

Smith, Neil. 2003. *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. Cloth and paperback. 557 pp. index, bibliography, maps, and illustrations.

Neil Smith has produced a remarkable work reviewing the rise of the U.S. to world power through the eyes of one man, the influential geographer Isaiah Bowman. From World War One through the end of the Second World War, Bowman played an instrumental part in shaping U.S. geo-economic policy. The methodology embraced by Smith is refreshingly unique compared to other contemporary work on geopolitics, and Smith is to be commended for both unwrapping the history of this American geographer and for attempting to understand Bowman's impact on shaping the geography behind American hegemony. However, as will be discussed, *American Empire* is far more effective at being a biography than as a text of critical political geographic analysis. Thus, though I can highly recommend adding this superb book to one's personal library, its potential shortcomings as academic text will be the focal point of this review.

When all is said and done, this book is a lengthy biography covering the epic life of a nationalist, anti-Semitic, racist, and by-and-large spiteful geographer who rose from a humble, rural background to become a powerful academic curmudgeon with the ears of the East Coast and U.S. political elite. The book sandwiches fourteen chapters (i.e., 422 pages) concerning the intricate details from all areas of Bowman's life between two relatively curt chapters explaining the context in which Bowman's biography is being reviewed. Smith argues that contemporary globalization represents the "third phase" of the long American Century, beginning with the Spanish-American War in 1898. Geography is, and has been, crucial to each phase of the American Century – this was readily recognized during the first two phases – but after World War Two, its implicit role in U.S. hegemonic expansion became largely invisible. Thus, Smith contends that by critically analyzing the life and times of Bowman, the geographer that helped "shape" U.S. global ambition during the first two phases of American Empire building, we can

better understand the invisible, though “specific,” geography of power underlying the American Century and contemporary globalization (xvii). Ironically, Smith most succinctly and clearly outlines this argument in the prologue, perhaps because only here is his theory not precariously chained to Isaiah Bowman’s life.

To cast any confusion aside, this book’s definition of “empire” departs drastically from the recent proliferation of the word as espoused by Hardt and Negri (2000). Perhaps to corral a larger audience, or maybe to distance himself from world -systems theory, it is unmistakable that throughout this book, “American Empire” actually refers to American world hegemony. Likely anticipating some dismay at his use of “empire” in reference to U.S. hegemony, the author randomly dismisses Hardt and Negri’s (2000) seminal work in a single sentence near the end of the book (p. 457). Such redefinition and renaming of certain concepts would be less troubling if, when discussing the broader themes behind American Empire, e.g., globalization and development, Smith would credit those that have already done extensive research on these topics. Unfortunately, perhaps due to the amount of energy the author exerted researching the biography, Smith frequently regurgitates many things that other political geographers have previously asserted, without referencing them in his endnotes. Though much of what this book argues might be considered common knowledge in geopolitical literature, the failure to credit other geographers’ research makes Smith’s analysis read simplistically. Moreover, it made this reviewer wonder if Smith was not promoting himself at the expense of the discipline as a whole – ironically something that Smith accuses Bowman of doing throughout his career.

Regardless of this book’s theoretical lightness, Smith must be commended for writing an encompassing, even excessively detailed, biography. Smith seamlessly weaves the personal scale politics and incredible agency of Bowman, who largely managed to shape U.S. economic expansion and U.S. power in the way he had hoped, with the larger geopolitical and economic

processes of his time. This is not a light biography by any stretch, and if anything Smith might be accused of going into excessive detail. Born in Canada, Bowman was eventually raised on a farm on the southern peninsula of Michigan. At the age of 21, he became a U.S. citizen and began attending a local college, from where his diligent and workaholic tendencies eventually helped him find his way into the geography program at Harvard. He was not necessarily well-liked at Harvard, but nonetheless became well networked, and with his East Coast connections rose to prominence as a physical geographer interested in Latin America. Smith begins his biography in earnest during Bowman's school days at Harvard in the late 1800s and his subsequent employment at Yale, and then outlines Bowman's career ascension as a professor at Yale; head of the American Geographical Society; chair of the Association of American Geographers; and the President of Johns Hopkins University. Outside of his official duties, Bowman was also an avid researcher of Latin America; a key figure and informer of the American delegation at the Treaty of Versailles in 1919; likely the person most responsible for covering up Perry's failed North Pole expedition; in charge of overseeing the development of refugee policy for Roosevelt during World War Two; and also a voice in the establishment of the United Nations. Bowman was a "household name" in America at one time, and so famous that he graced the cover of *Time Magazine* and was written about in *Life* as being at the forefront of U.S. foreign policy.

And yet today, in similar fashion to manifest destiny fulfilling President James K. Polk, very few Americans have heard of Bowman. Smith argues that this is not by accident; asserting that Bowman disappeared from American history – much as the geographic discipline did as a whole – precisely because geography's role behind the third phase of American hegemony, globalization, became so insidious and invisible. Ironically, though Bowman exerted an inordinate amount of energy to facilitate the American Century, his personal arrogance,

pomposity, and inability to get along with others likely destroyed the longevity of his own legacy.

Precisely because few people remember him, Smith encompasses far too much humdrum detail from Bowman's career. By the end of the book, so many episodes, subplots, and broader issues from within and outside of Bowman's life have been pieced together, some more convincingly than others, that it is easy to forget that Smith has a fairly straightforward argument. Though the author is clearly passionate about all aspects of Bowman's life, not every element makes for worthwhile reading. Many parts of this book, including certain chapters, would have been better scaled back or left out entirely. Instead, *American Empire* ends up reviewing a plethora of political and geographic topics, most of which have been reviewed more thoroughly by others. For example, much of the book reads as a history of the geographic discipline as a whole in that it: discusses Mackinder and Ratzel's place in the evolution of the discipline; offers a chapter on the debate over the "bunk" science of twentieth century geopolitics; analyzes the early years of the American Geographical Society; and frequently digresses into intra-geography department conflict during the first half of the twentieth century. Almost all of the topics Smith covers are interesting; yet, many do not seem crucial to proving his central point. By attempting to thoroughly include every organization and important person that Bowman was in contact with, Smith creates a quagmire that eventually, after about 350 pages, becomes difficult to wade through. Concerning Isaiah Bowman's life alone, Smith covers his: early schooling; extensive South American expeditions; role in the cover up of Perry's failed expedition to the North Pole; involvement at the Treaty of Versailles; struggle to find funding sources for geography organizations; largely forgotten and dismissible work on "pioneer settlement" geography; involvement in the Council of Foreign Relations; outspoken distaste for

Haushofer's "geopolitics"; fear of Communists; lifelong inter-personal squabbles with other diplomats and geographers; and his meetings with Prime Minister Churchill.

It must be noted that Smith is effective at linking Bowman's personal biographical topics with larger processes of the American Century. If anything the author is guilty of being overenthusiastic in doing this. Thus, through Bowman we are treated to Smith's historical take on all manner of topics, including: the dismemberment of Prussia and the Hapsburg Empire after World War One; diplomacy and compromise within Roosevelt's cabinet during the depression and World War Two; debates among World War Two allies; university politics at Johns Hopkins and Harvard (including gossip over the sex life of one professor there); the diplomatic intrigue involved during the creation of the United Nations; how Johns Hopkins failed to function as a Kantian university; U.S. refugee policy development during the Second World War; the debates around dismembering Germany during the Second World War; decolonization debates during the Second World War; the evolution of development theory in U.S. policy; and the instrumental nature of the UN as an institution of U.S. power. Smith includes far too many events simply because they were parts of Bowman's life, even though they have minimal use in highlighting phases of the American Century. In turn, a few parts of the book seem to have but tangential links to Isaiah Bowman.

As a final criticism, it must be noted that this book is largely devoid of any women characters in, or perspectives on, Bowman's life. Early in the book, it is mentioned the Bowman meets a woman and marries her. Later it is mentioned that he must leave the Treaty at Versailles early in order to be with her and his family. Other than these brief cameos, his wife remains entirely ambiguous. It is likely that the absence of women from analysis and discussion is due more to Bowman's workaholic and self-aggrandizing lifestyle than any academic oversight on

Smith's behalf. However, in a text this long and so encompassing, the absence of women was awkwardly noticeable and may have been better addressed by the author.

As already mentioned, this book should be considered a critical and comprehensive biography of an extremely influential geographer that had a front seat in foreseeing and shaping American hegemony. This book reads well, and the story unfolds in epic fashion, culminating in a succinct, nine-page final chapter. In the end, Smith argues that the American Century has been focused on economic, not territorial, expansion. He goes on to note that the U.S. cannot possibly manage to maintain control of this expansion under contemporary globalization. Thus, though seeing a surge in its power after the Soviet resistance collapsed in the late 80s and early 90s, the American Empire is likely withering. That is, many of the trans-national political and economic institutions developed under American Empire (e.g., the U.N. and IMF) are now beyond U.S. control. Thus, though capitalism continues in the geographic, extra-territorial fashion that U.S. policy initially shaped, and that Bowman provisioned, the U.S. and other nation-states are being forced to redefine their roles in the world-economy. Of course, none of these arguments are new or revolutionary, but what Smith has done is develop a new and insightful method of analysis to be embraced in the study of this topic. It is unfortunate that so much of the book's energy is focused on providing a complete biography, as Smith is obviously limited in how much time he can spend tying Bowman's life into contemporary political geographic analysis. Indeed, in the end *American Empire* seems to support an idea that I cannot imagine Smith would himself believe – that the American Century can be analyzed and explained without using much theory, Marxist or otherwise, at all.

#### References

Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2000). *Empire*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.