

# Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion and Seizing Destiny: The Relentless Expansion of American Territory

Kim M. Gruenwald  
*Kent State University*

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2010 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

## Recommended Citation

Gruenwald, Kim M. "Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion and Seizing Destiny: The Relentless Expansion of American Territory." *The Annals of Iowa* 69 (2010), 96-98.

Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol69/iss1/7>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

future, the mark of a distinguished Iowa scholar will be his or her ability to cite an Iowa author not included in Jack's collection.

Nonetheless, can any anthology, even one with 93 selections, really be called "the definitive collection"? Jack's own working premise argues against it. Ignored for too long, our literary heritage is a mother lode of unknown gems that enriches readers willing to mine it. The impetus for the publication is to encourage others to explore, not to fence us in to a known corpus. It would be ironic (and tragic) if the book fulfilled the promise of its title and did indeed become "definitive." Should not this book encourage readers to re-explore old issues of *The Midland Magazine* or modern Iowa poetry journals or aging newspaper editorials to read with fresh eyes the observations of others, past and present, also trying to make sense of their encounters with the land and its people?

Asked if he had favorite selections in the collection, Jack replied that his favorites keep changing. "It's a continuous process of rediscovery in a book this large . . . like rediscovering lost change in the couch cushions!" (author e-mail). The analogy is a good one. The reader of *Iowa — The Definitive Collection* will also be richer for the effort.

*Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion*, by Walter Nugent. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. xvii, 387 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 cloth.

*Seizing Destiny: The Relentless Expansion of American Territory*, by Richard Kluger. New York: Vintage Books, 2007. xviii, 649 pp. Maps, appendix, bibliographical notes, index. \$17.95 paper.

Reviewer Kim M. Gruenwald is associate professor of history at Kent State University. She is the author of *River of Enterprise: The Commercial Origins of Regional Identity in the Ohio Valley, 1790–1850* (2002).

The events of the first decade of the twenty-first century have prompted American citizens to question their nation's place in the world. How do others characterize the United States and how should U.S. citizens characterize their home? What role has racism played? Walter Nugent and Richard Kluger have written books that explore the imperial underpinnings of American expansion and power. Nugent argues that the imperialism of the late nineteenth century had its roots in events that began a century before. Voicing a premise that applies to both books, he writes, "'Republic' and 'empire' have not always fit well together" (xiv). Both authors find it remarkable that it took the United States less than a century to acquire territory that spanned the conti-

ment. Both books focus on the acquisition of territory through purchase, treaty, and war rather than on the settlement process.

In *Seizing Destiny*, Richard Kluger focuses mostly on the years between 1750 and the end of the nineteenth century. The history of that century and a half is broken down into 13 chapters, a few of which cover only a year or two. Kluger sets out to detail how the United States acquired the territory needed to build an empire. He presents “the darker side of the tale as well” (xviii). He details the state land cessions to the Confederation after the Revolution, the Louisiana Purchase, and the acquisition of Texas, Oregon, California, Alaska, and Hawaii, as well as territories in the Caribbean and the Pacific. The author and a crew of research assistants combed through many books and articles in search of information, but too many of Kluger’s sources are outdated; a plethora of studies written during the first half of the twentieth century fill too many slots in the short bibliographies for each chapter, and current scholarship is underrepresented. There are no footnotes, and the author directly quotes other authors with no citations. The mammoth volume contains only ten maps and no illustrations.

In *Habits of Empire*, Walter Nugent combines the stories of continental expansion and overseas imperialism to provide a single narrative of the rise of three United States empires. Two-thirds of the book encompasses the first: the taking of the territory between 1782 and 1850 that would become the lower 48 states. Most of the rest of the book details the second empire: the acquisition of Alaska and territory overseas. A short postscript focuses on what the author deems the third empire: a global one sought by national leaders after 1934. Nugent builds his model using a combination of political, military, and diplomatic history. The maps near the start of each chapter are clear and helpful, and, rather than scattering illustrations throughout the text, 16 pages of contemporary portraits and maps appear together in the middle.

How do the two books compare, and what do they have to offer those interested in the Midwest? In focusing on the acquisition of territory from France, Spain, Mexico, England, and Russia, both authors essentially pass over most of the middle of the country. In order to compare their approaches, we can turn to their discussions of the purchase of Alaska. Nugent devotes part of a chapter to it — less than 15 pages — and focuses on both the continuity of the process of empire building and the beginning of what he deems the second empire of the United States. Rather than focusing on settlement, William Henry Seward intended for Alaska to be the stepping stone to an empire of commerce in Asia: “the emphasis shifted from . . . peopling an area to

controlling its politics and economy. In either case, however, it was expansionism" (244).

While Nugent delves into Seward's background and career, Kluger devotes an entire chapter of nearly 40 pages to what he labels "The Great White Elephant Sale." He focuses not only on Seward, but also on the machinations of Russians, U.S. congressmen, and members of the cabinet. In the end, "the architect and facilitator of the Alaska purchase was not around to witness how shamelessly his government neglected the vast northland over the course of the next four presidential terms," Kluger writes, characterizing that neglect as "criminal indifference" (540). Where Nugent sees the purchase of Alaska as the beginning of an overseas empire, Kluger characterizes it simply as the end of an era.

Both books are mostly studies of the men in charge and what they did. But with today's concerns about presidential power, lobbyists, and multinational corporations, that is not necessarily a bad thing. By listing only sources that he directly quotes, Nugent's bibliography is not as useful to those wishing to study the topic further as it might have been. Kluger's bibliographical notes are of even less use. Still, both books present a global perspective on westward expansion and empire building that is missing from more traditional overviews of the American frontier that end at the Pacific Coast. Kluger and Nugent both show that although Frederick Jackson Turner had the right idea — the frontier experience lies at the heart of U.S. history — he got the *story* wrong. Sometimes Nugent's tone leans a bit too far toward political correctness in a way that might provoke some readers to dismiss his conclusions rather than debate them. Kluger, on the other hand, characterizes Native Americans as "scatterings of nomadic, Stone Age tribes shy on the organizational skills or death-dealing tools to repulse newcomers" (xiii) while characterizing those of European descent as "ill-disciplined, hard-charging people" who believed that "all obstacles be damned, and, if need be, demolished" in their quest for land (xviii). Both authors could have added more context that would allow readers to explore more deeply the motivations of their casts of characters. Still, both draw readers into the narrative so that they want to know what comes next. *Seizing Destiny* and *Habits of Empire* are intended to present the work of more than a generation of historians to a wide audience just when debates are needed about the meaning of empire and the way it applies to U.S. history. As such, they are timely studies.