

How to Hide an Empire

by Daniel Immerwahr · Language: EN

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Overview

How to Hide an Empire by Daniel Immerwahr fundamentally redefines the understanding of American history by challenging the popular image of the United States as a nation confined to its contiguous 48 states. Immerwahr argues that the U.S. has always been, and continues to be, an empire, but one that has masterfully obscured its territorial possessions and colonial history from its own citizens. He introduces the concept of a "pointillist empire," describing how the U.S. controls numerous scattered islands and territories—such as Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines (historically), American Samoa, and the U.S. Virgin Islands—whose inhabitants often lack full citizenship rights and political representation. This "Greater United States" remains largely invisible to mainland Americans, fostering a collective amnesia about its imperial past and present.

The book meticulously traces the evolution of this hidden empire from its late 19th-century acquisitions through to the present day. Immerwahr reveals how these territories served crucial strategic, economic, and military purposes, often at significant human cost to their indigenous populations. He highlights the paradox of a nation founded on anti-colonial principles becoming a major colonial power itself, and how this contradiction was managed through legal fictions and cultural narratives that prioritized the "map of the 48 states" as the true America. By bringing these forgotten histories to light, Immerwahr compels readers to reconsider American identity, its global role, and the ongoing implications for the millions living under U.S. sovereignty without full equality, making a powerful case for a more honest and complete understanding of the nation's past and present.

Key Takeaways

- The United States has historically been, and remains, an empire with numerous overseas territories, not just the contiguous 48 states.
- Many U.S. territories, such as Puerto Rico and Guam, are inhabited by millions who lack full citizenship rights and political representation.
- The concept of a "pointillist empire" describes how the U.S. maintains control over scattered, often forgotten, non-contiguous territories.
- The U.S. has actively fostered a narrative that obscures its imperial history, leading to widespread ignorance about its territorial possessions.

- Understanding the history of U.S. territories is crucial for a complete and honest understanding of American identity and its global impact.
- The strategic importance of these territories, particularly for military bases and economic resources, has been a consistent driver of U.S. foreign policy.
- The legacy of U.S. colonialism continues to impact the political, economic, and social conditions of its territorial populations today.

Chapter Summaries

Introduction: The Greater United States

Immerwahr introduces the concept of the "Greater United States," arguing that the familiar contiguous 48 states represent only a fraction of the nation's true territorial extent. He highlights the historical and ongoing invisibility of U.S. overseas territories, such as Puerto Rico and Guam, and sets the stage for exploring how this "pointillist empire" was acquired, maintained, and largely forgotten by mainland Americans.

Part I: The Age of Discovery

This section details the late 19th and early 20th-century expansion of the United States beyond its continental borders. It covers the acquisition of territories like the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam following the Spanish-American War, illustrating the U.S.'s rapid transformation into an imperial power. Immerwahr examines the motivations behind this expansion and the initial legal and political challenges it presented.

The Insular Cases

Immerwahr delves into the landmark Supreme Court decisions known as the Insular Cases, which established a legal framework for governing newly acquired territories. These rulings created a distinction between "incorporated" and "unincorporated" territories, allowing the U.S. to rule over populations without extending full constitutional rights or the promise of statehood, thus formalizing a colonial relationship.

The American Way of War

This chapter explores how U.S. territories became indispensable for projecting military power globally. Immerwahr details their strategic importance as coaling stations, naval bases, and later, airfields, enabling the U.S. to become a dominant force in the Pacific and Caribbean. He shows how military needs often dictated the treatment and development of these lands.

The Global New Deal

Immerwahr examines how New Deal-era policies and development projects extended to U.S. territories, often with mixed results. While some infrastructure and social programs were implemented, they frequently served U.S. strategic interests more than the genuine needs of

local populations, reinforcing colonial dependencies rather than fostering true self-sufficiency.

The American Way of Life

This section explores the cultural and economic integration of territories into the broader American sphere, often through the spread of consumer goods, media, and educational systems. Immerwahr shows how this cultural influence simultaneously offered opportunities and eroded indigenous cultures, creating complex identities among territorial residents.

The American Way of Science

Immerwahr reveals how U.S. territories served as crucial sites for scientific experimentation, particularly during the Cold War. He details the use of islands for atomic bomb testing, environmental research, and other scientific endeavors, often without adequate consideration for the health and safety of local populations or the ecological impact.

The American Way of Data

This chapter explores the role of U.S. territories in the development of global communication infrastructure. Immerwahr details how islands became vital nodes for undersea cables, radio stations, and satellite dishes, facilitating the flow of information and solidifying American technological and economic dominance in the digital age.

The American Way of Work

Immerwahr examines the economic exploitation of labor and resources within U.S. territories. He discusses how industries like sugar, pineapple, and later manufacturing and tourism, relied on cheap labor and specific legal statuses, often leading to economic dependency and limited opportunities for local populations.

The American Way of Protest

This chapter highlights the various forms of resistance and movements for self-determination that emerged within U.S. territories. Immerwahr chronicles the struggles of indigenous populations and colonial subjects to gain greater autonomy, full citizenship, or independence, showcasing their enduring fight against imperial rule.

Conclusion: The American Way of Forgetting

Immerwahr concludes by reiterating the persistent invisibility of the U.S. empire to most mainland Americans. He argues that this historical amnesia has profound implications for understanding American identity, its global responsibilities, and the ongoing struggles of millions living in U.S. territories without full equality or recognition.

Themes

- US Imperialism

- Forgotten Territories
- Colonial History
- National Identity
- Legal Fictions
- Military Strategy

Notable Quotes

- "The United States is not just the fifty states. It is also a collection of islands, a 'Greater United States' that includes Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands." — From the introduction, establishing the book's core premise about the true territorial extent of the U.S.
- "The map of the forty-eight states is a powerful fiction." — Discussing how the popular mental map of the U.S. obscures its imperial reality and overseas territories.
- "The American empire is not a contiguous landmass, but a pointillist one—a scattering of dots across the globe." — Explaining the unique nature of U.S. imperialism, characterized by dispersed, non-contiguous territories.
- "To be an American, it turns out, is to be a citizen of a country that has always been an empire, but has learned to hide it." — A concluding thought on the implications of the hidden empire for American identity and self-perception.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is *How to Hide an Empire* about?

It explores the hidden history of the United States as an empire, focusing on its overseas territories like Puerto Rico and Guam. Immerwahr argues that the U.S. has deliberately obscured its colonial past and present, leading to a widespread ignorance about millions of people living under U.S. sovereignty without full rights.

Is *How to Hide an Empire* worth reading?

Yes, it is highly recommended for anyone interested in American history, colonialism, and international relations. Immerwahr offers a meticulously researched and compelling argument that challenges conventional understandings of U.S. identity and power. It's an eye-opening account that reshapes perspectives.

How does *How to Hide an Empire* end?

Spoiler: The book concludes by emphasizing the ongoing invisibility of the U.S. empire and its profound implications. Immerwahr argues that this historical amnesia prevents a full understanding of American identity and perpetuates the unequal status of millions in U.S.

territories. He calls for a reckoning with this hidden history.

Who should read How to Hide an Empire?

This book is ideal for students of American history, political science, and postcolonial studies, as well as general readers interested in a more complete and nuanced understanding of the United States. Anyone curious about the origins of U.S. global power and its territorial legacy will find it insightful.

How long does it take to read How to Hide an Empire?

The book is approximately 500 pages long. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it would take roughly 12-15 hours to read the entire book, depending on individual reading pace and engagement with the detailed historical accounts.