistance, the Navy continued to concentrate its limited strength in the Atlantic, and none of the new territories was fortified with major bases.

There were of course two rising imperial powers in the Pacific in the late-nineteenth century, both of whose projections of power centered on island and peninsular territories. The other was Japan, which seized Hokkaido and Okinawa in the 1860s and 1870s, Taiwan in 1895, Korea in 1910, and the Pacific Island Territories (Micronesia) in 1919 before attempting to extend its dominance to Manchuria in 1931, and all of China from 1937. The result was that, on the eve of the Asia-Pacific Theatre of World War II, even as the U.S. imposed heavy economic sanctions on Japan, including an oil embargo, America's military lacked the capacity to defend its Hawaiian and Philippine colonies against Japan, whose expansive military power achieved preponderance in the Western and Central Pacific even as U.S.-Japan tensions intensified.

The Asia-Pacific War

United States expansion in the Pacific between 1850 and 1941 was but a prelude to what was to come. World War II transformed the U.S. into both a geopolitical colossus and a permanent warfare state. In World War II, the U.S. for the first time fought simultaneously in both the Atlantic and the Pacific theatres, that is, in both Europe and the Asia-Pacific. The war provided a springboard for expanding American power in multiple ways—at the height of the war the U.S. economy doubled in size and accounted for approximately half of world industrial output even as U.S. military power soared while the government extended its power over the economy and society. The war, the first and last to pose a significant threat to core U.S. interests, provided the springboard for expanding America's territorial reach globally, above all in Europe and Asia through the combination of a vast expansion of American industrial and territorial might and the crippling of all major potential rivals, both allies and foes. It demonstrated the U.S. arrival as a Pacific power, first in the fact that it concentrated its military power in the Pacific theatre, and second in the sense that it vastly expanded its territorial and military reach across the Pacific, this time to the heart of East Asia (Cumings, pp. 300, 390).

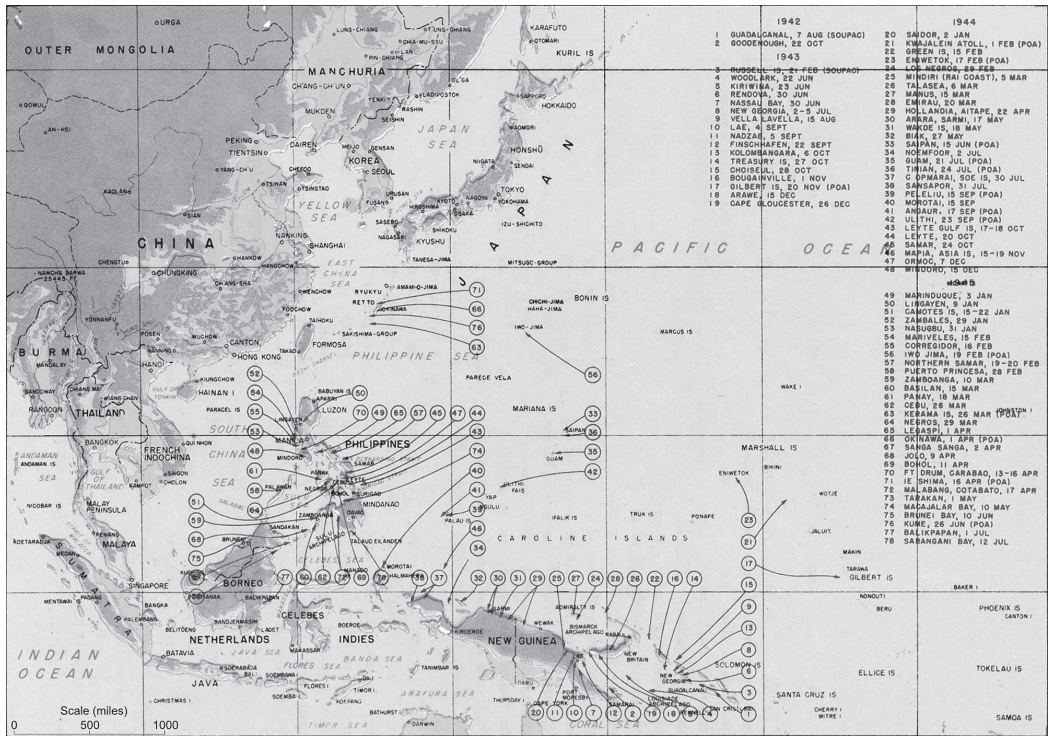
I have noted certain distinctive features of the American imperium that became discernible in the nineteenth century and more prominent in the Asia-Pacific War and post-war decades. These include the emphasis on securing ever more, and more important,

island territories, and in the wartime and postwar periods, the creation of an unprecedented nexus of military bases and occupying forces centered in the Asia-Pacific. It is a pattern that clearly distinguishes the U.S. from other empires past and present including the British, Japanese, Russian, German, French, and Chinese, to mention some of the most powerful, whose colonies and subject territories tended to center in continental areas.

Consider Midway, located at the midpoint between Japan and the U.S. West Coast. Taken by the Navy in 1867 as a naval station, it would become the site of the most important naval battle of the Asia-Pacific War when Japan attacked on June 4, 1942 in an effort to destroy U.S. naval power in the Pacific. The defeat at Midway ended Japan's advance and began the inexorable retreat that ended in defeat, the destruction of the Japanese homeland, and the dismantling of the empire. Midway exemplifies some of the ways in which even the most modest territorial acquisitions, retained in perpetuity, could assume deep significance in a new era.

Within months of the attack on Pearl Harbor, even as Japan, dreaming of the creation of a Pan-Asian empire, wrested control over large areas of the Asia-Pacific that been in the hands of the United States, Britain, France, and Holland, American strategic planners began cataloguing the territories that they would secure following Japan's defeat. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt called on the Joint Chiefs of Staff to survey the position of the U.S. in the postwar world. JCS Memorandum 570/2 of November 8, 1943, marked the shift from the primacy of hemispheric defense to U.S. global geostrategy. Sometimes referred to as the "Base Bible," the study envisaged bases in the Philippines and Micronesia where the U.S. would exercise "exclusive military rights" in addition to bases in the Southwest Pacific, Indochina, eastern China, Korea, and Japan in the form of "participating rights" as one of the "Great Powers enforcing peace" (Weeks and Meconis, pp. 15–16).

As Map 3 illustrates, U.S. strategy during the Asia-Pacific War pivoted on its naval-marine and air supremacy to attack Japan's insular territories. By 1944, with Japan in retreat, the U.S. was able to position its bombers to strike Japanese cities, a strategy employed to devastating effect from February 1945, while leaving largely untouched core areas of the Japanese empire, which would require protracted and costly land battles (Selden, 2007; Selden, 2008). The divergent strategies of Soviet and American forces is particularly striking. The Russians would play the leading role in crushing Germany in Europe, but at a cost of destruction of their country and more than twenty million Russian lives. The U.S. would rely on the use of insular bases to maximize its growing naval and air superiority and direct it first to destroying the Japanese navy and air force, and second, to a small number of island battles culminating in the Battle of Okinawa. Having emerged victorious in these battles with relatively small U.S. casualties, the U.S. proceeded to destroy sixty-four major Japanese cities by bombing, killing large numbers of civilians and making refugees of many more prior to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The combination of U.S. saturation and atomic bombing and Soviet entry into Manchuria forced Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945, obviating the need for a costly U.S.



Map 3. Map Showing and Dating U.S. Landings During the Asia-Pacific War. http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a4/US_landings.jpg

invasion.

In short, until the final year of the Asia-Pacific War, the U.S. held back from attacking densely populated continental areas, notably Manchukuo and occupied China, as well as Japan itself, colonial Korea, and Taiwan, concentrating instead on island hopping that brought its air and naval power ever closer to the main Japanese islands. In this way, it made optimal use of air and naval superiority while avoiding entanglements of the kind that Japan had encountered in the course of its inconclusive and immensely costly fifteen-year land war that began in Manchuria and extended to China. Japan's China war exacted an enormous toll in Chinese and Japanese lives, probably in the range of 15 to 30 million, while sapping the strength of the Japanese military over the years 1931–45.

The Postwar Construction of the American Empire of Bases

At Potsdam on August 9, 1945, President Harry Truman explained, “Though the United States wants no territory or profit or selfish advantage out of this war, we are going to maintain the military bases necessary for the complete protection of our interests and of world peace. Bases which our military experts deem to be essential for our protection, and which are not now in our possession, we will acquire” (*New York Times*, August 10,

1945). In fact, there were virtually no limits on the conception of bases and territories “essential for our protection.”

In the course of the Asia-Pacific War and its immediate aftermath, naval strategists drew up multiple plans envisaging territorial acquisitions centering on, but not limited to, islands throughout the Pacific, so as to create a vast Pacific security zone. American territorial acquisitions would take place within an international discourse stressing anti-colonialism but accommodating trusteeship over conquered islands even as the U.S. moved to secure absolute sovereignty within the framework of trusteeship.

Vice-Admiral Forrest P. Sherman, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations, told the Senate Naval Affairs Committee on February 14, 1946, that the U.S. should “maintain strategic control of the Pacific Ocean Area.” This, he averred, would require maintenance of the following thirty-three naval bases and airfields in twenty-two localities:

- A Main Naval Base: Hawai‘i;
- A Major Operating Base: Guam-Saipan;
- A Major Operating Base, Caretaker Status: Manus;
- Two Secondary Operating and Repair Bases: Adak, Philippines;
- Six Secondary Operating Bases, Small: Kodiak, Dutch Harbor, Attu, Midway, Samoa, Ryukyus;
- Seven Air Bases: Johnston Island, Palmyra, Canton Island, Majuro, Wake, Marcus, Iwo Jima;
- Four Combined Air Bases and Fleet Anchorages: Kwajalein, Eniwetok, Truk, Palau; and
- Eleven Air Fields: Hawai‘i, Kodiak, Dutch Harbor, Adak, Attu, Midway, Samoa, Manus, Guam-Saipan, Philippines, Ryukyus. (Kirkpatrick, pp. 48–49; Dower, pp. 155–64)

Several of these had been U.S. possessions for nearly a century; many were fortified with airfields and harbors in the final years of the war; and some, such as Hawai‘i and Guam, would subsequently become major U.S. bases in the postwar. Yet this was but part of U.S. ambitions for the Pacific.

The richest prizes, also insular or peninsular, were the American occupied territories of Japan and South Korea, together with Okinawa. Okinawa had been the costliest conquest in the Pacific in terms of U.S. casualties (12,520 Americans lost their lives), along with more than 100,000 Japanese, Korean, and Okinawan soldiers, and 120,000 out of the 460,000 Okinawan civilian population.⁶⁾ The largest concentration of U.S. military power in the Pacific, and a U.S. military colony, Okinawa was well positioned from the American perspective for future conflicts that might involve Japan, China, Korea, Russia, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. Seized as a U.S. military colony rather than returned to Japan at the conclusion of the war, Okinawa became a template on which the military could create a milieu of bases without constitutional or other constraints that functioned in Japan even under occupation.

There is a close relationship between areas in which the U.S. engaged in heavy combat during the Asia-Pacific War and its annexation or creation of military bases, including many islands of Micronesia and above all Okinawa. As Ron Crocombe observed, “Eleven

of the twelve present U.S. territories in the Pacific [Micronesia] were acquired by military action, the twelfth by negotiation for a military base. Military use has remained the dominant activity in almost all of them” (Crocombe, p. 303). Seizure of Micronesia and Okinawa present the most compelling examples of U.S. security imperialism: the value of the islands lay precisely in their military and geostrategic potential, including, on a number of Micronesian islands, their utility for testing atomic weapons. Stated differently, immediate economic, financial, and resource considerations were minimal as the U.S. expanded its grip over multiple Pacific islands. By contrast, U.S. control over Japan and South Korea had not only strategic value but also high economic and political value.

American Bases and the U.S.-Korean and U.S.-Vietnam Wars

It is worth noting common features of Okinawa and other U.S.-occupied or U.S.-controlled insular areas in contrast to occupied Germany and Japan. Where Germany was divided among the victorious powers, notably including the Soviet Union, the U.S. military wielded absolute power in Okinawa as well as in other newly acquired U.S. island territories with small populations. In Okinawa and the island territories, the U.S. exercised authority unchecked by constitutional provisions or other impediments such as those that existed in occupied Japan with its peace constitution.⁷⁾ Okinawa would demonstrate its immense value in regional geopolitical perspective virtually from day one of its incorporation. In October 1945, just five months after the Battle of Okinawa, 10,000 Marines were dispatched from Okinawa to North China. Their job was to take the surrender of Japanese forces, assuring that they did not surrender to Chinese Communist armies. Subsequent joint operations involving U.S. and Japanese forces were directed against Communist armies while the U.S. airlifted Chiang Kai-shek’s troops into North China (Wilson, pp. 33–37; Kolko and Kolko, pp. 248–49).

Half a century after Reid’s coinage of the image of the Pacific as an American lake, in 1949 General Douglas MacArthur put his personal stamp on the concept: “Now the Pacific has become an Anglo-Saxon lake and our line of defense runs through the chain of islands fringing the coast of Asia. It starts from the Philippines and continues through the Ryukyu archipelago, which includes its main bastion, Okinawa. Then it bends back through Japan and the Aleutian Island chain to Alaska” (*New York Times*, March 2, 1949).

In 1949, with Chinese Communist forces on the eve of victory, a \$58 million Congressional appropriation made Okinawa truly the American keystone of the Pacific. Five years later, with the outbreak of the U.S.-Korean War, Okinawa-based B-29 Superfortresses rained destruction over North and South Korea, and the islands served as a major supply and logistical base (Shinobu, p. 26).

During the U.S.-Vietnam War, between 1965 and 1972, both Okinawa and Guam, together with Thailand, played critical roles as the launch pad for B-52 bombings of Indochina. By 1969, more than 50,000 GIs were stationed on Okinawa. Flights took off daily from Okinawa’s Kadena Base to bomb Vietnam, and thousands of GIs paid two-week rest

and recreation visits throughout the war. Okinawa was also the site of an active anti-Vietnam War movement, yet once again, direct U.S. military rule served to protect Pentagon interests well (*Wikipedia*, “Okinawa”). Guam’s Andersen Air Force Base was the site of U.S. B-52 bombing of Vietnam between 1965 and 1972, reaching a peak intensity of 729 sorties in 11 days in December 1972 (*Wikipedia*, “Andersen”).

Marilyn Young has described the “living laboratories” of Korea and Vietnam for the development and testing of new U.S. weapons: the 1,200 pound Tarzon bomb, white-phosphorous-enhanced napalm; cluster bombs, CBUs; airburst cluster bombs; toxic defoliants; and varieties of nerve gas among others. B-52s from Okinawa and Guam delivered up to thirty tons of explosives each.

The statistics stun; they also provide distance. . . . In Korea over a three-year period, U.S./UN forces flew 1,040,708 sorties and dropped 386,037 tons of bombs and 32,357 tons of napalm. If one counts all types of airborne ordnance, including rockets and machine-gun ammunition, the total tonnage comes to 698,000. Throughout World War II, in all sectors, the United States dropped 2 million tons of bomb; for Indochina, the total figure in 8 million tons. . . . Three million tons were dropped on Laos. . . . For South Vietnam, . . . 19 million gallons of defoliant dropped on an area comprising 20 percent of South Vietnam—some 6 million acres. (Young, p. 157)

In this, above all, the U.S. island bases demonstrated their value in facilitating the forward U.S. presence in new types of wars in Asia and the Pacific.

The 2009 U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) Base Structure Report, borrowing the lingo of Wall Street, reports a “global military portfolio” of more than 5,579 sites covering 29 million acres and valued at \$157 billion. Of this total, 837 were overseas (including 121 in U.S. territories). But the DOD figures modestly neglect to mention many of the most important base acquisitions of recent years, including some in Japan, others in Israel and throughout the Middle East, and those in Iraq and Afghanistan-Pakistan.⁸⁾ Chalmers Johnson points out that the empire “consists of permanent naval bases, military airfields, army garrisons, espionage listening posts, and strategic enclaves on every continent of the globe.” He adds, “America’s foreign military enclaves, though structurally, legally, and conceptually different from colonies, are themselves something like micro-colonies in that they are completely beyond the jurisdiction of the occupied nation” (Johnson, pp. 23, 35).

Bruce Cumings looks beyond the insular bases to describe a new and complementary American phenomenon of the second half of the twentieth century:

. . . the permanent stationing of soldiers in a myriad of foreign bases across the face of the planet, connected to an enormous domestic complex of defense industries. For the first time in modern history, the leading power maintained an extensive network of bases on the territory of its allies and economic competitors—Japan, Germany, Britain, Italy, South Korea . . . marking a radical break with the European balance of power and the operation of realpolitik and a radical departure in American history: an archipelago of empire. (Cumings, p. 393)

This is the global face of American power and the superstructure of U.S. security imperi-

alism.

The Superpower and the Permanent Warfare State

A central feature of the proliferation of bases, particularly Pacific Island bases, is the permanent U.S. military presence characteristic of the years since 1942. This includes the unprecedented decision not to demobilize following American wars (particularly, as Cumings emphasizes, from the U.S.-Korean War forward), permanent warfare (that is, the unbroken succession of wars since 1941), the formation of U.S.-led military alliances, and the permanent stationing of U.S. forces on the territory of sovereign nations. Cumings rightly emphasizes the huge permanent increase in the U.S. military budget from the Korean War. Nevertheless, for our purposes, the permanent expansion of the U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific from 1945 provided the sinews on which to construct the permanent warfare state. As Marilyn Young observes, “The constancy of war and its constant erasure is linked intimately to the pursuit and maintenance of an American empire similarly erased” (Young).

Chalmers Johnson, who most fully documented and theorized the anatomy of the U.S. empire of bases, well grasped the significance of World War II not only in vastly expanding the scope and power of U.S. bases but also in defining a new geostrategic way of life for Americans whose ramifications were global, not least in the U.S. Johnson observes:

Our militarized empire is a physical reality with a distinct way of life but it is also a network of economic and political interests tied in a thousand different ways to American corporations, universities, and communities but kept separate from what passes for everyday life back in what has only recently come to be known as “the homeland.” And yet even that sense of separation is disappearing—for the changing nature of the empire is changing our society as well. (Johnson, p. 5)⁹⁾

Johnson documented the growing weight of the military establishment in American politics in step with an ever-expanding number of top brass stationed throughout the U.S. and the world, one of the institutional foundations that made the Pentagon by far the most powerful force in American governance.¹⁰⁾

Against the grain of Cold War rhetoric, which long defined the postwar decades in terms of Soviet-American bipolarity, the central fact was that the United States emerged from World War II as *the* superpower: above all, this means that it was able to use its position as the most powerful nation in the world in geopolitical, financial, and economic terms at a time when all potential challengers were in ruins, both to place its stamp on the dominant postwar international institutions that it created and to expand its territorial reach in the wake of war. One result was a fundamental shift in the exercise of American power.

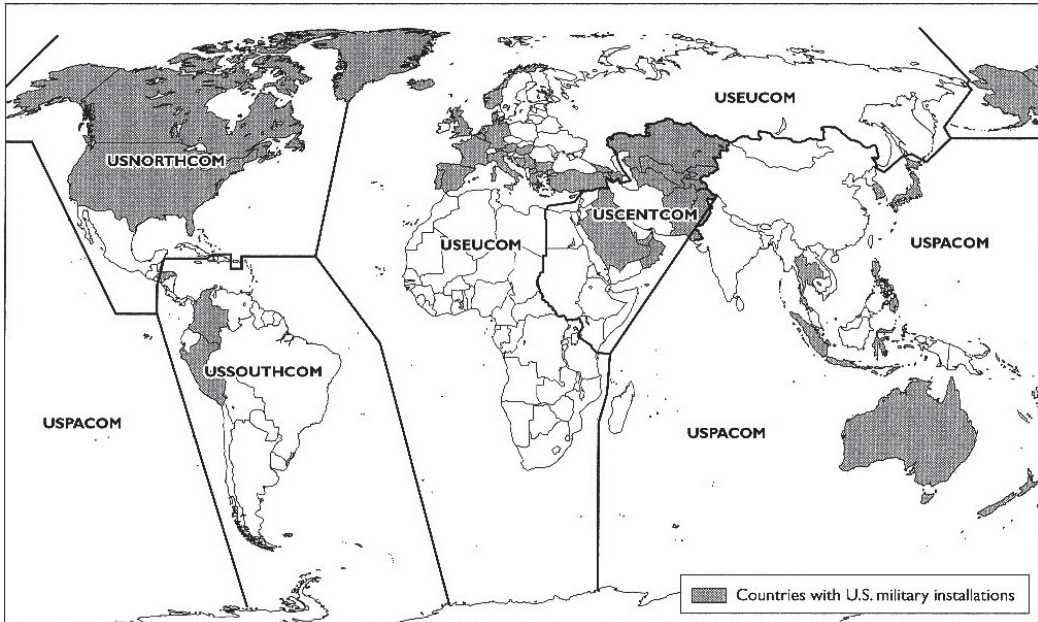
Whereas the U.S. demobilized much of its military in the wake of all earlier wars, World War II was followed by the dramatic expansion of U.S. military presence, above all

in the Pacific, where it extended its reach with new island acquisitions as well as dominating Japan and South Korea, and where the American fleet had no rival. As in earlier wars, the U.S. did reduce the size of its army. But in contrast to earlier conflicts, the strengthening of its naval and air power grew in ways consonant with its new footprint, above all in the Pacific, but also in Western Europe. As Admiral Chester W. Nimitz testified before a Senate subcommittee on May 30, 1946, “the Pacific Fleet will have in active status an amphibious force adequate to lift 1 reinforced marine division, 7 carriers, 6 escort carriers, 2 battleships, 17 cruisers (8 heavy and 9 light), 72 destroyers, 39 submarines, 16 destroyer escorts” (Dower, p. 162). And even when it reduced the size of the military in the wake of World War II, the nature of American power was such that it could rapidly reconstitute its forces, as it demonstrated in Korea.

The U.S. also initiated in the Philippines a policy and approach that it would repeat again and again in the postwar era, granting the Philippines independence in 1946 at the very moment that the U.S. secured 99-year leases on more than twenty bases. This would be precisely the *quid pro quo* for Japan’s independence of 1952; in that instance, not only did U.S. bases remain intact but on the day of independence, Japan signed the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty preserving Japan’s strategic subordination to the U.S., a position that remains unchanged six decades later; likewise, independence for Japan meant acceptance of the severance of Okinawa and its continued position as a U.S. military colony. Okinawa’s 1972 reversion to Japan two decades later preserved the full panoply of U.S. bases. One important change did occur with Okinawa’s reversion. That was a shift in the primary financing of the bases from the U.S. to Japan, a pattern that has only become clearer over subsequent decades (McCormack and Norimatsu).

I suggested above that the U.S. emerged from World War II as the hegemonic power in terms of its unrivaled military and economic power, the vast expansion of its territorial footprint, above all in the Pacific, and its ability to shape major parameters of the postwar international order including the United Nations, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund as well as global ideologies of market and democracy. In a profound sense, however, it failed to exercise hegemonic power. The core meaning of hegemony is the exercise of dominance to subordinate others in the absence of repeated resort to the use of military force. The reality of six decades of American supremacy is best understood, by contrast, in terms of the emergence of the American permanent warfare state—a nation perpetually at war—and the maintenance of a costly archipelago of bases, territories, and dependencies that anchor it within a series of five “Command Structures” that envelop the globe. Indeed, with the U.S. push to dominate space, a sixth command may soon be necessary. The permanent warfare state, in the end, can only be a formula for disaster, and we should see it for what it is: the very antithesis of the exercise of hegemonic power and a *modus operandi* that exacts a heavy and unsustainable toll on the world, including the United States.

In the course of six decades, during which a long-fractious Europe has remained largely at peace, the United States has fought successive wars. The most important of



Worldwide U.S. military bases.
 Map by Bill Nelson, based on maps done by the Peace Pledge Union and the U.S. Defense Department.

Map 4. U.S. Military Bases Worldwide.
 Source: Cumings, *Dominion*, p. 392.

these American wars have taken place in Asia including: China (1947), Korea (1950–53, but in the absence of a Peace Treaty, the war continues to the present), Indochina (1946–75), the Gulf (1990–91), Afghanistan and Pakistan (2001–present), and Iraq (2003–present). In these, and many smaller wars, the U.S. adversary has invariably been a poor, primarily agrarian nation. In none of these did the U.S. face a threat to its own territory or even significant interests of its people. Many of these wars lasted for years or even decades, at the end of which the U.S. was either stalemated or defeated after inflicting horrific damage on the land and people of its foes.¹¹⁾

As Chalmers Johnson, Peter Dale Scott, and Glenn Greenwald, among others, have eloquently documented, moreover, American democracy and the progressive values associated with the welfare state have also been casualties of the permanent warfare state. The state of the nation could be summed up as covert endless wars, consolidation of unchecked power, the rapid growth of surveillance and a regime of secrecy, massive inequalities in the legal system, and continuous transfers of wealth from the disappearing middle class to large corporate conglomerates. To this list we might add the political gridlock that paralyzes American politics. In 2012, the United States remains under the state of emergency proclaimed after 9.11, locked in a permanent state of war, and a war on the Bill of Rights, for which there is and can be no exit so long as the “war on terror” remains a national priority.

Notes

- 1) Cf. reports that there are 1,325 people on Johnston Atoll and 453 on Midway. These are not, however, permanent residents. <http://www.statoids.com/uum.html>. Three other minor islands are in the Caribbean.
- 2) For a fuller chronology of U.S. territorial acquisitions, policies in and pertaining to the Pacific Islands, and the complex range of status of the islands today, see Ron Crocombe, *The Pacific Islands and the USA*, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, xxiv–xxvii, 22–26. U.S. interest in, and claims to, many of the islands were long dormant, but with greater interest in the 1920s and 1930s in the run up to war with Japan, the U.S. solidified its control in several cases. In addition to these “minor islands,” in 1872 the U.S. also established a naval coaling station at Pago Pago in what eventually came to be called American Samoa, the only U.S. territory in the southern Pacific.
- 3) Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire. Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 43, puts the figure at 200,000. Bruce Cumings, *Dominion*, 133, estimates the Filipino civilian war dead at between 200,000 and 700,000 in addition to 16,000 to 20,000 insurgents. Literary critic E. San Juan, Jr. places the Filipino toll at 1.4 million. “U.S. Genocide in the Philippines. A Case of Guilt, Shame or Amnesia?” *Selves and Others*, March 22, 2005.
- 4) See Twain’s “To the Person Sitting in Darkness,” perhaps the most powerful of the anti-imperialist polemics in its ability to capture the combination of the brutality of U.S. forces and the idealistic promise to the victims of American power. “We have debauched America’s honor and blackened her face before the world; but each detail was for the best.” Quoted in Cumings, *Dominion*, 135.
- 5) See LaFeber, *The American Age*, 213, for U.S. and European colonial figures.
- 6) Figures in Gavan McCormack and Satoko Norimatsu, “Resistant Islands: Okinawa vs Japan and the United States” (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), Chapter Two. My previous study of “Okinawa and American Security Imperialism” was published in *Re-making Asia: Essays on the American Uses of Power* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 279–304.
- 7) Stated differently, Article 9, the peace provision of the Japanese Constitution, was predicated in practice on the U.S. nuclear umbrella and the stationing of U.S. forces, including nuclear-armed forces on Okinawa, though it would be necessary to conceal these agreements from public scrutiny. Following Okinawa’s 1972 reversion to Japan, with the full complement of U.S. bases intact, certain restrictions took effect based on the Japanese Constitution. The U.S. would then face the most powerful resistance of any of the insular bases. See McCormack and Norimatsu, *Resistant Islands*.
- 8) Department of Defense Base Structure Report FY 2009 Baseline, http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rc=t&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CCUQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2Fpubs%2Fpdfs%2F2009baseline.pdf&ei=bcj3TqS2Dcfr0Gc5uSKAg&usg=AFQjCNE1EdQrmAPdZpR_P_uvZ2uc9lmEmw&sig2=Wj3zpDCwt4r1IE-xihnlAA, DOD 2, 7, 15. Cf. Johnson, *Sorrows of Empire*, 202.
- 9) Johnson’s theory was deeply influenced by his visit to Okinawa in the early 1990s.
- 10) The number of generals and admirals fell briefly following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 only to rise again with the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. The economic crisis of 2008 combined with the fiscal crisis and the American defeat and withdrawal of forces from Iraq in 2011 prompted Defense Secretary Robert Gates to approve a plan in March to reduce the number of generals and admirals from 952 to 850 by 2014. As of December 2011, 27 of these top jobs had reportedly been cut. “Pentagon trimming ranks of generals, admirals,” *Stars and Stripes*, December 28, 2011.
- 11) A particularly striking critique of the bleak performance of the American military over the postwar decades from within the military establishment is provided by Lt. Col. (ret.) Stephen L. Melton, presently of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. “Conceptualizing Victory Anew — Revisiting U.S. Law, Doctrine, and Policy for War and Its Aftermath,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 60:1 (March 1, 2011): 8–14. Melton begins: “As we lick our many wounds and salvage what we can from our costly and confused wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is urgent that we address the intellectual errors that paved the way for our lack of success, lest we risk underperforming in future military endeavors as well.” He ends, after

cataloging major errors including an inability to win the peace and the need to develop doctrine for waging defensive and limited wars: “The American citizenry needs to establish higher expectations for military competence—a new standard that the Pentagon must get the war right before it even begins, not blunder through years of painful and costly heuristic learning as the prospect of victory diminishes.”

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