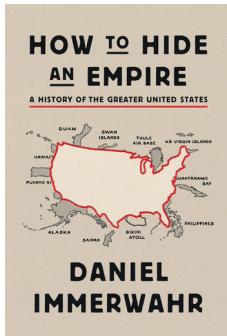




# HOW TO HIDE AN EMPIRE A SHORT HISTORY OF THE GREATER UNITED STATES

by Daniel Immerwahr  
(A Book Review)



“Is the United States an empire?” is a persistent question, but it’s not the only one Daniel Immerwahr’s book *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States* (2019) concerns itself with. Its driving force is the titular question: How did the US *hide* their empire? “This book’s main contribution is not archival, bringing to light some never-before-seen document,” Immerwahr

cautions his reader, “it’s perspectival, seeing a familiar history differently” (16). The book is a history of American imperialism and the Greater United States from a strongly overseas perspective: Immerwahr’s archival eye is fixed on the American “territories,” mainly, but not exclusively, Guam, the Philippines, the Guano Islands, and Puerto Rico—an American absence summarized in the title to chapter fifteen: “Nobody Knows in America, Puerto Rico’s in America.” Immerwahr centers his analysis around the act of *hiding*, but he devotes as much attention to *vanishing* as a closely related idea. In order to hide things, they must vanish. Hiding things too well means forgetting where they are and, eventually, forgetting we own them. This, Immerwahr argues, is the case with the US overseas territories. As the idea of a nation grew in prominence, “the colonies

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seemed more distant and nebulous, literally vanishing from maps and atlases" (112).

So how does one hide an empire? You hide the books, for example, making research on the overseas territory hard and frustrating. "The libraries contain literally thousands of books about US overseas territory," Immerwahr writes, but they have been "sidelined—filed, so to speak, on the wrong shelves" (15). Or you do not write about empire at all. In *The New York Times* archives, coverage on Poland, Albania, and Brazil is more extensive than on the Philippines. With its 639 articles, India elicited more interest than Alaska, Hawai'i, and Guam combined (cumulatively 13 articles, of which 0 on Guam). In Margaret Mead's trailblazing book *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), not once are Samoans acknowledged as US nationals. In order to hide imperial history, one hides the names of colonial politicians, activists, and revolutionaries from textbooks and histories of the US, where they are ignored and, as a consequence, forgotten. This is a habit Immerwahr corrects by speaking at length about key political figures in the American territories, their political struggles as well as their personal trajectories. Pedro Albizu Campos, Emilio Aguinaldo, and Manuel Quezon are names that the reader encounters with steady recurrence. Cultural indifference ran parallel to political indifference, as colonial policy was enveloped in a "blurry haze" (156). Territories were left without political representation, even for several months, as in the case of Alaska. The first governor of Puerto Rico spoke no Spanish, and interviews he released suggest he did not know where the island was. Upon his appointment, Ernest Gruening—the head of the Division of Territories and Island Possessions, an office in charge of Puerto Rico, Alaska, Hawai'i, the US Virgin Islands, the Philippines, and the major guano islands—had spent only one day in Puerto Rico.

Hidden empires do not appear on maps either. Such is the case with Indian Country, America's *colony within*, and its shrinking borders. From a designated Native settlement area supposed to cover 46% of US territory in the 1830s, to be governed by a Native confederacy, granted a delegate in Congress, and aspiring to statehood, Indian Country shrank to present day Oklahoma by 1879, and then disappeared, eroded by relentless white incursions and land

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grabbing. Even in its early days, “Indian Country rarely appeared on maps” and it always had “something indistinct about it” (40), a tenuous and ambiguous legal status that lay the foundations for its undoing.

You hide an empire by giving it different names, calling it “peacekeeping,” “globalization,” “dollar diplomacy,” or you meddle the language of empire beyond recognition, merging vocabularies of belonging and foreignness. A Supreme Court Justice stated that Puerto Rico was “foreign to the United States in a domestic sense”: The island, he explains, was “merely [...] a possession” (qtd. in Immerwahr 85). The idea of a country being “foreign [...] in a domestic sense” not only shows that there are “different ‘senses’ of ‘the United States’” (85) but also that these different senses can be strikingly contradictory. In most cases, vocabularies of belonging or exclusion were bestowed according to race. While states filled with white settlers were eligible for “incorporation” and could aspire to statehood, the others, the “unincorporated” territories, the territories inhabited by large non-white majorities like Mexico, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Alaska, Puerto Rico, or the Philippines, lingered as “disembodied shade[s], in an intermediate state of ambiguous existence” (87), being in the country but also not truly part of it. After voting in favor of a new constitution and a new government, Puerto Rico’s relation to the US was even more confusing. Puerto Rico became an “Estado Libre Asociado,” but it was neither free nor a state. It was a “somewhat shapeless” entity (Irene Vilar qtd. in Immerwahr 257) where empire has been brushed under the rug.

How else do you hide an empire? By incorporating lands and not people. It was unclear whether the fourteenth amendment, granting citizenship on the ground of one’s birth in the United States, applied to territories which belonged to the US but were not part of it. Were these people Americans? Were they subjects or citizens? Could they become presidents of the United States? Although former Spanish colonies were more densely populated than the US mainland, their populations were largely unacknowledged. When not invisible, their status fell within legal cracks that Immerwahr is very skilled at identifying. The book contains numerous examples of resolved and unresolved manifestations

of the same questions: “Is this an American?”, involving presidential nominees John McCain, born in the Panama Canal area, or Barack Obama, alongside the Navassa rioters who revolted against their overseers or the Filipinos trapped on the *USS Indiana*, sailing to San Francisco.

*How to Hide and Empire* sees a familiar history differently in more ways than one. Alternative cartographies are crucial to Immerwahr’s argument and give the book its characteristic visual quality and a further layer of memorability. For Immerwahr, it is imperative to see beyond the logo map and visualize the US differently, replacing the logo map’s “contiguous blob” (21) with a shockingly fragmented, scattered shape many mainland Americans may not recognize. First of all, Immerwahr insists that, until recently, the country has been in constant metamorphosis—not a monolith but a “pointillist empire,” which gives the second half of the book its title. The re-visualization of the US map expands the borders of the country’s history to include overseas territory, but also unveils the unsurprising but silenced truth that “it was in the territories that the government’s willingness to violate the civil liberties of its own subjects was on the fullest display” (179). Not only maps but also flags are subjected to Immerwahr’s re-visualizations. After the Second World War, for example, citizens bombarded the government with unsolicited flag designs and unlikely stars and stripes rearrangements. Many of them included empty space to allow for the addition of more stars. This hopeful oversharing signalled that American citizens did perceive the empire as fluid, in constant evolution, a mutable organism breathing in and out, expanding and contracting.

The image of the pointillist empire dominates part two, where Immerwahr goes beyond geopolitical expansion to reflect on other imperial forms. In a chapter called “Synthetica,” for example, he reconstructs the history of today’s disproportionate plastic consumption and its roots in American imperialism. “Synthetica” is a prophetic map published by *Fortune* magazine in 1940: it imagined “a new continent of plastics” (271) and eerily foreshadowed today’s Garbage Patches or “plastic islands,” accumulations of plastic debris growing in the oceans. Immerwahr touches upon the spread of English as a form of American imperialism

that created, as he provocatively puts it, “a world of Squantos,” the English-speaking Native who assisted the Pilgrim fathers with survival in the new world: “A world full of people ready and able to assist English speakers, wherever they may roam. A world almost designed for the convenience of the United States” (318). Then, Immerwahr moves the empire into more unusual realms: chemistry, standardization (why do measuring systems vary from country to country?), and the imperial fantasy of world domination from a tropical island – from Napoleon’s Elba to James Bond. In the end, one cannot begin to understand “the birth control pill, chemotherapy, plastic, Godzilla, the Beatles, *Little House on the Prairie*, Iran-Contra, the transistor radio, the name America itself” (400) without an understanding of US imperial history.

Immerwahr shows how empire has been a shadow discourse hidden in the folds of not only history but also of language. His prose is immensely enjoyable, intelligently metaphorical, gracefully irreverent. His depiction of Washington on a “landlord’s vengeance mission” is a pure delight (28). In an exhilarating rendition of Roosevelt’s life, the man is “a Harvard student, cowboy, policeman, war hero, and president, as well as an African explorer—virtually the entire list of boyhood fantasies, minus astronaut” (68). *How to Hide an Empire* is not only a work of rigor and density but also a labor of love wherein people—their everyday lives, their hesitations—and other things often lost to history, find representation. The story of the author’s distant relation, the German chemist Clara Immerwahr, reminds the reader that history can be written with empathy, and that the people that signed treaties, started wars, shot presidents and got shot, were someone’s children, parents, ancestors. Immerwahr writes irony and compassion into history, in a troubling read that is also a joyous one, which gifted this reader a few sonorous laughs in public.

WORKS CITED

- Immerwahr, Daniel. *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019.