Although Americans referred to their burgeoning nation as an empire from its earliest years, the precise implications of the term’s employment remain somewhat ambiguous. In surveying documents from the ratification of the constitution, it becomes clear that the word ‘empire’ is used in multiple ways, ranging from serving as a synonym for ‘nation’ to being something that Americans saw as a reasonable aspiration for an emerging nation—briefly, it is a nuanced term. Empire talk is engineered to present imperial ambition and action as positive, even desirable, for both the metropole and the wider world. To this end it employs techniques designed to emphasize the benefits of empire while also distancing the emergent empire from its brutal imperial predecessors. The documents concerning the ratification of the constitution offer some examples of this variety of empire talk; more often, however, ‘empire’ is tossed around as a synonym for the country itself. Rather than being the subject of admiration or consternation, ‘empire’ was more often bandied about as an alternate term for a growing nation.

The vast majority of the invocations of “empire” in the ratification debates are neutral—that is, the term is used to reference a particular size of polity rather than to reference any policy associated with it. The evidence for this lies in the sheer preponderance of examples of the word “empire” being used in innocuous contexts entirely unrelated to imperial ambition or policy. The United States government is referred to as an “empire,” 1 a “mighty empire,” 2 and even a “[f]ederal [e]mpire” 3 in contexts where foreign affairs and expansionary desires are simply not discussed. The third document, an editor’s note in the Massachusetts Centinel, is entirely based

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1 Agrippa VIII, Massachusetts Gazette, 25 December
2 Newport Herald, March 26, 1789
3 Cassius VI, Massachusetts Gazette, 25 December
4 Editor’s Note: The Raising of the 1st 3 Pillars of the Federal Superstructure, Massachusetts Centeniel, 26 December
around domestic policy involving the ratification of the constitution – the “great Dome of Federal Empire”\(^5\) is using ‘Dome’ as a metaphor for the nascent constitution;\(^6\) at a different point in this selfsame article, “the federal republic”\(^7\) is used to refer to the same entity. The sheer number of times that ‘empire’ is used in this way during discussions of the ratification of the constitution leads one to question if, perhaps, the federalization itself was conceived as a sort of empire-building because it combined disparate states under one overarching government – but, regardless of the validity of such speculation, the fact remains that this usage of ‘empire’ is a clear reference to a government’s political holdings rather than any statement on (imperial) foreign policy. ‘Empire’ as a synonym for ‘large territory under one government’ was a neutral use of the term; in these cases America-as-an-empire was not portrayed as good or bad, it merely \textit{was} – an inevitable fact.

Another common conceptualization of American empire also viewed it as inevitable for the United States: American empire was an inevitable development in the future, but not yet reality at the time of the authors’ writing. Continual references are made to the “rising empire,”\(^8\)^{9101121314} the “new empire,”\(^{151617}\) the “infant empire”\(^{1819}\), and so on – all of these ‘nascent’ terms implying, of course, that it is just the beginning of the American empire. The

\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Ibid.
\(^8\) “A True Friend,” Richmond, December 6, 1787.
\(^10\) Anthony Wayne to Marquis de Lafayette, Savannah, 4 July.
\(^12\) John Sullivan to John Langdon, Durham, N.H., 24 May 1790.
\(^13\) Cassius, New Jersey Journal, 31 October.
\(^14\) An Old Soldier, Lansingburgh Northern Centinel, 10 September 1787.
\(^15\) Manasseh Cutler Sermon, Marietta, Northwest Territory, 24 August.
\(^16\) Arnold Colt to Ephraim Kirby Wilkes-Barre, 2 February.
\(^17\) A. New York Independent Journal, 22 March.
\(^18\) Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer, 26 September.
\(^19\) Newport Herald, 26 March 1789.
documents that hold this perspective tend to have either a neutral or positive view of imperial ambition—if positive, it is because of the wealth empire would bring to the United States; the metropole is the focus of the narrative. “The Wish Political,” a short poem by ‘The Printer’s Lad,’ expresses a desire for a quick ratification of the constitution “so our Empire may arise/Until its top stone touch the skies -- / Wealth pour its golden tide – then glad/ With joy shall sing.” The poet clearly associates empire-building with wealth, and wealth with happiness; the means by which the American empire might acquire this imperial “golden tide,” however, go undiscussed. As a form of empire talk these examples do not provide any moral justification for imperial acts because the role of other countries in the production of American wealth is entirely ignored – their manifestation of ‘empire talk rhetoric’ stems from their focus on the benefits to the metropole that empire would bring, an abstract fortune unconnected to any of the (exploitative) labor that would generate it. Moralizing rationales for American empire focused on the “propagation of Christianity” throughout the New World as a result of American imperial expansion. Again, this narrative is targeted at the unwitting enforcers of the imperial project – the individual settlers, acting in pursuit of improved fortunes, potentially devout enough to be moved by the thought of spreading Christianity. The Native peoples are still an abstract part of “the remotest parts of the West” and are not yet concrete enough in American minds to warrant distinct justifications for bad treatment because they have not yet been touched by the tendrils of American expansion.

Even as Americans made little use of justifying empire talk, they made a point of emphasizing their imperial exceptionalism. It is an entirely new form of government – “an

20 The Printer’s Lad: New Year’s Verse, Boston, 1 January 1788
21 Manasseh Cutler Sermon, Marietta, Northwest Territory, 24 August.
22 Lecture Notes, February 8, 2016.
23 Manasseh Cutler Sermon, Marietta, Northwest Territory, 24 August.
Empire new, indeed, in point of existence [...] Never before was the wisdom of an Empire collected in one august assembly, for the purpose of deliberating, reasoning, and deciding on the best mode of civil government [...] It may be emphatically said that a new Empire has sprung into existence, and that there is a new thing under the sun.”24 The United States has a “new and [...] perfect system of government”25 that is unprecedented, different, and special; the “country [...] situation [...] manners and natural character [of America] cannot be pertinently compared to any thing, which has hitherto existed on earth”26 and thereby cannot hold to the standards set by prior regimes.

Americans also made a point of distinguishing themselves from the “British tyranny”27 that they had so recently escaped—a typical mode of empire talk that would distance the new American empire from the bloody, tarnished legacy of its predecessors. This British tyranny was opposed to “the freedom, independence, and liberty of the rising EMPIRE of America”28 – but, even with the firm narrative of American exceptionalism and devotion to freedom and justice, breaking from the British Empire was easier said than done. Even after the revolution, the residue of British political culture lingered in the United States. The very process of the country’s expansion is a testament to this: settlers in emergent states were sent to lands owned by treaty but inhabited by others, the sovereignty and cultural validity of Native Americans disregarded in face of the “freedom” offered by expanding borders.29 This is consistent with British thought and practice, wherein non-European powers unconnected to the “Law of

24 Ibid.
25 Social Compact, New Haven Gazette, 4 October.
26 “A True Friend,” Richmond, 6 December 1787.
27 An Old Soldier, Lansingburgh Northern Centinel, 10 September 1787.
28 Ibid.
29 Lecture Notes, February 8, 2016.
Nations” were not understood to possess sovereignty or a right to freedom from invasion.30 Violence was institutionalized, normalized, and legalized within the British model31 and this transferred to the policies of its former colony; but, this did certainly did not mean that Americans as a whole were fond of British policy or empire. Condemnations of injustice at the hands of opportunistic “men, who in the time of our distress, exulting in the idea of British power, with an unremitting hand, confiscated the property of our unfortunate citizens”32 appears in the writing of the time; the fact that the British policy towards Americans mirrored the American policy towards Native Americans goes unmentioned. The assumption that British agents lingered in the United States to “sow the seeds of division among the people” was “generally acknowledged”33; suspicion towards and fear of British tyranny persisted in the United States despite American replication of some of the British policies that were exercised against American colonists in the past.

Despite the inevitability and exceptionalism of American empire, there were still those who thought it was a dangerous thing to wish for, much less practice. Relative to the other two categories these dissenters were few and far between, in large part because American empire seems to have truly and fully been seen as inevitable by most of the writers; their protests are moderate. One writer advocates early attempts at empire-building in America because “[a] sad experience of the evils that arise from an immoderate pursuit of wealth, and an overdriven love of liberty, is also very beneficial to a young nation; as it will impress the great maxims of moderation & integrity”34 – in other words, it is a good plan for the United States to get the empire-itch out of their system so that they might better govern in the future. This statement

30 Lecture Notes, February 3, 2016.
31 Ibid.
33 “An Old Soldier”, Lansingburgh Northern Centinel, 1787.
34 Salem Mercury, 1 January.
presupposes that it is inevitable that the United States will send out tendrils of imperial influence; it merely seeks to use these early ventures as a teaching moment, rather than a disaster caused by an attempt in a less “enlightened era”\textsuperscript{35} when self-interested politicians might be in office or when the law might have grown muddy and unclear with age.

Simply because of the preponderance of allusions to the ‘American empire’ in unrelated documents I must give the most weight and importance to the notion of empire being more related to a polity’s size than to any desire for or against imperial action. Although there are multiple examples of empire being seen as an inevitable or positive evolution of American power, the number of ‘neutral’ examples far dwarfs positive or negative views of American empire. In examining the documents given I am tempted to conclude that the term ‘empire’ was understood to be a synonym of ‘big country’ and that the majority of sources simply use the word to reference the large conglomerate of a nation created when the colonies were united.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.