The concept of America as an empire has existed since its foundation. After the Articles of Confederation proved to be incapable of effectively governing the United States, the country’s founders convened in Philadelphia to establish a new basis of government for the fledgling polity. During this time of constitutional ratification, America’s brightest minds engaged in a plethora of debates and discussions regarding the American empire, its ambitions, and its potential dangers. Although a multitude of arguments were given for and against the rise of an American empire, these deliberations centered around the founders’ desires to establish a well-balanced state, one that could eventually possess the power to rival the European empires yet refrain from becoming the authoritarian, European-style empire from which state rebelled

One of the most prominent arguments in favor of a strong American empire was that the United States would greatly benefit by becoming part of the Law of Nations, a code of international conduct that regulated the various interactions among European nations. States within in the Law of Nations limited themselves to restricted warfare with each other, and their conflicts were resolved through mutual peace agreements. However, states not included in this Law of Nations were deemed unworthy of this limited warfare. These “uncivilized” states found themselves at the mercy of these more powerful European empires, subjected to unlimited, total warfare that ultimately ended in the conquest of the weaker power. Because of this
discrepancy in treatment, the United States was eager shed its status as an inferior polity and establish itself as a powerful, independent empire so as to be deemed worthy of entry into the Law of Nations.¹

John Brooks described how this desired transition from weak to powerful state would benefit the United States when he states, “progress from dependence to empire...forces to confess that the ascent to greatness, however hazardous, is more pleasing to the mass of mankind, than the practice of those virtues, which can alone secure respectability in the calm season of peace.”² Additionally, the New Haven Gazette writes of how America, as an inferior power, had been subjugated to the whims of the empires of the day, stating, “Have we not been obliged to crouch under every burthen, and like the stupid ass, submit to the strokes of an insulting driver?” The paper goes on to write of how a unified federal government would be able to form a “mighty empire...which shall make its enemies to tremble,”³ illustrating how having a strong, cooperative, and respectable empire would force states in the Law of Nations to recognize the power of the United States and treat it as an equal on the world stage. Proponents of this consolidated American power strove to prove its ability to effectively govern its diverse territory in a “civilized” manner.

However, not everyone at the time of constitutional ratification was enthusiastic about the notion of an American empire. Negative connotations of an American empire were partly based on Montesquieu’s claim that a republic ceases to govern effectively once it has expanded its borders over an area too extensive to

¹ Lecture notes, February 4, 2015
² John Brooks, Oration Delivered to the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati (excerpts)
³ Social Compact, New Haven Gazette, 4 October
control. Brutus I echoes these sentiments when he writes that in such an extensive republic, “the great officers of government would soon become above the controul of the people, and abuse their power to the purpose of aggrandizing themselves, and oppressing them,” and he goes on to further that, “a free republic cannot long subsist over a country of the great extent of these states.” These writers are concerned that, in seeking to become a vast land empire, the republic would abandon the components fundamental to its existence.

In addition to these worries of territorial overextension, other writers were concerned that the United States would resemble the illiberal, authoritarian empires of Europe if it were to aggressively pursue greater centralized power in an effort to become a powerful empire. The article “A True Friend” highlights this argument when it states that the American people, “ought to be...cautious and suspicious too in the extent of the powers they should delegate...thus to guard against incurring the same fate with all the different governments, which which we have been hitherto made acquainted ...to give this rising empire more striking and experimental lessons.” Furthermore, Cincinnatus argues that by distancing itself from traditional European empires, the United States will serve as a beacon of hope to their oppressed populations who seek to attain a better life for themselves. He writes of the, “many thousands who are now in different parts of Europe, groaning under the chains of despotism...who would gladly fly to our then free and happy country, here

4 Lecture notes, February 2, 2015
5 “Brutus I,” in New York Journal, 18 October 1787
6 A True Friend, Richmond, 6 December
to enjoy the blessings of liberty and the comforts of plenty.” If the United States were to adopt a form of rule similar to that of the despotic empires of Europe, these writers argue that it could find itself drifting down the familiar path that it so recently rebelled against.

It is worth noting that at the time of the ratification of the Constitution that the term “empire” did not necessarily invoke a positive or negative connotation on behalf of the writer. “Empire” did not become a term of moral judgment until the late 19th century, and it did not bear the many negative implications that its modern day definition does. It is likely then that some of these constitutional writers, in utilizing the term “empire” in a neutral sense, were simply describing the type of unified, large-scale polity that had been a common form of government throughout history.

These arguments about whether or not America should pursue a course of empiric ascendancy reflect the growing concerns of its founders and its citizens at the time. Those arguing for an expansive and powerful empire contended that America must be able to develop into a strong, independent state worthy of entry into the League of Nations. Those opposed to this expansive, centralized empire worried that America’s pursuit of empiric power would sacrifice the country’s founding principles in the process, eventually leading it down the all too familiar path towards authoritarianism and despotic rule. These debates over the proper extent of American empire at home and abroad continue to the present day, and,

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7 Cincinnatus, Lansingburgh North Centinel, 15 October 1787
8 Lecture notes, February 2, 2015
with America’s dominance of global affairs at the forefront of the international political scene, it is likely this discussion will endure well into the future.