

[How to Hide an Empire: Daniel Immerwahr on the History of the Greater United States](#)

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Introduction

How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States [published by Farrar Straus & Giroux in 2019)]. That's the title of a new book examining a part of the U.S. that is often overlooked: the nation's overseas territories from Puerto Rico to Guam, former territories like the Philippines, and its hundreds of military bases scattered across the globe. We speak with the book's author, Daniel Immerwahr, who writes, "At various times, the inhabitants of the U.S. Empire have been shot, shelled, starved, interned, dispossessed, tortured, and experimented on. What they haven't been, by and large, is seen." Immerwahr is an associate professor of history at Northwestern University.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

AMY GOODMAN: This is Democracy Now, democracynow.org, The War and Peace Report. I'm Amy Goodman, with Juan González.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*. That's the title of a stunning new book looking at a part of the U.S. that is often overlooked: the nation's overseas territories, from Puerto Rico to Guam, former territories like the Philippines, and its hundreds of military bases scattered across the globe.

AMY GOODMAN: Historian Daniel Immerwahr writes in his new book, "At various times, the inhabitants of the U.S. Empire have been shot, shelled, starved, interned, dispossessed, tortured, and experimented on. What they haven't been, by and large, is seen," he writes. Daniel Immerwahr is associate professor of history at Northwestern University in Chicago. He joins us from Chicago.

Welcome to Democracy Now! It's great to have you with us. Why don't you start with the title, *How to Hide an Empire*? How do you do it? And what "A History of the Greater United States" means?

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: When a lot of people think about the United States—people who live in the U.S. mainland, people outside of the United States—they think of the contiguous blob. It's a familiar shape. But, of course, those aren't the borders of the country, and actually they've only been the borders of the country for three years of U.S. history. So, what I tried to do was write a history of the greater United States, of the full area over which the United States claims jurisdiction. But what I found as I was writing was how frequently people on the mainland, and often political leaders, had an inaccurate view of their own country's borders, or at least had a very clear sense that the contiguous part of the United States—the states—was the part that mattered, and the territories were sort of peripheral, often regarded—or not fully understood—as left to dwindle as sacrifice zones or places that could be used for medical experiments and that sort of thing. So, my goal was to try to tell U.S. history with all the territory as part of the story.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: Well, Professor Immerwahr, one of the things that you raise is that, really, the question of the creation of an empire did not really begin when most histories talk about it, with the Spanish-American War of 1898, but you go earlier, into the colonization across the West, really. And you note that the Constitution doesn't have a whole lot to say about what happens to territories that are not states, except for the Territorial Clause, but that the Northwest Ordinance played a big role in shaping how the United States would expand. Could you talk about that?

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: The name of the country from the get-go was the United States of America. But from the first day of the country's history, from the first day when the United States

received its independence from Britain, it wasn't a union of states. It was an amalgamation of states and territories. There wasn't a lot of guidance in the Constitution about what was to be done with the territories, but ultimately, they were under the power of Congress.

The Northwest Ordinance set a pattern whereby territories could be upgraded to states. But two things were notable about that pattern. First of all, in order to be upgraded to states, according to the Northwest Ordinance, they had to be populated by white people. So, the idea was that nonwhite populations within them wouldn't really count. And it wasn't until the territories were sufficiently populated by white people that they would be accepted as states. The other really important thing to realize is, that's just a guidance. Congress can do whatever it wants, and it has done whatever it wants. It has held territories back from statehood, often for decades. Oklahoma took more than a century before it became a state. And it has promoted others to statehood quickly, usually just as a way of sort of curating the borders of the country, of deciding who's in and who's out.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And you mentioned Oklahoma. There was an attempt during the early 1900s to create a state called Sequoyah in parts of what is now Oklahoma. Talk about that and the reason why that never happened.

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: Oklahoma used to be called Indian Country or Indian Territory. That was its legal name. And that territory used to be enormous, 46 percent of the country when it was initially established. And then it was fairly quickly whittled down into the borders of present-day Oklahoma. And right at the end of this process, a sort of compressed group of various Indian polities tried to create a state, out of what was then eastern Oklahoma, and call it Sequoyah. It wouldn't be an all-Indian state or all-Native American state. It would be mixed. But their hope was that at least they'd have a sufficient population to have a governing majority within it. They applied for statehood. They were rejected for statehood, and, instead, Sequoyah was absorbed into the white-majority state of Oklahoma.

AMY GOODMAN: Professor Immerwahr, talk about why you begin with the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and take us through what are now called various things, but territories, what were called colonies, and the language changed. But start with Pearl Harbor.

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: It's such an extraordinary moment because it's one of the most familiar moments in U.S. history. And when most people of the United States think about Pearl Harbor, what they think about is Japan attacked the United States, and it attacked it by bombing Pearl Harbor, and that drew the United States into the war, and that was the only time that the United States was directly attacked in the war.

But, of course, what actually happened is, it wasn't just Hawai'i that Japan was attacking. Japan was launching an attack on the United States' Pacific territories, as well as Britain's Pacific territories and Thailand. So, in a near-simultaneous attack—this all happened within hours—the Japanese attacked the Philippines, Guam, Wake Island and Hawai'i. And the attack on the Philippines, militarily, was just as bad as the attack on Hawai'i.

And for that reason, it was unclear to reporters, initially, how to say what happened. If you look at the early newspapers some of them say, "The Japanese attack Philippines and Guam." Others say, "Japanese attack the Philippines and Hawai'i." That notion that the Philippines and Hawai'i were the really important targets to emphasize is how it appears in Eleanor Roosevelt's first speech. That's how it appears in a draft of the Pearl Harbor speech that FDR's undersecretary of state wrote. And that's how it appeared in FDR's own first draft of the speech, emphasizing both targets.

But what's amazing is that you can see FDR going through, thinking through that, thinking through the implications of trying to explain to the country that the Philippines had been attacked and this was cause for the United States to go to war. And it seems to me that he was quite clearly uncomfortable with that implication, worrying whether an attack on the Philippines would really count as a cause for war in the United States. And we have a lot of opinion polls from the time which suggest that most people who were living in the U.S. mainland didn't want to see the U.S. military come to the defense of the far-western territories of the United States, like the Philippines and Guam.

So, what FDR did is two things. First of all, he crossed out prominent references to the Philippines and just focused on Hawai'i. Hawai'i was also a territory, not a state, but it had a significantly larger white population, and it was closer to the mainland. And then, even then, it seems like he felt a little nervous about whether Hawai'i would count as the United States, for the purposes of rallying the nation to war. And indeed, opinion polls suggested only 55 percent of the country thought the U.S. military should defend the territory of Hawai'i in the case of war. So, he inserted the word "American" in his descriptor, so it's not just that the Japanese bombed, as it initially said in his speech, the island of Oahu, but that they bombed the American island of Oahu. So you can see what he was doing was trying to round Hawai'i up to American. And the Philippines and Guam he kind of regards as too far gone and just takes them out from prominent references of the speech and tucks them into the back.

And I think that has a lot to do with why a lot of people in the United States today don't realize that that attack was not just on Hawai'i alone. And it's a real pity that they don't realize it because the attack on Pearl Harbor was just that. It was an attack. The Japanese never came back. It was militarily damaging, but it didn't result in Hawai'i being invaded. That's not true of the Philippines, Guam, or Wake Island, all of which were attacked, all of which were conquered. Populations were interned. The occupation of the Philippines by Japan was an absolutely brutal affair. The occupation and the subsequent U.S. reconquest of the Philippines we think killed maybe 1.5 million people, as best we can tell, which is two times the number of people who died in the Civil War. That's the bloodiest event that ever happened on U.S. soil, and that's barely in the U.S. history textbooks.

AMY GOODMAN: And the Philippines became independent from the United States in 1946.

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: That's right.

AMY GOODMAN: People might be surprised to know it's so recent.

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: I often found that I would talk to people with Ph.D.'s in U.S. history, and I would just say—if they didn't study the colonies—I'd say "Do you know what the largest colony that the United States has held and what decade it became independent?" And I got a lot of people who were scratching their heads because it's not usually emphasized when we talk about U.S. history. We often talk about U.S. empire in a sort of broader and more diffuse sense. But, surprisingly, a lot of U.S. historians don't have a lot of knowledge about the actual colonies themselves.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: In terms of the independence of the Philippines in 1946, this whole issue of which territories became states versus which either were held as territories or became independent really pivoted around—and you mention it in your book—a group of Supreme Court decisions that are rarely studied these days: the Insular Cases in the early 1900s, that determined which were incorporated versus unincorporated territories. Could you talk about that, the significance of those decisions for justifying an American empire?

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: After the United States, in a sort of imperial shopping spree, acquired a number of large, populated colonies—the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Hawai'i, Guam—the Supreme Court had to figure out where these places stood within the fabric of the nation. They're part of the United States, but does that mean Filipinos can vote for the president? Does that mean they're covered by the Constitution? It wasn't clear, and there were a lot of arguments about it.

The Supreme Court ultimately came down with this: that the Constitution applies to the United States. It's the law of the land. But some of the territories, namely the ones that had been acquired from Spain—Puerto Rico, Guam, Philippines—and this would also extend to American Samoa and, later, to the U.S. Virgin Islands and other places—that those were not part of the land. So, the Constitution applies to the land, but these are not part of the United States in a constitutional sense, and therefore they are possessed by the United States. The United States encompasses them within its borders, but its Constitution doesn't fully extend to them.

Some of the territories—Hawai'i and Alaska, which had larger white settler populations—were deemed to be incorporated, meaning that the Constitution would extend to them. And that seemed to make them more eligible for statehood. But even in those cases, it wasn't entirely clear in the early part of the 20th century that Hawai'i or Alaska would ever become states. And, in fact, there was a lot of racist resistance in the U.S. mainland to the notion that people from Hawai'i might get to vote on federal laws.

AMY GOODMAN: In your book, you show two maps of the United States: one of just the mainland United States, the other with all of the territories included. The captions read, "They told you it was this, but it's this." Explain the significance of this and how this fits into the map of U.S. military bases around the world. The U.S. has something like 800 overseas military bases. By comparison, Russia has nine. Most countries have none.

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: That's right. I found that, in writing this book first of all, I had to learn how to make maps because I wanted to see the United States differently than it had been presented to me. I grew up in Pennsylvania. At no point in my education did I see a map of the United States that had Puerto Rico on it. Puerto Rico has been part of the United States since 1899. I wanted to just try to imagine the country differently, to see it differently, to map it differently. And so I did.

One thing I did was an equal-area projection showing all the territory of the United States. And what's remarkable—this map was from 1940—what's remarkable is how much just physical landmass of the United States was, at that point, in overseas territories—Alaska, Hawai'i, the Philippines. And you can do a similarly surprising map today. The parts of the United States that are not states don't take up as much land area today, but the United States controls hundreds of specks of land on islands, in foreign countries. And it's really easy not to think about that. And if you take all that land and you mash it all together, it probably adds up to less than the area of Connecticut. It's not a lot of space. But that land area is important, both for the U.S. military and also for all the countries and people who live right around that land and have to deal with outposts of the United States that are peppered throughout the world.

AMY GOODMAN: Daniel Immerwahr, we're going to break, then come back to this discussion. Professor Immerwahr teaches history at Northwestern University. His new book is *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*.

AMY GOODMAN: This is Democracy Now, democracynow.org, The War and Peace Report. I'm Amy Goodman, with Juan González, as we continue with Daniel Immerwahr, associate professor of history at Northwestern University, speaking to us from Chicago. His new book is *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: Professor Immerwahr, I wanted to ask you about the chapter in your book titled "Language Is a Virus." Obviously, when countries conquer other peoples who speak different languages, there's an issue of what happens to the language and the culture of the conquered or absorbed populations. And you talk in your book on the issue of the English language and how in the absorption, first of French speakers in Louisiana, of the Native peoples, of the Puerto Ricans and the Philippines, the language issue began to be dealt with.

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: It's an important thing to recognize that one of the things that empires do is they try to enforce a sort of homogeneity. They try to export the standards of the motherland onto the colonies. And often that's a violent and difficult process. Certainly that's been true in the United States and its territories as it's sought to export and enforce English. One of the more dramatic instances of this is on Guam where we have accounts of a naval officer who went around burning all English-Chamorro dictionaries as a way to try to extirpate the local language and enforce English. And there are all kinds of accounts of various colonial subjects being forcibly moved into English-language-only schools, and being physically punished if they speak their native language rather than English.

What's really interesting about that, however, is not only the way that the United States has, as many empires have done, tried to enforce its language in its colonies, but that, actually, the United States has been remarkably successful in enforcing its language outside of its colonies, too, after World War II. The history of the last 50 years or so has given rise to the remarkable spread of the English language, not just in places that the United States has physically controlled, but in far-distant places that it hasn't controlled.

AMY GOODMAN: I wanted to talk about one of the people you focus on in your book as a way to talk about colonialism: Cornelius Rhoads, the doctor, the cancer researcher, who went to San Juan, Puerto Rico, to study anemia in the 1930s. Tell us what he did there and how he ascended from there.

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: Cornelius Rhoads was working for the Rockefeller Institute, and he went to San Juan in the 1930s to research anemia. A lot of Puerto Ricans were suffering from anemia as a result of hookworm. He had been trained in Harvard, but suddenly, when he got to San Juan, he became a different kind of doctor. He took his location, being in Puerto Rico, as sort of license to do whatever he wanted, however he wanted to do it. This is what we have accounts of. First of all, he refused to treat some of his patients, just to see what would happen. He tried to induce disease in others, again, to see what would happen, by restricting their diets. He referred to his patients, to his colleagues, as experimental animals.

And then he wrote a letter. He sat down, and he wrote a letter, in which he said, to a colleague in Boston, "Puerto Rico is beautiful. The weather is incredible. I love the island. However, the problem is with the Puerto Ricans. They're awful. They steal. They're filthy. And the thing to do, really, is to totally exterminate the population." And then he said, "And I've started that. I've killed eight of my patients, and I've sought to transplant cancer into thirteen more. Hope you're doing well in Boston. Yours sincerely," and just signed off. We know that because he then left the letter out. It was discovered. It was discovered by the Puerto Rican staff of the hospital where he was working. And it became a national scandal, understandably. Puerto Ricans had heard the scorn of mainlanders. They had heard talk of the problem of Puerto Rican overpopulation and how mainlanders disapproved of it. But here they saw what they interpreted to be racist, homicidal intent from a doctor who had actually killed eight people.

Cornelius Rhoads left. He just fled the island, hoping, presumably, that what happens in San Juan stays in San Juan. The government did an investigation. It uncovered another letter, which the governor deemed worse than the first. But the governor suppressed that letter. He was appointed governor. He was a mainlander who had been appointed and not elected. We don't have the letter. No researcher has ever seen it or found it. The governor concluded, after having suppressed evidence, that Cornelius Rhoads probably didn't kill eight of his patients. He was probably just joking or something like that. And Cornelius Rhoads never faced a hearing.

Not only that. He didn't even get fired. He returned to New York. He continued his job. He quickly became the vice president of the New York Academy of Medicine. During World War II, he became a colonel in the Army and became the chief medical officer in the Chemical Warfare Service. That's not only a promotion. Just think about what that allows him to do because the Chemical Warfare Service is preparing the United States to enter a gas war, if it comes to that. In order to do that, it tests out all kinds of poison gas, first on animals—goats are preferred—but ultimately on human subjects, on uniformed men, who are, without a lot of informed consent, either having mustard agents applied to their skin to see how their skin blisters. They are put in gas chambers with gas masks to see how long they can stay in there. They're locked in there until they falter. There's an island that the United States uses off of Panama, San José Island. There men were put in the field, and they were asked to sort of stage mock battles. But while they did that, they were gassed from overhead, and this was to see how they were affected.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And interestingly, Professor Immerwahr, there were many Puerto Ricans who served in World War II who ended up stationed in Panama and being subjected to some of the mustard gas experiments that were conducted at that time. I know because one of my uncles, who served in the 65th Infantry, was in Panama and was subjected to those experiments. The interesting thing, though, is that Cornelius Rhoads remained a major figure in the medical world, didn't he? Only in recent years has there been an attempt to revise or reform the image of him in the medical community.

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: That's exactly right. After overseeing these medical experiments with gas, in which 60,000 uniformed men, a lot of them Puerto Rican, were subjected, without informed consent, to chemical weapons—and many of them suffered debilitating effects as a result of this—(emphysema, eye damage, genital scarring, psychological damage)—some of these men were really harmed by this. Nevertheless, that also didn't impede him. In fact, some of that work with chemical agents alerted him, as well as some other doctors, to the possibility that mustard agents could be used to treat cancer. Cornelius Rhoads took some of the surplus stock of U.S. chemical weapons after the war and became the first director of the Sloan Kettering Institute and then used his position to launch the turn to chemotherapy, and he tried chemical after chemical after chemical on fighting cancer.

The incredible thing is that, within the U.S. medical community, that's what he was remembered for. He appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. There was an award given by the American Association of Cancer Research after Cornelius Rhoads, and that award was given for more than twenty years, before a Puerto Rican cancer researcher pointed it out to the AACR, asking, "You know the guy, after whom this award is named, the hero, Cornelius Rhoads? You know what he did in Puerto Rico?" And it had been twenty-three years. The informational segregation had been so extraordinary that it had been twenty-three years before the mainland medical community realized that the guy that they had been enthusiastically celebrating had at least said in a letter that he had killed eight of his patients.

AMY GOODMAN: And the statue of Cornelius Rhoads at 103rd and 5th Avenue was removed.

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: The medical community has now gotten the memo. And the award has been changed, and now there's an understanding of his dual legacy. But what's extraordinary to me is just how long he got away with it, just how long he was able to experiment on so many Puerto Ricans in some of the worst ways imaginable, without facing the consequences of that.

AMY GOODMAN: That was just outside the New York Academy of Medicine. As we talk about Puerto Rico, let's talk about this issue of the language used, moving the language from "colonies" to "territories," and even when Donald Trump was speaking, how he referred to those in these territories (I mean, in places like Puerto Rico when you talk about the Constitution, or Guantánamo in Cuba) as being outside the Constitution. In your book, you talk about (this is clearly something Juan has known all of his life) how they don't even have trial by jury in Puerto Rico.

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: The constitutional right to trial by jury doesn't apply to Puerto Rico. I'm from Pennsylvania, but if I were to travel to San Juan, I would lose that right upon arriving in Puerto Rico.

AMY GOODMAN: And that issue of the changing language, from "colonies" to talking about them as "territories," the leadership of the United States understanding what the language meant, and then President Trump referring to, for example, Puerto Rico, in some astounding quotes, about Puerto Rico, as "you" and "them."

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: When the United States initially acquired the bulk of its overseas territories, those territories were referred to by the leaders of the United States, people like Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, in a really forthright way. They were called "colonies" because of course that's what they were. And these men were forthright defenders of empire and were very proud and happy to call the overseas possessions of the United States "colonies."

But that didn't last very long. By about the 1910s or so, you saw government officials becoming very nervous about the C-word and seeking to replace it with euphemism, so, "territory" is a gentler term. Legally, there's not an important distinction in U.S. law, but it's a term that at least seems consonant with the fabric of the United States. Kansas had been a territory. Montana had been a territory. And they're states. So, the practice in the United States has been, since the early 20th century, to refer to the overseas parts of the United States as "territories" rather than as "colonies." But nevertheless, there's still a clear sense from the leaders of the United States that such places don't really fit in the country. And Trump isn't the first person to enunciate that, but like with so many other things, Trump kind of says the quiet parts out loud.

After both hurricanes, Irma and Maria, damaged Puerto Rico and Trump had to sort of speak about this, he did this remarkable thing. When he addressed Puerto Rico, he referred to it in the second person. He said, "I hate to tell you, Puerto Rico, but you've thrown our budget out of whack." Now, of course, Puerto Rico is part of the United States. Puerto Ricans have been citizens for over a century. Nevertheless, in Trump's mind, it's very clear that there's a homeland, which is the kind of place you can build a wall around, the contiguous United States, and then there are these other parts of the United States, which seem to him to be foreign.

Another really good example of this is after a federal judge in Hawai'i blocked Trump's "Muslim ban" or "travel ban." Jeff Sessions expressed amazement that a judge sitting on a Pacific island could block the president. Of course, that has to do with the notion that Hawai'i isn't really part of the United States.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And talking about Pacific islands, talk about these specks of land and these islands and these territories where sometimes there are not even people, but yet they are critical or important to the United States. They have strategic value and are considered territories of the United States.

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: I think that's important to remember, that the United States has inhabited territories. It has five of them, but it also has a lot of other land, including uninhabited islands. And that's, in fact, the first U.S. entry into overseas empire. The familiar borders of the United States, the ones you picture in your mind when you think of the country, were sort of finally filled out in 1854 with the Gadsden Purchase. But three years later, the United States started claiming overseas territory in the form of uninhabited islands. In this case, they were called guano islands because they were sort of islands that birds landed on and deposited, for centuries, feces, that just sort of piled higher and higher, dried in the sun, and was an incredibly useful source of fertilizer. In pursuit of this fertilizer, the United States claimed nearly a hundred guano islands in the Caribbean and in the Pacific. They were useful for fertilizer and not much else in the 19th century.

But in the 20th century, it turned out that the same features of those islands that made them attractive to birds, small islands in the middle of an oceanic desert, good places to land, made them also really useful for planes. The United States has repurposed some of those islands as military bases, as places to store nuclear weapons, as places to land planes. In fact, it was on her way to one of those guano islands, Howland Island, that Amelia Earhart's plane went down. And that makes sense, right? Howland Island is seemingly nowhere next to nothing, a remote island in the Pacific. But if you're trying to fly a plane across the Pacific, having Howland Island is really important.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: What we hear a lot about is China trying to build an airstrip on small islands off the coast of China, but the United States has been doing this around the world for decades and decades, hasn't it?

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: Yes. I think if you were to characterize the United States' territorial empire today, I think you could call it a sort of pointillist empire, in that it consists mainly of islands and bases, just small specks, where the United States can move, stage its things, put transceivers, and store things.

And China is taking a page from that book. China doesn't have the same territorial extent that the United States has. It doesn't have the same kind of history in the 20th century of getting to claim all these islands. So China is doing something really interesting, which is it's making its own islands. It's actually creating artificial islands that serve the same purpose, that can be used as little points, as military bases, as a way for China to extend its influence by having these little specks of land.

AMY GOODMAN: And finally—we just have 30 seconds—from The Beatles to the peace symbol: explain its connection to colonies and air bases.

DANIEL IMMERWAHR: It turns out that these specks of land don't matter just for the U.S. military. They matter a lot for the people who have lived around them. And what I found in my book was that both the peace symbol and The Beatles are, in some ways, artifacts of the U.S. basing system—the peace symbol as a reaction to the fear of U.S. military bases, and The Beatles as a band that grew up in the shadow of the largest U.S. Air Force base in Europe.

AMY GOODMAN: We want to thank you so much, Daniel Immerwahr, for joining us. He is associate professor of history at Northwestern University. His new book is [*How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*](#).