

Immerman, Richard H.: *Empire for Liberty. A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2010. ISBN: 978-0-691-12762-0; 286 S.

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„Empire for Liberty: A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz“ examines the central question that has animated historical debates for at least the last half century: how to reconcile the inevitable clash between the sincerely held ideal of liberty with the exercise of American power. As a descendent of the William Appleman Williams school, Immerman finds this juxtaposition tragic, but lauds the makers of American policy for their vision and trenchant understanding of American potential. Many historians have tried to identify the ebb and flow of empire and imperialism in American history, uncovering the inevitable tension between idealism and power. Immerman’s study follows in this tradition, coming to an end in „The Dark Side“ of the contemporary „War on Terror.“

Immerman begins with the difficult question of definitions – which too often has become an end in and of itself. The author cuts through the distractions of this question by making it clear that the definition of empire is „dynamic“ (as are the connotations of whether such a label is negative or positive). Moreover, he makes it clear that the goal of the book is not to render moralistic judgment about the American empire, but to demonstrate the continuity of its existence: „America is and always has been an empire.“ (p. 4) Even more difficult to define than „empire“ has been „liberty,“ a value which has animated American policies through the ages but which has been so broadly defined „that it all but loses its meaning.“ (p. 5) Nevertheless, Americans throughout their history have embraced the self-image that they are champions of liberty and this devotion, argues Immerman, has sometimes weakened their empire: „That Americans do genuinely value liberty as an ideal deters them from imposing, or exercising, the degree of political control that

they could have.“ (p. 14)

The six portraits which illustrate the embrace of empire and liberty throughout American history are well-chosen. The organization of the book is chronological, and Immerman takes care to link thematically each chapter and the evolution of policy and ideology. The story begins with Benjamin Franklin who moves from a strong champion of the American colonies as a vital part of the British Empire in the 1760s to a patriotic believer in the new American empire by the 1780s, destined to grow geographically across the continent. Even if Franklin had been the original visionary of the American empire, Immerman describes how John Quincy Adams was really its creator. The legacy of Adams’ unparalleled success as secretary of state was complicated, Immerman writes, by his devotion to liberty. The legacy of his post-presidential years in congress became his opposition to the spread of slavery which threatened to corrupt the Empire for Liberty that stretched across the continent by the 1840s.

Four decades later, the secretary of state who inherited John Quincy Adams’ goal to spread the American Empire for Liberty also redefined the meaning and means of empire building. William Henry Seward turned away from the model of military conquest and the focus on landed expansion to embrace the vision of a commercial empire. Immerman picks up his story with Henry Cabot Lodge whose tenure in congress coincided with the dramatic expansion and triumph of Seward’s commercial empire as well as the land acquisitions which led many American policymakers to enthusiastically embrace the label of imperialist. The Lodge who emerges from these pages agreed with his predecessors that the United States was an Empire for Liberty, but he avoided this term and instead celebrated a „romantic belief in America’s destiny.“ (p. 137) Immerman details the titanic struggle between Lodge and Woodrow Wilson, concluding that although both believed deeply in the greatness of the U.S., they had different definitions of that status and by the mid 1920s, „Neither man’s vision of empire reached fruition.“ (p. 162)

The fifth figure whom Immerman has chosen embodied the tension between the visions

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of Wilson and Lodge. John Foster Dulles began his career following in the footsteps of Wilson, but, Immerman argues, reconceptualizes his understanding of international affairs and American goals in the late 1930s. The search for security becomes his top priority, in contrast to policymakers of a century before. Although Dulles helped to construct an American empire in opposition to what he saw as the oppressive Soviet one, the end result was a Cold War construction which often sacrificed liberty in the name of security.

The final policymaker of the book embraces morality in a way unlike that of any predecessors. In an effort to combat the evil that existed in the world, Paul Wolfowitz believed that the American Empire for Liberty could redeem the rest of the world by spreading its righteousness through military force. The result: the Global War on Terror.

The strengths of this book are many, its sweep ambitious, and its arguments compelling. There is little with which to quibble. The portrait of Woodrow Wilson might be drawn in such a way as to highlight his differences with Lodge. Wilson's idealism was, after all, complicated by his willingness to exercise American military power, unilaterally if need be, and his vision of an American Empire for Liberty was not synonymous with the League of Nations, as Immerman writes. In the postscript, Immerman's conclusion that „Rhetoric trumped reality“ (p. 233) seems inconsistent with his nuanced portraits of statesmen who clearly had their own versions of the realities of American empire; as much recent scholarship argues, rhetoric and reality are not necessarily oppositional categories. Finally, Immerman's conclusion that the shock of the „War on Terror“ and its abuses has finally led Americans to recognize that there is a tension between empire and liberty might be overly optimistic. As the war in Afghanistan begins its second decade, it is too early to predict that „Americans may finally have lost their appetite for expansion – and empire.“ (p. 236). Even if American imperialism were to disappear tomorrow, understanding its evolution over time and the people who shaped it is essential to our knowledge of United States and world history in the past 250 years. There is no better place to

gain this understanding than in Richard Immerman's insightful study.

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