

# THE AMERICAN CHALLENGE TO BRITISH HEGEMONY, 1861–1947\*

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**ABSTRACT.** In *The Shaping of America* Donald Meinig describes a United States averse to challenging Britain geostrategically but emerging as a powerhouse economy by the late 1890s. But America embarked on a sustained economic struggle with Britain in 1861 by embracing protectionism; America's Civil War ironclads were as much to resist Britain as fight the Confederacy; and in 1866 USS *Miantonomoh* helped persuade Britain to reconsider, then pay, the Alabama Claims. Britain never retaliated in the economic struggle by moving to protectionism and in the late 1800s began to appease America in geostrategic terms. This struggle intensified in the 1920s and 1930s as America and Britain competed for control of international transportation, international communication, and the global oil supply, but by the mid-1940s American hegemony was clear. This article traces the course of the complex economic and political struggle for hegemony in the light of recent models of transitions in the world economy.  
*Keywords:* Britain, cotton, economic war, geostrategy, hegemonic transition, oil.

The conventional argument of historians, historical and political geographers, and international relations scholars is that America became a global hegemon only after the collapse of the Axis Powers and the end of World War II in 1945. Such conventionality is rooted in an interpretation of hegemonic struggles as almost entirely military in nature (see, for example, Goldstein 1988). As John Agnew noted, “theories of hegemonic succession have trouble accounting for the absence of war as the USA replaced Britain as the dominant world power” (1993, 133). Despite his description of America as an imperial power from the Louisiana Purchase on, Donald Meinig eschews much discussion of hegemonic challenge and succession in his magisterial *The Shaping of America* and argues that a “global America” emerged only from the security failures of the “hemispheric defense” policy intended to control Germany and Japan and that led up to World War II (1993; 2004, 331–336). Many of these problems stem from the tendency of academic disciplines to focus on the affairs of the nation-state in which they are embedded and to have great difficulty seeing historical events in comparative and internationalist perspectives.

For example, Meinig privileges President Woodrow Wilson's attempt to create an internationalist peace after World War I, arguing that he “clung to neutrality” in his attempts to maintain the moral high ground for America (Meinig 2004, 306). Against this classical view of Wilsonian idealism is the fact that, at the Paris Peace Conference in Versailles in 1919, President Wilson was not at all neutral when he noted to Admiral William Bullard that “there were three dominating factors in

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