A summary of Walter Nugent's 
*Habits of Empire*

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Military and diplomatic histories often emphasize the pivotal importance of explosive events in shaping later outcomes; this proves to be unsatisfying for a number of reasons. What led such a situation to become so volatile? With his book *Habits of Empire*, Walter Nugent explores the use of aggression and force not as an explanatory tool in its own right, but rather as a set of symbols in a longer and larger narrative. The book is openly interested in high-profile military and diplomatic events that aimed at expanding the United States, but instead of seeing those events as making history, it sets them carefully in a broader historical context. *Habits of Empire* argues that Americans have, from the legal beginning of the United States, continuously and aggressively pursued every opportunity to expand their influence; a side benefit of this effort is that linking together separate thrusts provides a nearly comprehensive and nicely accessible summary of how the United States came to possess its territory.

One of the most striking aspects of American imperialism revealed by this book is how continuous and pervasive explicit expansionism has been in the history of the country. The country was almost always either militarily or diplomatically engaged in expanding its area of influence. For example, before the Civil War, the United States applied conquest, intrigue, and negotiation to expand into Florida, Texas, and both the remaining Southwest and the Northwest; this effort took place in overlapping episodes.
between 1810 and 1848. For the first century or so of the nation's formal existence, its expansion was very physical, although it shifted from a focus on settlement and demographic control to one of economic hegemony towards the end of that period.

The only real expansionist failure that Nugent notes was in the (repeated) attempts to absorb Canada into the American enterprise. Even this failure helps to demonstrate several of Nugent's arguments about the patterns of expansionism. The American sensitivity to opportunities extended broadly, and adventures near or across the Canadian border (as well as others) become far more clear in this context. Also, dramatic demographic expansion strongly facilitated much of the conquest of the contiguous territory of the nation; without it, pressure on Canada foundered.

Nugent provides a moderately detailed overview of each of these episodes, and in so doing the patterns, such as the force of demographic pressure, become clear. Nugent does not spend much effort in the book considering what might have promoted such fecundity, however; for example it focuses on neither economic nor environmental considerations. At several points he attributes early expansionism largely to luck, such as the confluence of circumstances that led the French to sell the Louisiana Territory to the United States, but even cases such as this demonstrate the strength of the American demographic and political position in the territory
and their eagerness to seize on favorable circumstances.

This book provides an elegant and compelling framework for understanding the general expansion of the territory and influence of the United States. In addition, to the degree that empires are characterized consistently\(^1\), this narrative connects United States society with other such societies in history. The book concludes by racing through a sketch of American force projection since World War I, where it plunges precipitously close to polemic. Early in this book, Nugent noted that many have commented on more recent forms of American imperialism, and as such, it might have been more valuable to restructure this conclusion to his book as a historiographic essay. Nonetheless, this book adds important symbolic depth to many of the ways that America used its power to expand its influence, particularly in the period leading up to World War I, by linking them together into a larger narrative.

\(^1\)Perhaps using William Appleman Williams' description of empires as societies that practice “the use and abuse, and the ignoring, of other people for one's own welfare and convenience.”
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