AN EMPIRE OF YOUTH:
AMERICAN BOY SCOUTS IN THE WORLD, 1910-1960

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A boy’s dream came true in June 1928 when Dick Douglas, David Martin Jr., and Douglas Oliver boarded a steamer in New York bound for Mombasa, Kenya. After extensive mental and physical examinations, the three Boy Scouts had been chosen out of a large field of applicants to join the explorers Martin and Osa Johnson for a two-month safari through central Africa. The adventures of Dick, Doug, and Dave made national headlines. They camped under starlit skies, filmed African wildlife, gave native boys Scouting lessons, and each shot a lion.¹ In 1929, Doug and Dave again traveled overseas. But now they were on a different mission. Together with 1,500 American boy ambassadors hailing from places as far apart as Berlin and Beijing, they participated in the biggest interwar youth gathering: the Third World Scout Jamboree in Birkenhead, England. “Barriers of language were pushed aside as well as religion and color,” Doug observed as he was touring the campground. “Every one greeted every one else with a firm Scout grip and joyful smile.” Pitching their tents alongside boys from five continents, U.S. Scouts staged historical pageants, traded souvenirs with their foreign peers, huddled around the campfires of global youth, and sang songs of international brotherhood.²

My research about Boy Scouting on America’s global peripheries builds on stories such as this one. Chronologically, the project stretches from the Progressive Era to the early Cold War. Geographically, it covers a wide range of different people and places that came into the orbit of American boys and men wearing the Scout uniform. My research project traces physical and imaginary border crossings across several generations. It weaves together colonial Scouting in the Philippines, Boy Scout expeditions to Africa and the South Pole, U.S. participation in international Scout festivals, the transnational networking of adult Scoutmasters, Boy Scouts corresponding with distant pen pals, and Scouting on U.S. military bases in Japan and West Germany after 1945.

Founded in 1910 as part of a larger transatlantic movement, the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) grew into one of the largest and most enduring


American youth ventures of the twentieth century. The Scouts’ emphasis on patriotism, faith in God, and training boys in outdoor skills and responsible citizenship made the organization extremely popular. National elites — Congress, churches, big business, the military — backed the BSA from the start. Since its incorporation more than a century ago, over 110 million Americans have donned the uniform of the Boy Scouts of America. At the same time, membership restrictions around the issues of gender, sexuality, and religion, as well as accusations of militarism and cases of child abuse, have mired the Boy Scouts in controversy to this day.3

Why study the Boy Scouts? Why go beyond the nation? The flowering of the organization in the early twentieth century can tell us a lot about several big questions in U.S. history that are often examined separately. Youth, gender, nation, international relations, and empire all converge in the Boy Scouts. Scouting was started by men in England and the United States who sensed that white middle-class masculinity was in decline. They feared that industrialization, urban vice, ethnic diversity, juvenile delinquency, and women in education made young men soft and racially degenerate and thus incapable of protecting the nation. Attempts to arrest this development through the promotion of physical exercise and outdoor vigor bred new normative assumptions about what constitutes the modern man. Youth organizations such as the Boy Scouts, located in the sphere between the family and the state, were established to advance the ideals of impeccable manhood and keep adolescents out of street gangs and away from crime.4

Like other scholars, I understand gender and youth to be fluid and contested but nonetheless powerful cultural constructs; yet my investigation of these constructs transcends political and geographical boundaries. The problem with much of the historical research on the BSA is that it takes places in a small national sandbox.5 This perspective is not only limited, it is wrong. It is wrong because it implies that the BSA turned into a domestic institution with purely domestic interests, that it looked inward rather than outward, that members negotiated the meaning of boyhood and manhood amongst themselves, and not in conversation with the outside world. By refusing to pursue the history of the Boy Scouts of America beyond the water’s edge, scholars have missed significant ways in which global developments have influenced American
attempts to define youth, gender, and nation. My project covers this neglected terrain.

A second problem is that historians have paid insufficient attention to the intergenerational dynamics of Scouting. Much has been said about the adult organizers, but little about the role of young people in the organization. The history of children tends to escape close scrutiny, maybe because writing it is a grueling task. Boys and girls are rarely autonomous historical actors and they produce fewer sources than adults. Yet similar to the ways in which young people have made their presence in history felt as students, workers, consumers, and activists, Boy Scouts were never the passive agents that the organizers so often assumed they were. Networks that sought to take political advantage of youth came to realize that young people frequently strayed from the scripts that adults had prepared for them. Rather than simply look at *representations* of youth, this project understands youthful subjects as *complex players* with their own interests and desires, who pushed national and transnational politics to new and unexpected places.

My research project heeds calls made by historians such as David Thelen and Thomas Bender to internationalize the study of U.S. history. Scouting serves this purpose because it was a movement that was neither purely national nor global, but both. The BSA, by forging new kinds of cross-border ties along the lines of age and gender, connected American boys and their leaders to a wider world of political and cultural affairs. It offered exciting opportunities for young American males interested in engaging with faraway people and places. I am interested in exploring how transnational forces and experiences molded the bodies and identities of young Scouts, and how these identities enabled them to accept, support, and critique America’s global presence in the twentieth century. I want to examine the nexus of masculinity and the projection of American power through the lens of the nation’s foremost youth organization. This power was reciprocal on many levels, affecting people of all ages and genders, as well as domestic and global politics. In short, I am interested in the correlation of youth, hegemonic manhood, and American empire.

A word about terminology. While some scholars suggest that the terms “transnational” and “imperial” are somehow analytically incompatible, assuming that the former denotes reciprocal interactions...
beyond nation states and the latter signifies the sprawling nature of metropolitan power, my usage postulates a symbiotic relationship between the two. Following Paul A. Kramer, I contend that writing a history of the BSA that proceeds outward into “the world” means writing a history of “power and connection,” a history that is simultaneously national, imperial, and transnational. The advantage of this approach is that it can capture and combine several trajectories of expansion and exchange pertaining to the Boy Scouts — from the internationalist forums of global Scouting to nation-specific colonial or quasi-colonial projects — without neglecting the multiplicity of actors, asymmetries, and uneven transformations these trajectories illuminate.

This essay focuses on the interwar period to elucidate the central argument of my research project: the BSA has always relied on wider spaces — geographical and historical — to construct the ideal twentieth-century man. In Boy Scout culture, Americanism was a masculine nation-making enterprise unconfined by national boundaries. As gender uncertainties caused by the disruptive forces of modernization made proving manhood increasingly difficult, the international arena came into view as one of the last sanctuaries of male authority, one well suited to raising American men for an American century. By sending boys and men abroad, the BSA aimed at reviving the equation of masculinity with national strength, while at the same time adapting it to the needs of a nascent world power drawn into closer political, economic, and cultural relations with other nations. The role of youth was crucial in all of this. The story of the BSA’s global frontiers, therefore, needs to be told as a story of two intersecting spaces: one in which adults sought to reform young people, and one in which young people carved out their own realms of experience.

I. Young Bodies and the Body Politic

Embedded in Dick’s, Doug’s, and Dave’s rise to becoming American boy celebrities are references to two dominant and interconnected discourses that thrived in the early twentieth century: youth and physical culture. These two discourses merged most conspicuously in the figure of the body. In the wake of the cultural turn in historiography, the body has emerged as a serious topic of historical inquiry. Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu have been in the vanguard of a group of social philosophers highlighting the significance of bodies for explaining broader historical developments. Although their
arguments differ, historians are increasingly drawing on their theories to map the connections between bodily practices, collective identities, and the exercise of power. One of their most important contributions was to demonstrate that bodies are not simply biological “facts” but culturally produced. As a result, scholars have stressed the body’s ability to function as a site of domination and contestation as well as a vehicle of social interaction and community formation.

Few turn-of-the-century scientists fused contemporary ideas about physical education, race, eugenics, civilization, empire, and youth more effectively than the American psychologist Granville Stanley Hall. His 1904 study *Adolescence* revolutionized understandings of youth. Hall described adolescence as an intermediate period bridging childhood and adulthood, an unstable life phase marked by extreme vitality and insecurity. He maintained that organized play, not formalized school curricula, built young men with strong muscles and superior moral capacity. While Hall shaped scientific discourse, mass movements such as the Boy Scouts popularized his themes. Building on Hall’s research, white middle-class educators on both sides of the Atlantic regarded fitness as the key to elevating youth and reinvigorating manhood. Extolling the physical aspects of manliness sustained the belief in the fundamental dissimilarity of the sexes at a time when more women were questioning this distinction. Clean, healthy, and upright male bodies indicated discipline, decency, and productivity. Constructing an ideal of citizenship that was both moral and muscular, BSA leaders introduced the Scout Oath in 1910, which made young Scouts promise that they would keep themselves “physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.” The first BSA handbook, published one year later, laid special emphasis on personal hygiene, proper eating, outdoor exercise, and sexual restraint. “To be strong,” physical educator George J. Fisher advised the young reader, “one must be pure in thought and clean in habit.”

Early Scout leaders turned Hall’s recapitulation theory — the idea that children grew up repeating the stages of human evolution — into a powerful narrative documenting the parallel processes of maturation of American boyhood and nationhood. The BSA’s founding texts derived the manly code of Scouting from a heroic national past. Celebratory accounts of nineteenth-century continental empire-building encouraged twentieth-century boys to see themselves as future citizens of a world-class nation. Obscuring white guilt, the 1911 *Handbook for Boys* cast the history of U.S. annexations as a moral crusade. In 1848, Americans defeated “the barbaric and military despotism of Mexico.”

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10 Instructive examples of how to utilize bodies for the writing of U.S. history are Olaf Stieglitz, *100 Percent American Boys: Disziplinierungsdiskurse und Ideologie im Civilian Conservation Corps* (Stuttgart, 1999); Jürgen Martschukat, *Die Geschichte der Todesstrafe in Nordamerika: Von der Kolonialzeit bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 2002); and James A. Tyner, *Oriental Bodies: Discourse and Discipline in U.S. Immigration Policy, 1875-1942* (Lanham, MD, 2006).


14 Ibid., 233.
Following the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States liberated Cuba from the “inhuman treatment practised by the Spanish soldiery.” Even as Americans acquired an oceanic empire, the handbook told its young readers that “there is no country less warlike than ours.”15 In this sanitized history, America’s colonial ventures were presented not as bloody conquests but as an exercise in modern knighthood.

Although references to chivalry became less frequent over time, BSA members continued to make creative use of one of the oldest literary forms, the quest, to generate allegiance to empire. The quest functioned as a sort of proxy narrative, a way of discursively making sense of empire without having to acknowledge its existence. Like the classic Arthurian quest, the journey to manhood in Scouting was paved with ordeals. The imagined reward was citizenship, which boys could attain by proving their merit and advancing upward in rank. Youth was presented as a teleological process geared towards immaculate manhood. Quests also involved travel. Just as the romanticized medieval knight pursued glory in faraway places, Scouts were to seek adventure outside the feminized spheres of home and school. Boys allegedly built sturdy bodies and male character in natural surroundings under adult supervision. While most Scouts attended regional summer camps, the highest recognition was reserved for those who traveled to distant lands, thereby imitating the central myth of American history: the story of virtuous pioneers, inspired by manifest destiny, who forged new communities on foreign territory. Adolescence was thus transformed from a scientific drama into a juvenile romance that utilized quest narratives for the entwined projects of man, nation, and empire-making.

To stoke the boys’ enthusiasm, BSA leaders stressed the element of play in these rites of passage. Youth reformers in the United States subscribed to the idea that citizenship training was a game full of adventure that boys should enjoy playing — an idea developed by the British founder of Scouting, Robert Baden-Powell.16 Survival training,
campfire rituals, and choreographed pageants promised worthwhile entertainment. The Seventh and Eighth Scout Laws — which state that a Scout is “obedient” and “cheerful,” respectively — were supposed to bolster parental authority by teaching boys to happily follow the orders of their elders but also blurred the lines between work and play, leisure and politics. Travel accounts as well as fiction about Boy Scouts carrying a mobile American civilization to the outer rims of U.S. state power, such as the Philippines or the Panama Canal, whetted young people’s appetite for overseas adventure. Playful encounters with the world helped adolescents outline the shifting horizons of masculine citizenship and American empire before global currents shaped their lives as adults.

II. A Vast Army of Peace Boys

If the Boy Scouts grew out of an Anglo-American project aimed at shoring up the validity of strong masculine and national identities, the geopolitical and cultural transformations of the early twentieth century brought to the fore progressive femininities and alternative masculinities that challenged the gender order that Scouting upheld. Pacifism, church decline, economic professionalization, and the horrors of World War I curbed the muscular Christianity of previous decades. Modern mass leisure and consumerism allowed a more assertive youth to dwell in social and cultural spaces of their own making. Movie theaters, dance clubs, gambling halls, sports teams, summer camps, and other recreational institutions offered new opportunities for adolescent bonding and self-expression. The fact that young people were beginning to craft their own gender and sexual identities through peer practices such as flirting and dating filled conservative educators with alarm. Another cause of concern was leftist youth movements that forged transnational ties of their own while filling their ranks with working-class children in defiance of traditional racial and gender sensibilities. The specter of gender upheaval was further raised by the enfranchisement of women and their advance into male-dominated spheres. Girl organizations such as the Girl Scouts or Camp Fire Girls foregrounded the civic potential of young women. Unsettled by these developments, Boy Scout organizers sought ways to reaffirm their status as the guardians of the one true organization that raised able-bodied men and citizens who could master the global risks and uncertainties of their time. Transnationalism offered a solution, even as others in the movement viewed it as part of the problem. After the machine guns fell silent...
in 1918, the webs of commerce, migration, and cultural exchange that had pulled Americans onto the world stage once again started to multiply. The interwar years were a period full of nationalist resentment and economic volatility but also replete with aspirations for world peace and democratic globalization.21 Despite the U.S. government’s refusal to join the League of Nations, world fairs and exhibitions, international conferences and sporting events, as well as media changes demonstrated America’s interdependence with other countries. New technologies accelerated the pace of global communication and transportation. U.S. citizens traveled abroad more often but they also lived in foreign countries as businessmen, artists, diplomats, and missionaries. Young people, too, aided by innovations such as the youth hostel, journeyed across nations and continents as never before, getting acquainted with new people, places, and cultures.

The Boy Scouts navigated the same currents. In less than a decade, their body culture had become a global phenomenon. The organization’s mantra of fun, fitness, and fellowship appealed to boys from various societies. As branches of the movement began cropping up in Europe, Latin America, East Asia, and throughout the British Empire, the BSA, too, established an offshore presence. Overseas councils were founded in Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and other territories under U.S. colonial rule. In addition, BSA officials entered the newly formed transnational bodies of global Scouting, the International Scout Conference and the World Scout Bureau, where they worked with European Scout leaders to develop worldwide standards for citizenship training consistent with their Western middle-class expectations. Most prominently, the organization sent delegations to the World Scout Jamborees, large rallies of Boy Scouts of various

nationalities that have been held almost every four years since 1920. The selection criteria favored highly decorated boys who were healthy, athletic, and able to cover their own travel expenses. The interwar jamborees and their performances of gender, nation, and generation reshaped Scouting’s image, adding new layers to the meaning of boyhood and manhood. They reimagined youth as the architect of a new world built on peace and universal brotherhood.  

However, while adult organizers set the stage for these global youth encounters, it was actual youth who made these networks flourish by making their time, capital, energy, and bodies available to them. American Boy Scouts eager to bond with their distant peers subscribed to Scout magazines with international news, wrote letters, and engaged in foreign aid. Young people’s enthusiasm proved contagious, as the example of Daniel Carter Beard illustrates. One of the founders of Scouting in the United States, Beard initially railed against “alien influences,” echoing the virulent nationalism and nativism of postwar American society. But the international fan mail he received, including letters from boys who were looking to find penpals in other countries, as well as popular reports of young Scout explorers hoisting the American flag on distant shores softened his stance. In 1929, the almost eighty-year-old Beard crossed the Atlantic to participate in the Third World Scout Jamboree in England. “Uncle Dan, you should be the happiest man in the world to be able to look around you and see all your dreams realized,” BSA Foreign Commissioner and banker Mortimer Schiff told Beard as they were watching the “vast army of peace boys” that had assembled at Arrowe Park march by in their national Scout uniforms.

Beard was not the only eyewitness who was impressed by the exuberance with which young participants enacted the jamboree themes of world friendship and brotherhood. Carried away with how youths extended the fraternal ties of nationhood to an imagined global community of youth, British journalist Sir Philipp Gibbs had this to say about Boy Scouts from different corners of the earth marching in unison and laughing and singing together: “It seemed to me, as I stood there watching ... that here was the beginning of a new chapter in history. We older men who remember the past had no place here. It was youth’s rendezvous, with new hopes, a new vision of life, a great promise ahead.” In a sense, Gibbs was merely amplifying the generational distinctions made by young Scouts themselves, who used their moment in the public spotlight to articulate forceful

22 Tammy M. Proctor, On My Honor: Guides and Scouts in Interwar Britain (Philadelphia, 2002) focuses on the British role in the internationalization of Scouting after World War I.

23 Boys’ Life, the official BSA magazine for boys, promoted the “World Brotherhood of Boys” penpal service as early as 1916. On Boy Scouts who organized aid for war-devastated children in France and Armenia after World War I, see “Scouting to the Rescue in Devastated France,” Boys’ Life (August 1920), 32; and “When Scouting Brings Life,” Scouting (April 1923), 2.


critiques of adult international relations. Citing his young age as an asset rather than an impediment, Gibson Sherrard from San Antonio, Texas, wrote home from England: "It is remarkable how we get along over here ... we seem to understand [each other] for we seem to all have the same impulses and ideas — anyway, we are just boys ... If the older people would have just such a meeting of all nations in a spirit of friendship," Gibson augured, "I don’t believe there would be any wars."27 Eagle Scout Owen Matthews made a similar point when recounting his experiences at the 1933 jamboree in Hungary. “Even though their creed or color might be different,” Owen formed amicable bonds with Scouts from England to Estonia, from Syria to South Africa, and learned to “love these brother Scouts as much as those in America.” Owen then called upon his government to turn more young Americans into campfire diplomats, since “peace gatherings and encampments of youth from all countries [would] do more to further future world peace than adult conferences held in some castle or other building.”28 In all these cases, U.S. boys tapped into the notion that youth were unburdened by the prejudices and follies of their elders, and thus uniquely qualified to envision different national and global futures.29

This faith in the transformative power of youth motivated some Boy Scouts to foster a universal language that would reduce the distance between nations and cultures. Again U.S. boys were in the vanguard. They helped turn the “International Left Handshake” into a ritual that bound Scouts together the world over. Plans to establish Esperanto as the lingua franca of the movement thrived in the early 1920s but found little support outside a small circle of connoisseurs.30 Much more popular were initiatives to introduce Indian sign language as a mode of transnational communication. Training courses that American boys offered at international Scout festivals based on Scoutmaster William Tomkins’s manual Universal American Indian Sign Language captured the interest of Boy Scouts from different countries.31 Although their success was limited, such schemes testified to the young Scouts’ optimism that their playful interactions would spawn a less cynical and more authentic form of international relations.

It would be easy to dismiss these efforts as youthful naivety, but postwar associations of boyhood with purity, flexibility, and inclusiveness also served adult interests. Creating the image of the Boy Scouts as global crusaders for peace was not just another recruitment tool in a time of slow membership growth. It helped turn attention away

from instances of youth bullying and child abuse that the BSA had been trying to keep from the public eye to protect Scouting’s good name. More importantly, it deflected charges that the organization was militaristic to the core. Boy Scouts selling war bonds and waving the Stars and Stripes had become iconic scenes for Americans during World War I. In the climate of demobilization after 1918, Boy Scout leaders sought to turn war bodies into peace bodies by shedding some of the movement’s martial components. U.S. officials, in keeping with international standards, added knee socks, shorts, and neckerchiefs to the Scout uniform to soften its military features. Socialist groups warned that the BSA was a junior branch of the U.S. army that indoctrinated kids for war. They could point to the fact that the BSA had garnered endorsements from high-ranking officers and veteran organizations such as the American Legion. Many parents were reluctant to let their sons join a youth program that emphasized marching and soldier-like drill. The uniform drove a wedge into immigrant families, in particular. The boys the BSA viewed as agents of Americanization had to contend with their fathers, for whom the uniform served as a bitter reminder of military conscription in their homelands. To combat such misgivings, Scout leaders insisted that all they cared about was “character-building” and instilling fraternal feelings in boys, until the rise of totalitarian youth in the 1930s rendered equations of Scouting with militarism much less effective.

Although adult organizers underscored the political productivity of Scouting’s body culture in an era of global-ideological reorientation, they simultaneously worked hard to rein in the transnational impulses of young Scouts. Demonstrations like the pacifist procession in Chicago in 1922 in which Boy Scouts carried a banner reading “Humanity Above Nationalism” gave BSA leaders serious headaches. What if international understanding weakened the bond between manhood and national service instead of preserving it? What if young people jumped to wrong conclusions about their role as peacemakers? Chief Scout of the World Robert Baden-Powell argued passionately against returning to the “narrow patriotism” of prewar times, but the former warrior wondered how boys could be trained for peace without “emasculating [the] nation.” Echoing Baden-Powell’s concerns, U.S. Scout officials avoided describing their overseas activities with any term that might have branded them unmanly and unpatriotic. One such term was pacifism, which many equated with weakness or outright treason, but American organizers also found internationalism to

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32 The BSA national archives in Irvine, Texas, hold a file on Scoutmasters accused of homosexual and pedophilic conduct that goes back to 1919. A ruling of the Oregon Supreme Court in June 2012 required the BSA to make public records dating from 1965 to 1985.

33 See MacLeod, Building Character in the American Boy, 178. The International Scout Conference in Paris in 1922 recommended these changes to the Scout uniform.

34 On the BSA’s cooperation with the American Legion, see BSA, Annual Report of the Boy Scouts of America (New York, 1920), 39–42.

35 For some of these intergenerational disputes between parents wary of militarism and children who wanted to join the Boy Scouts, see the letters that boys wrote to Daniel Carter Beard, Daniel Carter Beard Papers, Boxes 213–215. See also “From Doughboy Duds to Oscar de la Renta,” Scouting (October 2002), 12–13.


37 Robert Baden-Powell, “Education in Love in Place of Fear,” Jamboree (January 1923), 326.
be a dirty word because of its proximity to revolutionary social-ism. “We are not pacifists or internationalists,” assured Mortimer Schiff. For men like Schiff, whose success in international business made them new American role models, there was no better founda-tion for a peaceful and prosperous future than in raising men “with clean, strong minds and bodies.”

The common language spoken by Boy Scouts around the globe, Schiff insisted, had little to do with bookish theories but everything to do with giving literal flesh to the idea of brotherhood through camaraderie and shared manly experience.

Few examples are more illustrative of the BSA’s anti-intellectual-ism in international affairs than its handling of the major supranational player of the time, the League of Nations. Starting in the early 1920s, League representatives reached out to organized youth as part of a larger campaign to propagate their ideals. While U.S. Scout officials welcomed the League’s assistance in lobbying foreign governments to grant Scouts travel facilitations, they blocked any motion to introduce a League-backed merit badge for world citizenship. Much of the fear that participating in a system of binding global governance would sap national virility was expressed in gender-specific and generational vocabulary. “While diplomats blunder and men debate — here is youth … pledged to a high code of living,” stated George J. Fisher at the first multi-national Scout gathering on American soil in 1937. Against the dual menace of an unmasculine foreign policy and a hyper-masculine fascist youth, the BSA pitted a concept of international relations grounded in strong national bodies and brotherly recognition. Portraying professional diplomacy as inept and ineffective, Scout leaders suggested that world peace hinged neither on a rootless pacifism nor on opaque supranational regimes but on voluntary ties of companionship forged by tough, disciplined, and patriotic boy-men. Here and elsewhere, adult organizers rode the wave of youth to present their ways as the way of the future.

III. Brotherhood, Race, and the Rejuvenation of Empire

Adolescent performances of border-crossing friendship drove adult organizers to reconsider the relationship of manhood, national loyalty, and transnational responsibilities. But the spectacle of white U.S. Scouts holding hands with boys of different color abroad also produced potentially powerful critiques of social and racial
inequalities at home. The idea of raising male youth in the spirit of cooperation based on characterizations of boyhood as classless, transreligious, and transethnic called established hierarchies of race and empire into question. In fact, the BSA’s interwar policies towards Native Americans, African Americans, and colonial youth were directly related to the transnational forces that renegotiated the boundaries between nations and generations. Again, the behavior of young people shaped these policies in decisive ways.

Conservative youth workers had always exhibited a strong interest in non-white masculinities. Many believed that the naturalism and primitivism of the supposedly “uncivilized races” could be utilized to shield young white men from the feminizing effects of modern civilization. This explains why Native American lore played a central role in Boy Scout mythology. Wild West shows and Indian war dances that U.S. boys performed at the interwar jamborees turned the figures of the rugged pioneer and the red warrior into global symbols of American masculinity. However, the popularity of these symbols sometimes led to unexpected results. U.S. Scouts who had traveled to Hungary in 1933 were caught by surprise when Hungarian children interrupted one of their pageants with improvised Indian yells. Four years earlier, British Boy Scouts were disappointed when their American companions did not appear fully dressed in Indian garb for the 1929 Jamboree. Instead, they scoffed at the U.S. delegation for taking “feminine precautions,” seeing in their modern tents and generous food rations a sign of “American plutocracy.” Ironically, the globalization of playing Indian had been so successful that foreign Scouts felt confident enough to criticize American boys as unrepresentative of their country’s reputation for hardiness.

One way to counter this perception was to bring in individuals from racial groups whose masculine traits BSA leaders sought to instill in the nation’s youth. Native American lore experts were hired to

lend authenticity to large-scale Indian performances abroad. The International Scout Conference laid the groundwork for non-white participation in global Scouting in 1924, declaring that Boy Scout membership should not be denied for “any reason of race.” Such stipulations provided a boost to those in the BSA leadership who held that invocations of brotherhood on the international stage also required expanding the realm of brotherhood at home. In 1926, the Inter-Racial Service (IRS) was established to increase African American participation and encourage reluctant white southerners to allow segregated black troops. Another group the IRS targeted was Native American boys. Starting in the late 1920s, BSA officials partnered with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to launch troops at federal boarding schools for Native Americans. The IRS’s endeavors were only modestly successful. By the mid-1930s, black membership had passed the 30,000 mark. Small inroads into the Asian and Native American community had also been made.

Parallel attempts to enlist non-white youth in the cause of building an expansive and inclusive American nation were undertaken in the colonies. U.S. Scoutmasters started organizing troops of local boys in Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines as early as 1912 to pacify and “civilize” indigenous youth. Discounting geographical, cultural, and political differences, the BSA national office bundled Scouting in these overseas possessions into a separate “Region 13” in addition to its twelve geographical regions on the mainland. BSA officials believed that Scout training would strengthen the bonds of empire and turn colonial boys into future native elites loyal to the American nation-state. Backed by state officials, missionaries, businessmen, and military personnel, U.S. Scout authorities emphasized that their work with indigenous youth was a project conducted in the spirit of mutuality and fellow feeling rather than domination. This vision found full expression at the Hungarian World Jamboree in 1933 when a delegation of Filipino Scouts arrived on the campground and pitched their tents next to boys from New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Few occasions were more apt to sell to the world a successful example of cross-racial brotherhood and benevolent empire. Here, organizers thought, were the future pillars of a healthy, robust, and friendly world-class American Commonwealth. Like their pioneer forbears, the boys had proven their manhood by crossing new frontiers: the frontiers of international politics. Chief Scout Executive James E. West drew this analogy in his description of the gateway to the American camp:
Our blockhouses were not built for defense against hostile Indian tribes. They were a promise to the Scouts of the World that, in entering, they would find the same spirit, in Scouting, of resourcefulness, perseverance and friendliness that marked the early pioneers ... Weren’t we settlers, too, in a strange land? Hadn’t we come to help in the building of an empire — an empire of youth and brotherhood?47

But even as the multiracial character of the jamborees reflected poorly on domestic race politics, masculine and racial hierarchies were anything but absent from Scouting’s “empire of youth”. In fact, the “Little Americas” that Boy Scouts constructed on the country’s twentieth-century global frontiers were less a socially accurate representation of a multicultural nation than a projection of white fantasies. The playful and often superficial interactions of white boys with the few Native American, black, and colonial Scouts that had been invited as token representatives of the “other” America tended to gloss over differences instead of engaging with them. Non-whites, fully aware that the BSA’s model of manhood privileged white middle-class youth, gave mixed responses at best. While some Native and African Americans detected in Scouting a corridor leading to social recognition, others saw in the separate and segregated treatment of minority boys evidence that involvement would lead to the perpetuation of their second-class masculine and civic status.48 Many voiced their disapproval by simply staying out of the organization. Colonial boys may have taken offense that white Scoutmasters were advised to lower the standards when it came to admitting non-white youth, but their reluctance to flock to the Boy Scouts in high numbers had just as much to do with the organization’s colonial policies of military drill and strict American-ization. The publication of a local supplement to the BSA handbook in 1932 that contained a section on Filipino patriotism was vetoed by national authorities.49 It was only after the islands embarked on the path to full independence in the late 1930s that membership in the newly founded Boy Scouts of the Philippines soared.

Despite the formal inclusion of non-white youth into the BSA’s orbit of brotherhood, the belief that global Scout friendship entailed fraternizing with the racial “other” remained heavily contested. More than once the boys had to grapple with the ambiguities of equality. Not unlike adults, some responded with apathy and outright hostility, others with courageous support. Many white Scouts in the South emulated the discriminatory practices of their elders and refused to

49   Governor General Leonard Wood to James E. West, June 4, 1924; "Memorandum for General Parker," December 6, 1932. Records of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, Record Group 350.3, Box 26981, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.
admit blacks into their troops.\(^5^0\) A group of Los Angeles Boy Scouts, on the other hand, voted in favor of welcoming a Japanese-American boy in their midst, despite racially motivated objections from white parents.\(^5^1\) Most white adults supported Scouting because they saw it as a tool to reconstruct, not replace, national and imperial identities. But the Fourth Scout Law that a Boy Scout “is a friend to all and a brother to every other Scout” sounded so appealing and, yet, was so undefined that youth in different localities could come up with answers of their own. These answers on occasion departed from or even defied the intentions of their superiors. For young Scouts, whether they embraced Owen Matthew’s interracial idealism or sided with the Jim Crowism of white southern boys, it was the interaction with new transnational forces that set them apart from preceding generations and suggested to them that the destiny of their nation and its relationship to the world ultimately rested in their hands.

**Conclusion**

What, then, are the lessons that historians can draw from the young Americans in Scout uniform who navigated the turbulent national and international waters of the Interwar Years? How do their itineraries fit into the chronologies of manhood and American empire in the early twentieth century? The interwar jamborees conveyed a palpable sense of excitement. The boys approached each other with a joyful curiosity and faith in their ability to usher in a new era in global relations. But even as Boy Scouts claimed a special role for youth in transcending class, racial, religious, and national antagonisms, nascent feelings of difference dented their self-proclaimed fraternity. The Boy Scout narrative of postwar reconciliation had a clear Western bias, downplaying the wartime experiences of former enemies or current ideological opponents — in particular, Soviet Russia. Moreover, by actively exploring international relations, U.S. boys returned not only with a better appreciation of global commonalities, but also with a clearer understanding of what made them unique as Americans. Nation-building, not cosmopolitan unity, was more often the principal outcome of these youth gatherings. Pageants, flags, camp folklore, and uniformed bodies representing different countries made many Scouts aware that national distinctions mattered and that the nation was the primary locus of belonging. Although rivalry was discouraged in global Scouting, British Scouts “glowed with national pride” when they saw their “Chief” Baden-Powell enter the arena, hailing him as a Christ-like saint who “had brought the world of youth together in

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50 See Jordan, “A Modest Manli-
ness,” 218. On the challenges
facing African American Boy
Scouts, see also Gilbert R.
Mason, Beaches, Blood, and
Ballets: A Black Doctor’s Civil
Rights Struggle (Jackson, MI,
2000), 92-95.

51 R.R. Cochran, Be Prepa-
red! The Life and Illusions of
a Scoutmaster (New York,
1952), 88-89.
a common fellowship.”52 Likewise, American boys boasted that their camping methods were the envy of the civilized world and stated that hearing “the national anthem in a foreign land made quivers race up and down [their] spines.”53

Transnationalism worked in tandem with nationalism to offer the initiation rites for a new manhood that cast the United States as a young and benign power in world affairs. And yet, the nostalgic drift of Boy Scout rhetoric is obvious, and their rituals advanced a markedly preadolescent and asexual style of masculinity. Scouting’s boyish cult of friendship hardly captured the complexities of the twentieth-century’s political, economic, and cultural interdependencies — it trivialized them. At the same time, however, it bridged the realms of play and politics in decisive ways, linking abstract notions of national identity and global responsibility to concrete sites and experiences. Whistling the tune of youthful brotherhood made hegemonic manhood all the more effective since it obscured the fact that adopting the latter meant the subordination of women and denigrating the masculinities of other men (socialists, atheists, homosexuals) who deviated from accepted standards of manly achievement. Meanwhile, adults basked in the ambiance of youth and the positive imagery it evoked. Posing as youthful leaders allowed them to whitewash their personal histories and refashion themselves as dynamic and forward-looking men. Boy Scouting’s creation of “minor utopias” through juvenile bonding exonerated the same elites whose policies had made imperial conquest and war possible in the first place.54 This was the organization’s answer to the problem of how to inculcate in boys a sense of masculine citizenship in an era that witnessed the erosion of traditional gender roles as well as alternative attempts to breed the “new man” under the banner of Soviet communism, Italian fascism, and National Socialism. Such ideological distinctions resurfaced during the BSA’s golden years in the “long” 1950s when the confluence of Cold War politics and the arrival of the baby boomers led to record growth rates resulting in more than five million active members.55

My research project joins a new generation of scholars who have begun to write the history of “global America.” The BSA’s imperial and transnational encounters reveal how young American males left their imprint upon changing conceptions of their nation’s place in the world, in an era when U.S. attitudes toward international involvement were very much in flux. These encounters were conditioned by region, race, ethnicity, class, and age — power structures that

52 “The Jamboree of Smiling Faces,” The Scouter (September 1933), 2.
55 The BSA published current membership figures in its annual reports to Congress.
shaped the ways in which American boys gained access to identity-forming global experiences. To be sure, only a small elite of mostly white and well-off U.S. Scouts enjoyed the privileges of overseas travel. But in following their tracks we can learn more about changes and continuities in the larger patterns of social status, gender, and empire. Overall, the BSA crafted an understanding of masculine citizenship that transcended the domestic-foreign binary and constituted a significant auxiliary of U.S. expansion. But since there is always a tension between cultural norms and individual practices, this project is committed to recording the agency of youthful subjects as they struck their own paths to manhood within and beyond the ideological constraints of Scouting. A history that examines how Boy Scouts came to terms with the entangled notions of gender, nation, and empire needs to cut across geographical and generational lines.

There is much to be gained from embedding the history of the Boy Scouts of America in larger global contexts. It illustrates the centrality of young people in the widening of America’s “external footprint,” to borrow a phrase from Ian Tyrrell, and shows how youth became a potent symbol of its imagined national and international future. It reveals how twentieth-century U.S. global expansion was tied to articulations of new ideals of boyhood and manhood. It sheds important light on the dialectics of military culture and peace. And it invites reflection on the extent to which narratives of fun and fellowship, rather than military or economic might, spurred the evolution of American empire.

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