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Review of *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* By Walter Nugent

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BOOK REVIEWS

Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion. By Walter Nugent. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. xvii + 387 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 cloth, \$17.00 paper.

Two decades ago, “new western historians,” led by Patricia Nelson Limerick in *Legacy of Conquest*, attempted to banish any mention of Frederick Jackson Turner and his frontier thesis. Although the Turner thesis was ethnocentric and its grounding of democracy in a frontier experience flawed in various ways, a nagging question remained: did the fact that America had a frontier matter at all?

In *Habits of Empire*, Walter Nugent, past president of the Western History Association, thinks the frontier mattered a great deal. This is not because it created democracy, but because it “taught Americans a twisted ideology: that they should expand the area of civilization and shrink the area of savagery.” “The significance of the frontier in American history,” Nugent suggests, “may well be that it instilled in Americans bad habits of building empires.”

Nugent’s book presents an impressive case for the continuity of such habits over the course of U.S. history. Beginning with the 1783 Treaty of Paris and including chapters on the acquisition of Louisiana, Florida, Texas, Oregon, California, and New Mexico, Alaska, and various Pacific and Caribbean territories, Nugent reveals common patterns in the process by which the United States pieced together its continental and overseas empires through 1934 (he also briefly discusses developments

from the Cold War to the 2003 Iraq invasion). Nugent is aware of differences between what he refers to as Empire I (the lower forty-eight in which settlement was the main priority) and Empire II (noncontiguous territorial acquisitions in which commerce was dominant). Still, he makes a persuasive case for the unity of these acquisitions in an “underlying proclivity toward empire” grounded in a set of assumptions about manifest destiny, mission, white supremacy, and exceptionalism, assumptions that Nugent repeatedly interrogates.

In one of the book’s many astute observations, Nugent suggests that although American empire-building itself was hardly exceptional, Americans were exceptional in thinking that what they were doing *was* exceptional. Unlike European powers, who frankly acknowledged empire building as realpolitik, “Americans truly believed that their providential mission and destiny permitted, even demanded, that they behave imperialistically.” Although this perhaps understates the extent to which Europeans genuinely believed in a civilizing mission as part of their justification for imperialism, it helps us understand why Americans have seldom acknowledged themselves as imperialists, even though, to use William Appleman Williams’s phrase, empire has been for them “a way of life.” Walter Nugent’s *Habits of Empire* forcefully asks Americans to reckon with a long imperial history.

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