On Thursday, March 6th, at 4:30PM in Lewis Auditorium, Goldwin Smith Hall, Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, Professor of History at San Diego State University, gave a talk entitled "America: Empire or Umpire, and At What Cost?" The talk was part of the Einaudi Center's ongoing Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series.

Cobbs-Hoffman began her talk by observing, “Everyone talks about getting out of Iraq and Afghanistan, but nobody talks about getting out of Japan and Germany.” She attributed this to a fundamental confusion and lack of awareness about the history of U.S. foreign policy. Currently the U.S. has the greatest power to influence foreign conflicts, but this power also has many limits. According to Cobbs-Hoffman, the 20th century saw the U.S. reverse its policy of non-entanglement and become an “umpire”.

To frame her talk, Cobbs-Hoffman asked the following questions. Are we the world’s policeman or a self-important bully? Are we an empire? Are we the only power that can prevent a third world war or a global economic collapse? Must we play this role forever? Was this a necessary detour and is now is the time for a course correction? Is it time to proceed confidently to the next phase?

She then went on to explore three major themes that she hoped would demonstrate the U.S. wasn’t an empire, but something else entirely. Cobbs-Hoffman decided that she needed to write her latest book to answer these questions and to consider the suitability of the paradigm “empire” to describe the U.S. and its relationship with the rest of the world. She finds it a misleading term, and a, “sloppy, imprecise catch-all phrase.”
Next, Cobbs-Hoffman went on to discuss why this paradigm was so problematic, and gave examples of several other expansionist powers of the 19th century that nobody considers empires. In her view, if the U.S. was an empire, so was Chile at the time of the Pacific War of 1879-83, and Argentina around the same period. If we focus on militarism, she asked, how were France, Saudi Arabia and the Philippines able to kick the U.S. out of its bases in their countries? In terms of economic power, Cobbs-Hoffman also found empire to be an inadequate definition. According to her, most of the U.S. economic growth in the 19th and early 20th centuries happened because of things going on inside of its borders. “If we are going to call America an Empire we need to use the definition consistently,” she said.

During the post-World War II period of U.S. dominance, the number of sovereign nations has doubled, and wealth has increased everywhere. Useful tools of governance, such as democratic capitalism, have always spread from their point of origin. Cobbs-Hoffman offered smart phones and farming as two examples. “We don’t say Mesopotamians have been shoving bread down everyone’s throats,” she joked. In her view, democracy spread around the world because it was a compelling model.

For her third major theme, Cobbs-Hoffman discussed how we might develop a different understanding of the U.S. role in the world, namely that of an umpire rather than an empire. She went on to explain that the U.S. became influential because it embodied certain principles that others found attractive. The first principle was “access,” in economic terms with free markets and in political terms with citizen rule. Throughout the period of U.S. ascendancy, independent nations have gradually replaced empires. The second principle was “arbitration,” through laws and regulation. With the Treaty of Westphalia came the belief that war is counterproductive and it would be better to arbitrate our differences. The third principle was “transparency.” During its first 150 years the U.S. had been content to be the “city on the hill,” a model for the rest of the world, but since 1947 has gotten involved in world affairs as a policeman and protector.

This tendency to umpire, according to Cobbs-Hoffman, is rooted deep in the historical DNA of the U.S. “The U.S. was designed to be and has always acted as an umpire among states,” she explained. Its relationship towards its own states has been an approximation of a supra-national power that intervenes but doesn’t replace the existing political powers. Alexander Hamilton and James Madison both called the central government an “umpire” in the Federalist Papers. During the Cold War, therefore, the U.S. gravitated towards playing a familiar role. In 1947, the U.S., though reluctant to get involved after World War II, was pushed and prodded into this role which it didn’t take by coercion. During the following period the U.S. has sometimes been a good umpire and sometimes a bad one, but has been the de-facto umpire in world affairs.

To summarize her talk, Cobbs-Hoffman made a sports analogy, pointing out that baseball umpires are always a target for the discontent of the spectators, and they never win. The U.S. spends more on military than all other nations combined, and the effect has been a decline from first in per capita income in 1950 to seventeenth. Cobbs-Hoffman believes it’s time for other nations to step up to share the burden, and was encouraged to see Britain and Germany taking a leadership role in trying to find a peaceful resolution in Ukraine. She concluded, “A stable system is one that all nations want and are prepared to defend.”

The Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series features prominent leaders in international affairs who can address topical issues from a variety of perspectives. The Speaker Series is part
of the Foreign Policy Initiative at Cornell University led by the Einaudi Center to maximize the intellectual impact of Cornell's outstanding resources in this area.