Ideas of empire observed in the ratification debates over the United States Constitution display patterns of “empire talk” that may fall under positive, negative, or neutral categories. The states were put in a position of adopting various modes of government, varying in extent of division or consolidation as an empire; that America would be divided into thirteen separate and independent states, or states divided into several confederacies, or states consolidated into one comprehensive federal republic. Some authors feared that the individual liberties and rights of states might be at stake if consolidated. Others feared that the strength the American empire at the time would be compromised if the states were left divided. In exploring the readings of the debate documents, the terms “empire,” “power,” and “union” grow eerily synonymous. In the historical context of ratification, we see similarly relevant rhetoric on the benefits, dangers, and ideas of the possibly inevitable existence of the union of America during the nation’s infantile stage of empire.

Rhetoric on empire, coined as “empire talk” in the past has served as a lens through which one might study and understand different ideologies and justifications of empire. Perceptions presented by empire talk might include ideas that empire is (1) something positive, to aspire to, (2) something negative, to be abolished, or (3) something neutral, that simply exists. Helpful examples of differing views on empire are expressed in the text found in the ratification debates over the United States Constitution. While the term “empire” itself was commonplace in political jargon without inherently positive or negative connotation until the late 19th C, “empire talk” is still apparent in the ways that the writers present their ideas on American empire in terms
of power, influence, values, and consequences. Visions of empire are seen developing as the debates continue to discuss the proposed union of states under one governing “force.” The debates speak of possible consequences both positive and negative that may come from consolidating the empire of America under one federal government, versus dividing into individual states. Others might argue that issues of empire are not necessarily positive or negative, but are organic developments of a governing system in response to the needs of the existing empire.

The parties supporting positive empire talk in the ratification debates argued that consolidation of the states was necessary to protect American liberties, rights, and happiness from impeding forces, both external and internal. Sources read that “it is only in our united character, as an empire, that our independence is acknowledged, that our power can be regarded, or our credit supported among foreign nations.” The statement indicates that the American states must consolidate in order to be considered a formidable power among the other external forces and foreign powers. Additionally, others argued that the individual states with no general government might also figuratively implode on one another, as a result of “internal jealousy, contention, and war” that will inevitably exist between divided states.

The neutral typology of empire talk in the ratification debates suggest that imperial mechanisms of government were organically born from the growing needs of America. Although said perceptions are not positive in the sense of explicitly aspiring toward empire, neutral perceptions still stand as justification for the existence of empire and the means by which empires maintain and grow in power. Parties that contributed neutral “empire talk” argued that

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1 Lecture notes, February 1, 2016
2 George Washington: To the Executives of the States, 1783, Providence United States Chronicle, 15 March
3 James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, New York, 24 October, 1 November
4 Version of Wilson’s Speech by Alexander J. Dallas
the establishment of a union would simply be a larger scale of polity, adapted to America’s need
of a functioning government across its growth in both physical territory, and rise as a world
influence\(^5\). For example, one excerpt reads: “the united wisdom of America is now forming a
government adequate to the wants of our rising empire… if it should seem deficient, proper
altercations will be made.”\(^6\) The excerpt suggests that the new ideas on government had been
introduced as a natural reaction to the changes in growing American needs. The neutral stance
might also argue that “the fathers of [this] country, have deliberated upon the dearest interests of
men, and laboured to frame a system of laws and constitutions that shall perpetuate the blessings
of that independence, which you obtained by your swords” which asserts that the development of
said government is implemented solely to protect what already exists\(^7\).

While positive and negative classifications of “empire talk” stand as justification for
empire, negative “empire talk” in ratification debate emphasized rhetoric on the dangers of
pursuing American empire in the footsteps of history’s fallen imperial powers. Parties
contributing to negative “empire talk” argued that top-heavy power in America would lead to the
oppression and ruin of the people. One source contends that the vaguely defined power to be
possessed by an American president, hardly differs from that of the establishment of the
monarchy in Great Britain\(^8\). Another argued that however the general government might be
framed, it would still end in nothing short of despotism, especially over such an extensive
territory\(^9\). A government given so much power will “degenerate to a compleat Aristocracy,
armed with the powers unnecessary in any case to bestow… fatal to the liberties of the people\(^10\).”

\(^5\) Brutus I, New York Journal, 18 October 1787
\(^6\) An Admirer of Anti-Federal Men, New York Daily Advertiser, 26
\(^7\) Pennsylvania Packet, 22 September
\(^8\) Cato V, New York Journal, 22 November 1787
\(^9\) Centinel I, Independent Gazetteer, 5 October
\(^10\) John De Witt III, American Herald, 5 November
Said excerpt states that the consequences of a top-heavy power spiraling out of control, will weigh on the people, similar to the trends found in the disintegration of past empires. For example, much negative rhetoric on empire challenged the ideas of American exceptionalism and the validity of such claims that the American empire is so different from past empires: “Americans are like other men in similar situations, when the manners and opinions of the community are changed… and your political compact inexplicit, your posterity will find that great power… will as readily produce a Caesar, Caligula, Nero, and Domitian in America, as the same cause did in the Roman empire.”11 This example is opposite in promoting American exceptionalism by asserting that American empire is not different from empires of the past which have been consumed by power instead of the people.

Even if the alleged general government could be “instituted and maintained on principles of freedom [instead of despotism], it would not be so competent to attend to the various local concerns and wants of every particular district,” arguing that even in the case of a “successful” federal government, the government would be so far removed from the people both in physical distance and distance in knowledge of local issues that it would be incompetent in addressing the needs of the people.12 Such a government would compromise individual freedoms and liberties previously offered by state and local governments. The following excerpt reinforces the idea that a general government will be unlikely to accommodate for the smaller states’ internal needs, meaning that that some will inevitably face oppression on the need to preserve the “greater good”: “in large states the same principles of legislation will not apply to all the parts.”13 The risk of despotism and the experiences of mankind in history support the notion that consolidating

11 Cato V, New York Journal, 22 November 1787
12 Centinel I, Independent Gazetteer, 5 October
13 Agrippa IV, Massachusetts Gazette, 4 December
the states under one great power would put the people at risk of losing their individual and unique liberties and freedoms earned by them.

The justification behind each classification of government often relies on comparisons to other empires past and present. The parties promoting negative typology feared that under one power, despotism is inevitable. Negative “empire talk” might argue that joining the union takes away the unique dispersion of power across a great expanse, which is an advantage that differentiates America from other powers. Patterns of despotism in past empires have largely failed, or has lead to the rise of issues that eventually lead to the fall of great empires. The proponents of positive “empire talk” feared that without the strong head of power, the states will essentially implode upon one another. In addition, positive rhetoric suggested that the strength of the union would eventually benefit states individually in areas of trade, value of land, protection of liberties or rights, and protections against other empires. Positive “empire talk” suggested that the unconnected states would be exploited by foreign powers, which would weaken the whole American empire.

Many sources consider the validity of arguments both positive, neutral and negative “empire talk” in deciding perceptions over the Constitution. For example, some argued more than one “side”: it is the perceived object of government to “protect the citizens of an extensive empire from exterior force and injury.... necessary that powers should be given adequate to the discharge of so important an duty. But the gentlemen exclaim that here lies the source of excessive taxation, and that the people will be plundered and oppressed.”\(^\text{14}\) While the three typologies appear to have justified and relevant rhetoric, positive rhetoric appears to be the most basic in terms of doing what needs to be done in order for the empire to survive. Positive “empire talk” essentially contends that the union under a general government will do it’s best to

\(^\text{14}\) Convention Debate
protect citizens from themselves by offering great things like trade, protection from foreign powers, and overall growth. While not everyone will be happy in this system of government, the “greater good” will instead be preserved in a consolidated empire.