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American Neo-Imperialism Isn't Really News

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January 2026

Author's note: This is the first in a series about American history and contemporary events that will unfold through February 2026. It will also be part of a February 19 JES presentation billed as a story about Venezuela, but which will create part of a ["tapestry,"](#) to pay homage to a term from Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth, into which we might weave today's surprising events into the fuller story of America.

The birth of the modern Western nation state is typically considered by historians and political scientists to be the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which consolidated the concept of a nation under a single monarch, tidied up centuries of power struggles among various city-states headed by wealthy families. This treaty solidified the concept of autocratic dominance over national sovereignty with clearly demarcated borders and stated policies of noninterference in each other's affairs.

However, even as the strengthening of individual monarchies allowed the gains made by the Age of Exploration, the rise of multinational corporations threatened the nation-state concept before it was even enshrined in that document. A multinational corporation is a commercial entity technically based in one country, but that erased other countries' sovereignty and borders by exploiting weaker countries' natural and human resources and repatriating them for the wealth of the home nation and people.

The British East India Company was founded in 1600, followed by the Dutch East India Company in 1602 — nearly 50 years before the Treaty of Westphalia — yet their imperial and commercial practices would later conflict with the principles the treaty formalized. While the Dutch company is considered the first multinational corporation because it was the first to issue stock, it was soon eclipsed by the massive reach of the British company, which was much more than a “corporation,” as we think of them today.

The British East India Company was a national enterprise, requiring the use of the royal military, diplomatic corps, and thus significant resources of the treasury, even though taxpaying residents of the home country often supplied the labor and force that enriched its shareholders.^[i] The British National Trust notes that the “East India Company was probably the most powerful corporation in history. At its height, it dominated global trade between Europe, South Asia and the Far East, fought numerous wars using its own army and navy, and conquered and colonized modern day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma.”^[ii]

As noted in the 2010 book, “Empire of Food,” the “turn of the 17th century, at the dawn of the global marketplace, was the first time that a merchant could make a circuit of the Earth, jumping on and off ships, buying and selling merchandise in the hope (usually deluded) of getting fabulously rich.”^[iii] Amid national expansionary forces, this was also a time when wealthier families or intrepid individuals without royal connections could change their and their progeny’s fortunes for generations, creating and building upon enormous wealth fully exploited from abroad.

France, Holland, and Spain had already been taking advantage of the resources of the New World since Columbus accidentally “discovered” it in 1492. Then Cortés disobeyed orders in 1519 when he landed 600 armed men in Mexico and essentially took over the Aztec empire.^[iv] Nathaniel Philbrick’s book, “Mayflower,” explains, “By the beginning of the seventeenth century, it had become apparent that the colonization of North America was essential to England’s future prosperity.”^[v]

While the Revolutionary War ensured the North American colonies’ independence from the still mighty British Empire, it was the War of 1812 that established the American nation’s viability as a rising global trading power. In full Westphalian fashion, at last it proved it could defend its newly won sovereignty and dictate its own commercial policies. Lest we think American expansionism came much later, in 1781, before the war even officially ended in 1783, Article XI of the Articles of Confederation pointedly invited Canada to join the 13 colonies to dominate the continent and prohibit British influence.^[vi]

Again, dynamic historical forces work in tandem, as in 1803, before a second war with Britain even began. For \$15 million, the Louisiana Purchase doubled the size

of the United States, gave the U.S. complete control of the critical Mississippi River trade route, and opened the possibility of discovering a Northwest Passage, which could expand the nation “from sea to shining sea.”^[vii] This acquisition set those colonies on a path to empire.

While America spurned the British monarchy and aristocracy and many of its governing principles and loudly embraced the ideas of the Enlightenment in its constitution—which placed the individual, rather than the nation or a deity at the center of its humanist ideology—it also maintained and adopted many of Britain’s commercial qualities. This exemplifies the democratic and capitalist tug-of-war. Despite the new nation’s conceptual adherence to humanism, in practice, it legally continued large-scale human trafficking until 1820.

American political culture still celebrates aspects of Manifest Destiny and eras of territorial expansion; President Donald Trump, for example, has highlighted Andrew Jackson as a personal hero.^[viii] Like Cortés three centuries earlier, through unsanctioned military action, Jackson forced Spain to cede Florida, through unsanctioned military action, and by 1821, became its first governor.^[ix] Perhaps that’s why the president likes living there so much. The U.S. also compromised the sovereign territorial integrity of Mexico, taking vast amounts of that territory as its own. Much like the British expansion into Asia, this move was done through the dual use of American military and treasury: a combination of war and purchase, to gain Texas, California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, essentially in that order.^[x]

Another famous purchase obtained Alaska from Russia in 1867. Secretary of State William H. Seward then recommended purchasing both Greenland and Iceland for its catalog of natural resources in 1868. However, this was still the period when most Americans saw the Alaska deal as “Seward’s Folly;” the gold rushes had to wait until the 1890s to prove Seward right, so no more acquisitions under his administration. The map illustrates the various domestic territorial acquisitions (it includes Hawaii, but that comes later in the story).^[xi]



U.S. territorial acquisitions from 1783 through 1867

In 1910, U.S. Ambassador to Denmark Maurice Egan proposed that the U.S. obtain Greenland through a complex land swap that included returning the Danish mainland territory recently lost to Germany in exchange for cash and part of the U.S.-controlled Philippines.^[xii] Although the 1910 proposal failed, idea of territorial exchanges remained alive and well. An American declaration attached to the 1916 treaty ceding the Danish West Indies to the United States explicitly acknowledged Denmark maintained its rights in Greenland, stating that the “government of the United States will not object to the Danish government extending their political and economic interests to the whole of Greenland.”^[xiii]

President Harry S. Truman also made a \$100 million offer for Greenland in 1946. Thus, Trump’s frequent suggestion that the U.S. “buy” Greenland^[xiv] only echoes earlier ideas of territorial expansion and full U.S. control of North America in the context of past endeavors.^[xv]

This puts the Western nation-state, the initial rise of the national corporation and U.S. regional expansion into a historical framework, as well as American historical interests in Greenland. While some contemporary news may seem to be far out of the ordinary, it was actually the 80 years of a strong global alliance system, despite Cold War interruptions, ensuring the stability of a Western-centric global order that is the historical anomaly. It may be great for us while it lasts, but it wasn’t to everyone’s taste. Just ask Russia, China, and Iran.

It also serves to remind us, as we struggle to absorb all the attention-grabbing headlines our tailored algorithms throw at us, that aside from perhaps the first man-made nuclear explosion in 1945, there really is very little new under the sun.

In the next installment, we will continue the story of American Imperialism by exploring the Monroe Doctrine and its various corollaries and what they meant about America then and now and about the periods in history in which they were established and put into policy.

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