

Bringing the Rise of the United States into ‘Introduction to International Relations’

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Abstract: Many introductory courses in International Relations dedicate some portion of the class to international history. Such class segments often focus on great power politics of the twentieth century. That is, they often cover World War One, World War Two, and the Cold War, or some combination thereof. In this essay, I argue that these international history segments in Introduction to IR should also address the rise of the United States to great power status. That is, we should expose students to less familiar but pedagogically useful aspects of international history. I outline three reasons to bring this topic into introductory IR courses, and I provide a detailed description of the ways one can do so.

I. Introduction

Every instructor’s ‘Introduction to International Relations’ course differs somewhat from other versions of this same course. From the means of student learning assessment to the jokes instructors use to get a laugh or two, there are many ways in which the details of this course vary. (One such difference is the title of the course—by referring to ‘Introduction to IR’ here, I do not mean to dismiss similar courses that are instead labelled as introductions to, e.g., ‘world politics’ or ‘international studies’.) It is relatively common, however, for an introductory IR course to include a segment on international history. That is, there are often multiple class sessions—after some earlier sessions that familiarise students with some basic concepts and

perspectives on IR—that use aspects of recent world history to demonstrate how IR scholars develop and test their theories. Such segments frequently start with the origins of World War One and continue through the end of the Cold War. A recent study, for example, finds that World War One, World War Two, and the Cold War are among the ten ‘most common empirical topics’ listed in a sample of forty-eight introductory syllabi (Knight 2019, 219).¹

I argue, however, that academics who teach in the United States—and perhaps elsewhere, but especially in the United States—ought to re-work Introduction to IR courses to include at least one class session on the rise of the United States to great-power status. That is, if the typical starting point for discussions of international history in Introduction to IR is 1914, we should push that back to at least 1783. There may well be reason to go farther into the past and to pay more attention to less familiar polities, but I will make the case here that Introduction to IR classes ought to include a session on international history through the lens of early U.S. foreign policy—from 1783 through, say, 1898 or 1914. In this article I outline three reasons to do so, and based on my own teaching experience, I provide a detailed description of the teaching resources, materials, and methods for doing so. I also address two important concerns—that adding yet more course content focused on U.S. experiences might worsen existing biases toward Western experiences and that the rise of the United States would be better situated in more advanced courses.

II. Why the Rise of the United States?

There are at least three good reasons to dedicate a session of Introduction to IR to the rise of the United States. First, this topic can serve to dispel widespread myths about U.S. history. U.S. participation in the Spanish-American War starting in 1898 is sometimes used to denote the time when the United States took its first steps toward being a great power. While 1898 is surely

an important moment in the history of U.S. foreign policy, students can get the wrong idea when instructors ignore the first century or so of U.S. history. That is, they may come to believe that earlier U.S. foreign policy was isolationist in character, a myth that is sometimes bolstered by references to George Washington's warning against 'permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world' or John Quincy Adams's statement that the U.S. 'goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy' (Dunn 2005, 253). But early U.S. foreign policy was quite different. Indeed, Restad (2012, 58) argues that the isolationist/internationalist dichotomy in framing U.S. foreign policy does not get the history right and ought to be replaced with a conception that foregrounds American national identity as contributing to 'steady unilateral exceptionalism'. IR scholars ought not to contribute to any such myths and could actively work to dispel them by dedicating a course session to the very active century of U.S. expansion across the North American continent and beyond.

Second, studying this period offers instructors the chance to bring historically marginalised groups and under-studied topics into IR. Such topics—especially Native dispossession and resistance (Wadsworth 2014) and Black liberation struggles (Koomen 2019)—can help relate the field of IR to the current questions of race and identity that students so often want to discuss (Bunte 2019) as well as ongoing political debates about how Native nations and people of colour interact with the U.S. political system (Estes 2017; Towler, Crawford, and Bennett 2019). In other words, a seemingly familiar history can be used to expose students to a broader range of actors than they might expect and could be used to challenge hegemonic American or Eurocentric biases in the discipline (Cook 2019). A session on the rise of the United States, in short, can show students that IR can take even marginalised peoples seriously as political actors, and it can promote productive reflection on the ethical issues that political

leaders face (Marineau 2019).

Third, the rise of the United States can provide students with a helpful case with which to compare the Chinese case. It is now common in Introduction to IR to spend some time on the rise of China and its implications for world politics. Unfortunately, it is often the case that students will not have studied the rise of any other country in depth to that point in the course. Perhaps earlier sessions will have made mention of the rise and decline of great powers, the tensions that such transitions can inspire, and the ways that rising and declining powers respond to those tensions (Goddard 2018; Parent and MacDonald 2018; Shiffrinson 2018). Even if students heard about such dynamics, however, it is unlikely that they explored the rise or decline of any given state in great depth. Examining the rise of the United States allows for more sustained student engagement with the expansion of one particular state. This, in turn, offers students an important comparison when they later encounter debates on the future of Chinese intentions and capabilities. The likely long-term importance of the U.S.-China relationship should give IR scholars all the more reason to teach their introductory students about the rise of both states.

III. Resources, Materials, and Methods

Even if one is convinced of the merits of bringing the rise of the United States into Introduction to IR, this would be a new topic to teach for many IR scholars, which would present immediate practical questions. The simple answer to the question of how one should teach on this topic is that one should do whatever one can comfortably do in the way that most effectively accomplishes one's learning goals. When I first taught this subject, for example, I used a traditional lecture format—I used active learning elements such as games, simulations, and small-group discussions during other sessions. But to offer a more detailed explanation of how

one might approach this subject, I will describe the four topics I discussed for my own ‘Rise of the United States’ session during a summer 2019 Introduction to IR course. I also mention readings that I found useful in highlighting certain questions or concepts, and I describe how I related that lecture’s material to prior and future lectures. I offer the following description not as a model to be replicated but as one example that I hope will inspire further experimentation among IR instructors.

I wanted to start this lecture by reminding students that the United States—like any polity—was not created *ex nihilo*. The first topic I covered was thus the question of how British influence shaped the institutions of a nascent United States. In answering this question, I relied on two assigned readings. First, I used Sean Gailmard’s (2017) article, ‘Building a New Imperial State: The Strategic Foundations of Separation of Powers in America,’ which uses a formal model to demonstrate that the separation of powers in the U.S. system was borne of a British dilemma. Given that the Crown needed governors to administer their overseas colonies, how was it to prevent excessive rent extraction by these governors? The Crown’s solution, Gailmard argues, was to create colonial legislative assemblies that would control budgets and taxation independent of the governor. The second reading on this topic, an excerpt (Chapter 1) from Julian Go’s (2011) *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present*, similarly makes the case that U.S. institutions and behaviours look much like their British predecessors and that the United States replicated its imperial patterns as it expanded. Go, however, approaches the subject from a background in sociology, which helps illustrate to students that different methodological approaches can nonetheless yield similar results. Moreover, Go’s explicit comparison of British and U.S. practices helps to set up the question of whether the United States is indeed an empire—a question to which I will return.

The second topic I introduced was the question of why the United States unified. More specifically, why did the United States deepen its union by abandoning the Articles of Confederation for the Constitution? This I structured around three extant perspectives in the literature, each associated with a different reading that I described in class but did not assign (Holton 2007; Parent 2011; Musgrave n.d.). First, Holton argues that the reasons were primarily economic in nature. Political elites saw trade as the key to future U.S. prosperity and therefore saw the individual states' lax use of their tax and debt collection powers as a threat to the creditworthiness of the federal government. Second, Parent makes an explicitly realist argument. Voluntary unification for him is an extreme alliance, and only an 'optimally intense, indefinite, symmetrically afflicting threat' would suffice to induce such a sacrifice of autonomy; political elites, however, still need to persuade relevant domestic audiences of unification's necessity (Parent 2011, 4). Third, Musgrave (n.d.) argues that it was neither economic nor security concerns that yielded unification. Rather, it was an institutional quirk of the Articles of Confederation. Because the Articles required unanimity and because the political elites who had qualms with the Articles could not arrive at consensus on limited reforms, elites instead went around the Articles to craft an entirely new system. Addressing this topic is helpful in encouraging students to rethink the boundaries between 'domestic' and 'international'—a distinction, one might remind their students, that is integral to IR theories like structural realism.

The third topic I introduced is one I have already noted above—the question of whether the United States is an empire. If feasible given the class size, this may be a useful place to pause for discussion either by breaking the students into small groups or by asking the class as a whole to contribute to a conversation about what 'empire' means. Such a discussion can helpfully get students asking the same questions that IR scholars ask when talking about empire. Is 'empire'

an analytically useful concept, and if so, how can empire be distinguished from other forms of governance? As noted above, these are questions that a reading of Go (2011) should prompt for students, but when lecturing on this topic, I relied more heavily on Nexon and Wright (2007) to describe different political orders and the ways that a polity might more or less closely approximate an empire. Indeed, such courses ought to directly address the American empire debate precisely because there is so much use of ‘empire’ language in popular discourse (Jackson and Nexon 2015) and in public-facing historical work (Nugent 2008; Immerwahr 2019). The most useful thing for an Introduction to IR instructor to do, I believe, is thus to discuss different definitions of empire and to distinguish between approaches that take a binary view (in assuming that polities are either imperial or not—typical of much popular conversation) and approaches that instead treat empire as a relational, sometimes ideal typical model that polities can approach to greater or lesser degrees (Doyle 1986; Nexon and Wright 2007). I found it worthwhile to have this discussion before we arrived at later great-power politics—that is, before we arrived at contestation between the United States and Soviet Union and before we discussed the rise of China and, for example, the Belt-and-Road Initiative. Having first discussed in abstract terms what it means to talk about empire, we were able to have fruitful discussions about whether and to what extent those states have differed in the imperial qualities of their foreign policy practices.

Fourth and finally, I discussed the use of military force and occupations with a specific emphasis on America’s ‘Indian Wars’ and Reconstruction. Within IR, there is much work on the questions of when the use of military force is most effective, what makes occupations more or less likely to succeed, and when states should use force in such ways (see, e.g., Edelstein 2008 and [Morkevičius](#) 2018). Relatively few in IR, however, have used nineteenth-century U.S. history in the form of the Indian Wars or Reconstruction to address such topics. What little is

available in IR is, to my knowledge, mostly in the form of unpublished manuscripts at this point (see, e.g., Stewart and Kitchens [n.d.] on Reconstruction). This, however, offers an opportunity—relating the innovative, ongoing research of junior scholars to classic questions of IR can provide students with a vivid sense of where the field has been and where it is going. To provide a broader sense as to how IR scholars are engaging with the experiences of historically marginalised peoples, one might also cover U.S. relations with Native nations by way of various international political phenomena, including bargaining (Spirling 2011), identity formation (Cha 2015), and alliance formation (Crawford 1994; Grynaviski 2018). One could similarly discuss the American empire debate in light of the experiences of populations affected by the slave trade and U.S. territorial acquisitions across the continent, in the Pacific, and in the Caribbean (Harris 2017; Frymer 2017; Maass 2020). Discussing topics such as these allowed me to again draw attention to the blurry line between ‘domestic’ and ‘international’ affairs and to provide students with useful context for current political debates. Moreover, these topics can prompt a usefully open-ended question—why is it that so much IR scholarship has ignored early U.S. history in the construction and testing of theory?

IV. Caveats and Conclusions

I conclude by offering responses to two potential concerns. First, one might be concerned that IR already focuses on the United States to a great extent; perhaps we ought not to skew introductory courses even further in that direction (Maliniak et al., 2018). I would respond in three ways. First, I would cite the recent argument of Cullen Hendrix and Jon Vreede (2019, 319) that the focus on the United States in IR scholarship is ‘not especially outsized when its large population, economy, and its extensive history of participation in interstate wars are taken into account’. Second, I noted in the introduction that I would especially recommend adding such

a session to Introduction to IR courses in the United States. Given student interest in the country in which they are studying—and perhaps the civic value of teaching citizens about the history of their home country’s foreign policy (Westheimer and Kahne 2004, Szarejko and Carnes 2018)—it may be most sensible to bring this topic into Introduction to IR classes in the United States. Third and finally, I would reiterate that the rise of the United States offers instructors the chance to address topics and peoples that do not frequently appear in such courses and can actually challenge the views of students who often have little knowledge of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history. Indeed, among other phenomena of interest to IR scholars, the first century of U.S. independence involved wars with Native nations, interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean, and a civil war fought over slavery.

A second concern one might raise is that the topics I have advocated for teaching in Introduction to IR are better left for higher-level classes on U.S. foreign policy. I would agree that undergraduate courses on U.S. foreign policy should indeed cover some of the topics I have discussed if they do not already do so. But my argument for bringing the rise of the United States into introductory classes rests on the fact that not every student will continue to study IR thereafter. Students with majors outside of Political Science may only take an introductory course to fulfil general education requirements. Students within the major might decide to switch majors or might opt to take higher-level classes in a different subfield. Their varying experiences in the discipline will depend in part on ‘sparking curiosity’ at the introductory stage, and encounters with unfamiliar histories may help in doing so (Ettinger 2020, 11). Moreover, small departments may not have the resources to routinely offer higher-level classes on U.S. foreign policy. Given these realities, I believe it is worth covering the rise of the United States in Introduction to IR.

In summary, I argue that there are good reasons to incorporate the rise of the United States into Introduction to IR classes, and I have described some resources, materials, and methods on how to teach this topic. When students enter a classroom for Introduction to IR, many of them will be encountering the academic field of IR for the first time. For some, it will also be the last time they engage with the field. Regardless of any given student's subsequent experiences, I believe that Introduction to IR courses that expose students to academic debates surrounding the rise of the United States will leave them better equipped to understand world politics.

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¹ The Cold War is the most common empirical topic, whereas World War One takes third place, and World War Two ties with 'US Hegemony' for eighth place.