Despite the atrocities that took place in the wake of the ratification of the Constitution of the United States – namely, displacement and massacre of Native Americans and the continued perpetuation of human bondage – it is difficult to argue that the rhetoric surrounding the document was not positive. An evaluation of documents relating to the debate of ratification throughout the new United States indicates genuine positive ambition in the nation’s founders. While many of the arguments supporting federalism were merely a result of the international status quo of empire befitting a large nation, there seems to have been an honest intention of Americans to create a nation truly committed to advancing enlightened ideals of liberty, justice, and the like. Nonetheless, careful analysis hints at foreboding signs of dangerous ambitions, of the vice and greed that tends to accompany territorial and economic expansion.

Empires were the dominant standard for global economic and political structure at the end of the 18th century\(^1\). A result of this international status quo was the presumption that America would too become an empire of its own, owing to its basic size of polity. Political thinkers expressed the need for the United States “to support the dignity and consequence which we have assumed…among the nations of the earth—that of being an independent and separate empire of ourselves.”\(^2\) “Nations” and “empires” were considered synonymous. The concept of a nation made up of a union of states was also a unique concept; union of the German states, Great Britain, and Italy were still many years away, for example. Thus, empire felt like a natural ambition for a nation based upon a collection of distinct political units. Arguments supporting the strength of the states as a unified nation were backed by likening “progress from dependence

\(^1\) Lecture notes, February 2nd 2015.
\(^2\) “Civis” in Pennsylvania Packet, June 25 1787.
to empire” to an “ascent to greatness.” Another source proposes “if the United States are to be melted down into one empire,” they should be governed as “a confederation of small republics, possessing all the powers of internal government, but united in the management of their foreign and general concerns.” To many, empire was seen as a natural consequence of size, as well as the discrete manner of its territories. Declaring empire was not a statement of intent to expand into new lands or waters; it was acceptance into the international precedent established by Europe and its “law of nations.”

Most early American thinkers focused their empire talk around more ambitious aims, making early thoughts of American empire a positive ambition to the largest extent. Feeding off of the wave of revolutionary ideals that came in securing American independence, Americans felt that the United States would be a bright beacon of progressive values. Their discussion of ratification reflected these sentiments. George Washington was supremely optimistic; “The treasures of knowledge acquired by the labours of philosophers, sages and legislators, through a long succession of years, are laid open for use, and their collected wisdom may be happily applied in the establishment of our forms of government.” The thinkers of the Enlightenment had an important influence on the documents and rhetoric of the time period, as America sought to define its own identity through its promotion of contemporary political philosophy. This appeal to modern intellectualism was portrayed as a display of exceptionalism within the “infant empire”; “Thus the dotage of our parent continent is stained with wild ambition and fantastick pride, while the vigorous youth of the confederated states, expands under the influence of reason

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3 John Brooks, Oration to Massachusetts Society.
4 Centinel I, Independent Gazetteer, October 5th 1787.
5 Lecture notes, February 9th.
6 Washington, To the Executives of the States, March 15th 1783.
7 Lecture notes, February 9th.
and philosophy.” The support of federalism in the “extended and growing empire” was affirmed by calls to “adopt a government founded upon with wisdom and justice on the principles of equal liberty.” Collectively, the dominant empire talk that was a result of positive ambition encompassed all three of the American “revolutions”: the revolution for self-government, for treaty-worthiness, and for dominion over land and peoples. It is important to consider the sources that proposed such worthy motives for a union based on federalism; as publications intended to rally support for ratification – state sentinels and newspapers – the rhetoric was likely to be euphemized and exaggerated, appealing to the Americans who deemed themselves members of enlightened “empires of republican freedom.” Nonetheless, the public discourse surrounding the roots of American empire was, to a great extent, of positive nature.

It makes sense that the early leaders of American empire would seek to expand upon generally good principles; no empire strives to actively promote malicious intentions. But rhetoric can only go so far. In time, the United States would betray its early talk of exceptionalism through its vicious treatment of Native Americans, excluding them from citizenship and subjugating them to the American legal regime. Some glimmers of eventual greed and ignorance shone through the ratification documents, making American empire a dangerous ambition to a small degree. Certain rhetoric created an image of an enemy to the American republic – “Shall then some insinuating courtier, or some formidable desperado, blast the hopes of this young empire? Shall they here erect a tyranny or a despotism more to be dreaded than death, in her most hideous forms?” – demanding patriotism in order to defend its

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8 Massachusetts Sentinel, October 6th 1787.
9 Lansingburgh Northern Sentinel, October 22nd 1787.
10 Lecture notes, February 4th 2015.
11 Massachusetts Sentinel, September 29th 1787.
12 Lecture notes, March 2nd 2015.
13 David Daggett, New Haven oration.
borders. Some were more expressive about intent to not only defend borders, but to expand them, with calls for “both Nova-Scotia and Canada [to] be annexed to the American Empire.”\textsuperscript{14} Other documents presented subtle threats to those that opposed the Constitution, an odd paradox for a country that was promoting freedom of thought. “No good man will wish to oppose [the Constitution], and I hope no wicked man will dare to do it.” There was also some notion of the Constitution being infallible; “Every sentence is full of meaning and of such import that none but the violent and dishonest can oppose…A mighty empire may be formed upon this basis which shall make its enemies to tremble.”\textsuperscript{15} The general need to become an expanding nation – through proposals of expansion and exaggeration of governmental excellence – was integral in the “third American revolution”, the struggle for dominion\textsuperscript{16}. While these early signs of generic characteristics of empires were outweighed by the hope for a new American ideology, they presented underlying tension in the ratification debates.

Even in its fledgling state of union, the United States was set on becoming a competitive empire in the international framework. This underlying intention, present throughout debates surrounding the ratification of the Constitution in 1787, was a result of various factors: the size of polity fitting into the contemporary global system, the dangerous and greedy motives of American commercial and political agents, and, to the largest extent, the genuine desire to become a nation that stood for and maintained its revolutionary values. It would become difficult to implement this noble notion as American empire came to fruition. Perhaps it is a fundamental trait of empires to have initial aspirations for moral exceptionalism, but to fail predictably.

\textsuperscript{14} Fairfield Gazette, July 25\textsuperscript{th} 1787.
\textsuperscript{15} Social Compact, New Haven Gazette, October 4\textsuperscript{th} 1787.
\textsuperscript{16} Lecture notes, February 2\textsuperscript{nd} 2015.