

THE UNITED STATES AFTER 1783: AN AMERICAN OR A BRITISH EMPIRE?

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Standard accounts of U.S. and imperial history treat 1783, the year of independence, as marking a decisive break. Historians of the United States then focus on the ‘national story’, while historians of the British Empire depart for other regions of the world. These familiar guidelines need to be reconsidered. The concept of ‘empire’ is not confined to constitutional change, even when it authorises freedom of action in internal affairs, but embraces other considerations affecting the economy, culture, and international affairs. Historians of the United States adopt a broad definition of ‘empire’ to explain Westward expansion, but do not consider that the USA might itself have remained dependent on external influences for much of the nineteenth century. The seminar presents two arguments: that it is misleading to apply the term ‘empire’ to internal expansion and mistaken to assume that the United States became fully independent in 1783. British influence survived the break in 1783 and extended its reach into the nineteenth century. It was not until after the Civil War that the United States achieved full independence. Far from being an exceptional case, the United States should be recognised as being the first in a long list of former colonial states to struggle with the problem of making formal independence effective.