Throughout American history, it has been debated whether we are an “Empire of Liberty” that should spread our influence and power, a misguided nation sacrificing personal liberty in the name of imperial ambition, or simply a certain size of polity. The period leading up to the ratification of the United States Constitution resulted in an explosion of these arguments as we debated what the direction of our young nation would be. While many supporters of ratification claimed that unifying our nation into an empire would be beneficial to us and would spread liberty across the globe, detractors of ratification claimed that imperial ambitions and unification would come at the expense of personal liberty, and were dangerous for the nation. Some others took a more neutral stance, arguing that we are not necessarily an empire at all, but rather that we are a certain size of polity. So, there were ultimately three arguments regarding “empire talk” in the United States during the ratification period; that an American empire was a positive ambition, that an American empire was a dangerous ambition, and that an American empire was simply a certain size of polity. When considering patterns of empire talk throughout history, it becomes evident that the United States at this time was largely a positive ambition, although to a lesser degree it could be argued that at this time that imperial ambitions were dangerous or neutral.

Those most adamantly against ratification of the Constitution argued that imperial ambitions would lead to a loss of personal liberty and would be a detriment to our nation. These detractors held that a government so distant from the people
and centralized would distance the people from their government and inevitably lead to corruption. For instance, in the anonymously written Anti-Federalist paper entitled *Centinel Number 1*, published on October 5, 1787, it was argued that “a very extensive country cannot be governed on democratical principles, on any other plan, than a confederation of a number of small republics, possessing all the powers of internal government, but united in the management of their foreign and general concerns.” Centinel goes on to claim that “if the United States are to be melted down into one empire,” then such an empire couldn’t be “consistent with freedom,” and would be the result of “depotisism.” Centinel’s argument here in essence is this; by uniting the nation under such a strict Constitution, the people would be forced to reside under a government that was distant from them and would have different values from the states in which they lived. Therefore, such an empire would be inconsistent with democratic principles and would be a violation of the personal liberty that Americans fought so adamantly for. Centinel’s stance here reflects the fears that many Anti-Federalists had regarding the ratification of the Constitution and the imperial ambitions of the United States. Those who feared imperial ambitions of the United States felt that by ratifying a Constitution, individual states would lose their ability to self-govern, and the national government would override the will of individual states. Indeed, this fear was reflected in another anonymous source entitled *Letter from Massachusetts*, which feared that “the representation (for states within the Constitution) is by far too small to transact the business of so large an empire.” Once again, this statement indicates a fear that under the Constitution individual liberty would be sacrificed for imperial ambitions. And these fears were
not unfounded; under the Constitution, territories within the United States that were not yet granted statehood were treated as colonies, and settlers lost certain rights as military officials began to govern territories.³ To this day, some still believe that the states do not have enough power or control over themselves. These fears paint a negative image of American imperial ambitions, asserting that no good would come from these ambitions. However, at the moment of ratification in American history, while there were those who feared imperial ambitions, it appears evident that an American empire was widely a positive ambition.

The prevalent view during the ratification period was that an American empire was a positive ambition that would lead to a spread of freedom and liberty within the nation and around the globe. And while this view could simply be a “justifying ideology”⁴ for American imperial ambition, it appears evident that Americans widely viewed imperial ambitions as positive. While we may not have lived up to our self-image, in the period leading up to the ratification of the Constitution Americans widely believed that our imperial ambitions were positive goals that would help both our nation and the world as a whole. This sentiment can be seen in this statement from George Washington: “The foundation of our empire was not laid in the gloomy age of ignorance and superstition, but at an epocha when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any former period... At this auspicious period the United States came into existence as a Nation, and if their citizens should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be entirely their own.”⁵ Washington asserts here that the United States came into existence at a period of human enlightenment and liberty,
and in all likelihood will reflect those values as an empire. Because of this, Washington would argue that American imperial ambitions must be positive, because they would spread these ideals of liberty and personal freedom. Many other Americans shared Washington's view, including the Virginia Independent Chronicle, which proclaimed that "it is the Tree of Life, whose Fruit will enthrone this western Empire high among the Nations, and raise the firmest and fairest Temple to liberty, that has ever yet dignified this Globe." This statement once again expresses the thought that an American empire would be firmly rooted in the principles of liberty, would spread liberty around the globe, and would even "dignify" the world with its very presence. Those who believed that an American empire was a positive ambition disregarded the fears of Anti-Federalists, and responded to fears that the government would become too powerful or tyrannical by claiming that, "while the eyes of the whole empire are directed to one supreme legislature, its duties will be perfectly understood, its conduct will be narrowly watched, and its laws will be obeyed with cheerfulness and respect." This statement directly responds to fears of Anti-Federalists, asserting that uniting the nation into one firm empire would not destroy personal liberty or be a risk to the values of the United States. It indicates a view more akin to that of the Federalists, and claims that the "one supreme legislature" would be under close supervision and would act only with the consent of the American people. This was the view that eventually won the day, as the Constitution was ratified. Overall, in the period leading up to the ratification of the Constitution, an American empire was widely a positive ambition. We sought to spread liberty and freedom, and believed that our empire would be a benevolent
one. This was our justifying ideology, and it truly was a positive image. And while we certainly did not live up to this self-image in many respects, including our horrific treatment of Native Americans and the lack of independence that new territories experienced, overall our justifying ideology was a positive one.\(^3\)

Therefore, our imperial ambitions were, on their face, positive.

Another, less prevalent, view was that an American empire would simply be a certain size of polity. Those who held this view did not place moral significance into our imperial ambitions, or view these ambitions as “positive” or “negative,” but rather argued that we would simply be a nation. For instance, the Pennsylvania Herald compared “our infant sovereignty” to “established empires,” implying that we were not an empire at all, but were simply a young nation.\(^8\) The New Haven Gazette argued that we desired to create a “free and independent empire,” but that “[t]he truth is, such an empire is not yet established.”\(^9\) This statement implies that we had in vain attempted to establish an empire, but our imperial ambitions, for good or bad, were not yet realized. This neutral view of an American empire was not very common, and more often people viewed American imperial ambitions as positive or negative. However, it does raise some interesting points, such as that we were a small nation that was at risk of not existing at all in the ratification period.\(^10\)

Ultimately, while it could be argued that an American empire was a dangerous or neutral ambition during the ratification period, for the most part it was a positive ambition. This is due to the fact that our justifying ideology was
positive, and our intentions for empire were good-natured. So, while it is far from evident that we were or are a positive empire, our ambitions were largely positive.

**Endnotes:**

1. “Centinel,” in Independent Gazetteer, October 5, 1787
2. *Letter From Massachusetts*, October 17, 1787
3. Lecture Notes, February 1, 2016
4. Lecture Notes, January 20, 2016
5. George Washington, *To the Executives of the States*, March 15, 1783
6. Virginia Independent Chronicle, September 26, 1787
8. Pennsylvania Herald, July 28
10. Lecture Notes, February 2, 2016