

UnTextbooked

A history podcast for the future.

Transcript: [Is there an American Empire?](#)

Interviewer:	Elliot Smith
Guest	Dr. Daniel Immerwahr
Season - Episode	2 - 5
Released (YYYY-MM-DD)	2021-11-01

Please Note: Transcript generated by artificial intelligence and may contain inaccuracies.

Gabe Hostin 0:05

Most of history is marked by the rise and fall of empires. You might remember learning about the Ottoman Empire, the Roman Empire, the Mongol Empire, etc. They all had different tactics to reach. But the common feature is that they were powerful nations that took over the places. Part of the American origin story is that our country started out as a British colony. And after a few 100 years in a Revolutionary War, American colonists were free from the British Empire. But our country was quickly expanding something resembling an empire of its own. The original 13 colonies grew and acquire territories not just nearby, but across the world. And today, there are dots all over the globe that are technically part of the US, but not entirely so.

Elliot Smith 0:48

So while Puerto Rico, American Samoa the US Virgin Islands, there are some former US territories also so we look at the Philippines, and then Hawaii and Alaska. And then there's also all the US military bases. We have over 800 military bases. Most countries have zero so of course all of those bases constitute territory.

Gabe Hostin 1:15

On textbook producer Elliot Smith realize that he didn't actually know much about these places.

Elliot Smith 1:20

We think of the US as this country between you know, New York and Florida on the East Coast and that we have California on the West Coast. That's kind of our country. I think it's easy to look at the territory as kind of as these areas on the map, but there's also the people there, you

Note: Transcript generated by artificial intelligence. May contain errors.

know, all these places are most of the places have people who've lived there for generations who made their lives there. And that adds another consideration another dimension to it.

Gabe Hostin 1:49

Elliott wants to understand the reasons why country like the United States would want to spread so far across the globe, and why their ambition changed dramatically in the 20th century. So he read how to hide an empire a history of the great United States by Dr. Daniel Immerwahr

Elliot Smith 2:05

You know he describes the thing he calls it the pointillist empire, where essentially we used to have all these territories but because developments and globalization and new technologies, we don't really need that same physical footprint. So we've given up a lot of that initial territory, especially after World War Two, and we've just kept little spaces, you know, maybe military basis, things like that. But we're still an empire. We just don't have the same territories.

Gabe Hostin 2:33

After the break, Elliot Smith and Dr. Daniel Immerwahr talk about why most Americans don't seem to know much about US territories and where the distinction between a nation and Empire lies. I'm Kim Hostin and you're listening to UnTextbooked.

Elliot Smith 2:52

UnTextbooked. Want to start by asking you about something you bring up at the beginning of the book. How do you draw a distinction between influence and Empire? In other words, like we have US influence maybe economically, culturally, that's impacting people all over the world. But then empires a little different. How do you like as a historian as a scholar, say, Okay, this is more than influence. This is actually empire.

Dr. Daniel Immerwahr 3:27

Yeah, so the word Empire is a tricky one. It's tricky one for two reasons. One reason is that nobody totally agrees on what it means, you know, is a really powerful country that has a tendency to be able to push its neighbors around. Is that an empire? Is that just a bully? Or is that just a leader? So you can see that there's some you know, there's no established definition that would immediately resolve this issue to everyone's satisfaction. The other complication is that the word Empire often functions as a pejorative as an insult. So if you like the United States, you are more likely to say it's a leader. Or perhaps if you want a technical and kind of neutral term, a hegemonic but if you disapprove of the United States and its place in the world, you're far more likely to call it an empire, because Empire is a kind of dirty word. It's an insult and to say that the United States is an empire is to say there's something deeply wrong about the kind of power that the United States has in the world today. So the one thing that most almost everyone agrees on is that a country with colonies is an empire. The United States still has five inhabited territories, and let's just say them out loud because they're often forgotten from the perspective of the mainland, the US Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, American Samoa,

Note: Transcript generated by artificial intelligence. May contain errors.

Guam, and the CNMI, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. But there's a sense and a pervasive sense that the real United States is the part that is the contiguous blob, with oceans on either side, Canada, North Mexico to the south. And in fact, you often can find the United States referred to as sort of in logo and advertisements. Just with that with that shape. And there's still a sense that, you know, the important part of the country is that is that blob is that contiguous shape and the other stuff is kind of less important, right or details are trivial. And I think that that feeling that there's a part of the country that matters and a part that's sort of on the blurry periphery and can safely be ignored. That's a that's a feeling that is has been a really shaping force in US history. And it's actually quite hard to get a full grasp on US history. If you're not attentive to all those, call them Empire call or whatever you want to call them. Sort of overseas extensions of the United States.

Elliot Smith 5:44

Yeah, so we have this time when the country was continuing to expand. You describe in the book how we gained territories in the Spanish American War, you know, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, but there were other times where the US made the decision not to take the territories in places like Southern Mexico and some other Central and South American countries. Why did we take some places and not the other was there this like, big kind of master plan we were going after? Was it more by chance? What went into that?

Unknown Speaker 6:14

There's no master plan, but it's also not by chance. And the reason is that there have been a prevailing logic, a logic that keeps coming up again and again, when there are questions about what the shape of the United States should be. And they start with the Louisiana Purchase and that logic has to do with the racial character of the United States. Whenever the United States expands, and that was generally 19th century felt to be a good thing. A country that is larger is more powerful, more prosperous, more populous, all those things that people liked. When a country expands, it also incorporates new people. And if a country expands too quickly or too much, or into two populous areas, then it might incorporate a lot of new people and new people who might demographically swamp the existing population. And, you know, the United States was not the racial utopias. It is today, in the early 19th century. And so there was a clear sense by the leaders of the country that certain kinds of people living in North America and living in the Caribbean, made Americans black people the sense of Africans, even sort of people who were to French or Spanish, were going to be difficult to assimilate and were kind of threat to the country so that the logic was you, you carefully curate where the borders go, so that you don't incorporate too many non white people too quickly. And a really great example of this is the war between the United States and Mexico. So the United States fight towards Mexico in the 1840s occupies Mexico City. And is so militarily dominant at the end of that, that it basically has a discretion of how much of a bite of Mexico does it want to take how much of Mexico is going to annex and turn into part of the United States? And there are people in the government who you know, look at Mexico and think we should take it all. So there's this all Mexico contingent militarily? That's possible. I mean, you'd have to deal with a rebellious population, but it wouldn't

Note: Transcript generated by artificial intelligence. May contain errors.

be the first time the United States dealt with one of those. But the ultimately what prevents leaders of the United States from chomping on all of Mexico and instead encourages them just to take the northern part of Mexico the part that, you know, we now think of as Arizona, New Mexico, California, is that that northern frontier of Mexico is more thinly populated. And this southern Mexico as a lot of people, there's a lot of Mexicans in it. And it was a newspaper, the voice of logic like this. We drew the border so we could take as much of Mexico with as few Mexicans as possible. And that's often the question in the United States is how can the United States territorial expand, without taking too many non white people without sacrificing the white lead character of the country? That's the dominant logic in the 19th century.

Elliot Smith 8:55

And in the cases where we did take territories, especially with majority non white populations, they kind of have this status as a territory. What does that really mean? Because it's kind of a little bit vague. What is the territory?

Unknown Speaker 9:14

You know? A territory is part of the United States is not a state and territories are provided for in the Constitution. But territories are vaguely defined in the Constitution. There's an enormous amount of fretting about, you know, division of power and the three branches in the Constitution. And then there's just one clause that says the territories will be governed by Congress. So they're already a kind of nebulous zone. And and you refer to this moment, which we've already talked about in 1898 when the United States seizes a bunch of territories so the United States has suddenly acquired as a result of a war with Spain. A number of overseas territories and in case of the Philippines are a very populous overseas territory. So then there's this sort of constitutional question of what are these territories? Are they the same kind of territory as Kansas and Idaho or are they fundamentally different kinds of places and they rule that the the territories that have been seized from Spain so Guam, Puerto Rico in the Philippines is where the bulk of the overseas population lives, that they are not really part of the United States? They're they're claimed by the United States but they're not part of the United States. One of the judges voices the logic this way so okay, this the Constitution is the supreme law of the land, but these territories aren't really part of the land. They're not they're not really part of the country. And the reason that the Supreme Court is doing this, I mean, first of all, the court is very clear that about why this is because these places have quote unquote, alien races in them. But the reason this is all happening is that now that the United States has taken all these territories, there's a huge public debate about whether they're going to be included in the country and on what terms they'll be included. And these Supreme Court cases are weights are a way to include them, but not include them in a way that past territories have been included, not include them with the sense that they're on the road to statehood in some ways, what these cases do is they carve out room within the Constitution and legal order of the United States for Empire.

Elliot Smith 11:12

So Pearl Harbor is kind of this turning point in your book. And you you tell this interesting story about the speech that FDR gives his famous day that will live in infamy speech about the events at Pearl Harbor. And he makes one omission about the territories and I was wondering if you could share that story.

Unknown Speaker 11:34

Sure. Yeah. So I that Pearl Harbor event is a huge deal in US history. It's it's, you know, it's in all the textbooks and I checked us about 350 books about Pearl Harbor in the Library of Congress. This is you know, the date that will live in infamy, as FDR famously called it when the United States is attacked by surprise by Japan and the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor which is a naval base and in Hawaii, the only time US oil was ever struck is in this, you know, infamous moment in Pearl Harbor. Okay, it turns out that a lot of that is not correct. And it's not even like a secret not correct, like, you know, pretty publicly available, not correct. So what happens on the day of Pearl Harbor, what the Japanese are trying to do is to sort of Sweep the leg and just all at once take all of the Allied colonial holdings in the Pacific out you know, at the same time, so that they don't have to fight them one by one and probably lose those those battles. If they had to do that. It's not just that the Japanese bomb that one place Pearl Harbor, in fact, the Japanese do a kind of empire wide attack on the United States, a specific Empire, and they attack Guam and they attack Wake Island and they attack the Philippines. And all of this is happening within a matter of hours. So they're, you know, the reports are coming into the White House about all these places that have been attacked, and it's kind of hard to figure out even how to make sense of it, how to narrate it. How do you what name do you give to this event? The Imperial attack by Japan the attack on Guam and the Philippines, you know, what do you even call it? FDR, initially, in his speech, had said that the two main really important targets are the Philippines and Hawaii and then you can see him rethinking. And we have the draft of his speech, the original version, and then his pencil editing and what you can see him doing is crossing out references to the Philippines. Why? I mean, it's like what's going on? I mean, the Philippines didn't get attacked. So why not refer to the Philippines and my my strong guess is that FDR is doing some frantic calculation in his mind and he's thinking, Okay, I have to give a speech where I have to say to the country, we've been attacked, and by we I mean the United States, the United States has been attacked by the Empire of Japan. And and in order for this to be the cause of war, people have to feel my audience have to feel like they have been attacked. Do people in Kansas do people in Massachusetts do people in Florida feel like they've been attacked? If the Philippines has been attacked? I'm not so sure. I suspect FDR was wondering. And in fact, we have all these opinion polls from around the time suggesting that people in the US mainland weren't really interested in seeing the US military come to the defense of the Philippines, despite the fact that the Philippines is part of the United States. Hawaii had a significantly larger white population. And I think that was the basis on which FDR thought, Okay, I can't really sell the Philippines as part of the United States. Seems too foreign to too many people. But I could maybe sell Hawaii. So let's just stick with Hawaii. Let's work with Hawaii. And you know, I have this account of a reporter who's in Manila at the time in the Philippines and he's listening to the speech on the airwaves. He's thinking, What the hell is this? What like we're

Note: Transcript generated by artificial intelligence. May contain errors.

being attacked right now. There are planes flying overhead right now. Our president on the radio is just doddering on about how bad it is in Hawaii. Does he not know and the answer is of course he knew. He just didn't think he should talk about it because the Philippines seem to Brown in order to get people in his audience excited about the war.

Elliot Smith 15:01

So World War Two is also this big turning point, because after the end of the war, the US controls all of this territories, but then they start giving it up. How do we tell if this is still an empire because we did give up control of a lot of places where, you know, a lot of citizens were so if there's less people, is it still an empire? How does that How do you make that distinction?

Unknown Speaker 15:28

Yeah, so right at the end of the war, the United States has occupied so much territory so it's occupying Japan and occupying part of Germany and Austria and an occupied part of Italy. And, you know, US troops are all over the map. And so what the United States does after World War Two after 1945 is rather than trying to extend its power, by the way the British had by just claiming as much you know, ground as possible. It rather extends his power by by constructing what I call a pointillist empire, consisting mainly of of islands and military bases that are carved out of other countries over which the United States will you know, not maybe not even claim sovereignty, maybe just lease the places. And so you see this kind of shift in the spatial logic of US power where it's no longer about, you know, claiming half of Mexico or we're taking the Philippines, but rather it's about just putting a lot of military bases all over the planet, which is what the United States has today. They're about we think 800 bases that the United States hasn't territories in foreign countries today. And so then you have this question, well, what about those bases? What about that pointless empire? Does that make the United States an empire? And, you know, you could argue, you could argue both ways, right? You could say, well, it's not really doing traditional colonies. It's it looks different from you. Know, these sort of classic empires of old. Or you could say, No, this is just what Empire looks like today. It looks like military bases. It looks like all these little dots spread out over the planet. Empire has taken on a new form because of you know, shifts in our politics and new technological possibilities, but it's still empire. And I'll just say there's a lot of people who live near those military bases. So in foreign countries that are kind of in the shadow of military bases, they often use that term. They often say that this is a form of Empire.

Elliot Smith 17:17

It does seem like in the US that we like to use the term superpower to describe us. It's kind of like, I guess, guess what, some of that global reach, but it also doesn't really include those territories that physical land you describe.

Unknown Speaker 17:32

Yeah. To describe the place of the United States in the world today as a superpower is to acknowledge first of all, that it's not just another country. Right, that it has an outsize influence

Note: Transcript generated by artificial intelligence. May contain errors.

would be the nicest way to put it. But, but is in some ways to suggest that, you know, I mean, the metaphor might be something like they're all these countries, you know, they have different amounts of strength. Some of them are really strong and some of them are quite weak and the United States is the strongest of all, it is a superpower. And, and I think that's probably the kind of thing that people imagine when they use that term. And it doesn't really deal with another facet of the United States global power, which is that it's it's not just a superpower. It's a super presence, in that the United States has land that it has some control over all over the planet. And if you think that the difference between the United States and you know, a country like Belgium, is just that the United States, you know, has a bigger military and a bigger economy. You're missing a fact that the United States also has military bases all over Western Europe. And that's a fact that, you know, is hard to miss from the perspective of Europe. But it's quite it's weirdly easy for people in the United States to not think too hard about.

Elliot Smith 18:45

I guess there's also this kind of irony, and that the US got its independence from the British Empire, and that we were in some ways a colony and now we went on to to have colonies. So in our in our national narrative, does that play a role into why the US Empire might be hidden like that?

Unknown Speaker 19:05

I think it does. There's a lot of resistance to thinking of the United States as an empire at least at a very high political level. I mean, you can almost every president since 1898, has made a speech a public speech, saying some version of the United States isn't an empire doesn't cover territory. And I think you're right that part of that has to do with the national identity in the United States as being a colony that rejected empire that rebelled from the British Empire that stands for freedom, not subjugation and subjugation meaning being subjected to the rule of another. And yet the United States quite clearly, quite obviously, has its own empire has its own overseas empire and and has had an overseas Empire for the bulk of its history. And so I think one one way of resolving that tension, or that, you know, it's like the collision between those those two, you know, facts is just to not really talk about the overseas parts of the United States.

Elliot Smith 20:01

Professor Daniel Immerwahr is the author of How to hide an empire a history of the greater United States, Professor Immerwahr Where can people find more about your work?

Unknown Speaker 20:12

Sure, the book that I wrote how to hide an empire, you can buy it in a bookstore. It's also available on audiobook and the narrator won the award for narrating it. So if you're that kind of person, you won't get to see my maps that I made. But otherwise, you can listen to it on audiobook and then if you just Google my name, I have a website where I have linked to all my other readings.

Note: Transcript generated by artificial intelligence. May contain errors.

Gabe Hostin 20:45

Dr. Daniel Immerwahr is professor of global history at Northwestern University. He's the author of *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*. Elliott Smith is a high school senior. Our website is untextbooked.org and we're on social media UnTextbooked. Our music is by Silas Bowen and Coleman Hamilton. UnTextbooked A by Bethany Denton and Jeff Emtman. Fernanda rain is our executive producer. UnTextbooked is a project of Got history, an organization that believes in a world where all young people can advance civic well being for themselves, society and the planet.