

American Foreign Relations Reconsidered, 1890–1993

Edited by Gordon Martel



London and New York

272 25

4 Imperialism, American style, 1890–1916

Joseph A. Fry

In April 1899 Theodore Roosevelt exhorted his countrymen to meet the challenges and responsibilities of an imperial foreign policy: “If we are to be a really great people,” Roosevelt asserted, “we must strive in good faith to play a great part in the world.” His vision included building an isthmian canal, seizing the strategic bases necessary to decide the “destiny of the oceans of the East and the West,” and subduing and ruling the islands acquired from Spain. Three years later, Republican Senator George F. Hoar lamented the nation’s decision to follow TR’s advice. Hoar charged the United States with converting the Monroe Doctrine from a policy of “eternal righteousness and justice . . . to a doctrine of brutal selfishness looking only to our own advantage.” Even more tragically, by suppressing the Filipino revolution, “We crushed the only Republic in Asia . . . made war on the only Christian people in the East . . . [and] inflicted torture on unarmed men.”¹

These conflicting perspectives clearly foreshadowed the difficulty historians have had in “coming to terms” with American empire. Indeed both Americans generally and many influential scholars have been loath to acknowledge that the United States had joined the European powers in the practice of imperialism after 1890. In contrast to the British who justified and took great pride in their imperial exploits, Americans have persistently denied the existence of an American empire or have labored to demonstrate that it was more benign and more transitory than its European counterparts.²

This discomfort with the existence and nature of American empire lies at the heart of the differing interpretations of United States foreign relations from 1890 to 1916. Simply defining the term “imperialism” has generated intense disagreement and frustration. As early as 1919, Joseph A. Schumpeter pronounced “The word ‘imperialism’ . . . abused to the point where it threatens to lose all meaning.” Conscious of this ambiguity or averse to linking the United States to imperialism, many historians of this period have avoided grappling with the definition or the substance of imperialism by employing the expression “expansion” or by interpreting the period in terms of America’s rise to “world power.” Still, given the acquisition of the Philippines, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Guam, and Samoa; the establishment of protectorates over Cuba, Panama, and the Dominican Republic; and armed

interventions in several of these countries as well as Mexico, Haiti, and Nicaragua, students of these years must acknowledge and confront directly the phenomenon of imperialism. And, they must define it. Although he was referring to jazz, musician Fats Waller has provided an applicable admonition: “Man,” Fats warned, “if you don’t know what it is, don’t mess with it.”³

Those most reluctant to acknowledge the existence of an American empire have defined imperialism narrowly. These scholars have essentially equated imperialism with colonialism, or the formal annexation of territory not meant to be integrated into the larger body politic. In so doing, they effectively limit American imperialism to the holding of Puerto Rico and the Philippines and separate these acquisitions from Hawaii and from previous territorial annexations on the north American continent. Thus American imperialism was a “great aberration,” a temporary, almost accidental, loss of national direction, from which the United States quickly recovered after 1900.⁴

By contrast, those historians most disturbed by US actions abroad have defined imperialism more broadly. While citing the holding of formal colonies as imperialistic, they have also contended that the United States had begun establishing an “informal empire” by the 1890s. These scholars emphasize that imperial control may be exercised through economic means as well as political annexations or military interventions and that the United States built an “overseas economic empire.” Because Americans had pursued commercial expansion abroad to solve internal problems since the 1780s and had expanded territorially at the expense of nonwhites throughout the nineteenth century, the imperialism of the 1890s was neither accidental nor transitory. Still other students add culture to the areas of imperial control. They define “cultural imperialism” as a stronger nation assuming the right to impose and disseminate its beliefs and values at the expense of a weaker, native culture.⁵

Given these widely varying definitions, one might be tempted to agree with the Australian historian Sir Keith Hancock, who pronounced “Imperialism . . . no word for scholars. The emotional echoes which it arouses are too violent and too contradictory. It does not convey a precise meaning.”⁶ But the centrality of imperialism to this period of United States foreign relations demands a working definition. The key considerations are power, control, and intent. Imperialism and hence empire exist when a stronger nation or society imposes or attempts to impose control over a weaker nation or group of people. This control may be formal (via annexations, protectorates, or military occupations) or informal (via economic control, cultural domination, or threat of intervention). The informal species of empire might involve businessmen, missionaries, and other non-state actors. Advocates of a stricter definition will protest the difficulty of measuring the degree of informal control or domination that constitutes imperialism. For example, where does normal commercial activity end and economic imperialism begin? Although absolute certainty of measurement may be unobtainable in such areas, the phenomenon of imperialism remains apparent. As Richard Graham, a historian of Latin

America, observed, “It may take a hydraulic engineer to measure the flow of water, but anyone can see it flows downhill.”⁷

THE ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

A scholarly consensus on the motives for American imperialism in the period from 1890 through 1916 has been just as elusive as agreement on a definition of the phenomenon. Easily the greatest contention has centered on the influence of economic considerations. Observing the vast increase in American productivity and exports, turn-of-the-century critics of European and American imperialism cited the quest for markets and investment opportunities as the driving force behind United States foreign policy. Scholars such as Charles A. Beard and Scott Nearing subsequently developed these themes during the 1920s and 1930s; but it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that the “revisionist” or “new Left” school of American historians compiled the most comprehensive brief for the primacy of economic influences. Beginning in 1959 with the publication of *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, William A. Williams and a number of his former students emphasized the continuity of an aggressive, expansionist American foreign policy. Prior to the Civil War, the United States had constructed an empire on the north American continent; following Appomattox, the focus shifted to a “New Empire” of foreign trade with the final suppression of the native Americans serving as the crucial linkage between the two forms of empire. By the 1890s, the makers of US foreign policy sought markets rather than extensive new territories. Indeed, they practiced the “imperialism of anti-imperialism” by arguing for free trade and investment and against large colonies.⁸

According to the revisionist argument, the pursuit of this “informal empire” intensified during the Gilded Age as repeated depressions disrupted the economy and incited an alarming level of social protest. Both farmers and manufacturers traced the core problem to overproduction, hence the need for unobstructed access to foreign markets to dispose of the “glut” and to avoid explosive outbursts such as the Homestead Strike or the Populist Movement. This compulsive search for an “open door” for foreign trade, and the attendant practice of looking abroad to solve internal problems, became the essence of American foreign policy. Building on this theoretical grounding, on world systems analysis, and on dependency theory, several more recent studies have argued that the United States emerged as a core or metropole (industrialized, commercially and militarily developed) nation during this period and pursued a foreign policy designed to dominate and exploit peripheral (weaker, non-industrialized) countries economically and politically.⁹ From this perspective of more than a century of empire building, the annexation of Hawaii and the Spanish islands was more a “culmination” than an “aberration” and more a product of the nation’s political economy and place in the world capitalist system than a momentary, irrational act.

Several interlocking “chains of causes” had produced war and empire: the

depression of the 1890s had solidified the consensus on the need for foreign markets; the potential for sales in China and the fear that the Europeans were about to close their spheres of influence to American trade left businessmen uneasy and the Far East second in importance only to Cuba among policy-makers; and the government, particularly in the person of McKinley, formulated a partnership with business in promoting foreign trade. Both McKinley and his business constituents had concluded in mid-March 1898 that only by restoring international order and preserving domestic tranquility could trade and particularly the development of US prospects in China be pursued. Although McKinley “did not want war, he did want what only a war could provide: the disappearance of the terrible uncertainty in American political and economic life, and a solid basis from which to resume the building of the new American commercial empire.”¹⁰ With the conflict came the annexation of Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, not as the first steps toward a great territorial empire but as strategic outposts for safeguarding an isthmian canal and as outposts en route to the China market.

According to the revisionists, both this partnership between business and government and the drive for international economic expansion remained central to the making of American foreign policy in the early twentieth century. Together with Williams, other historians have asserted that business and political leaders agreed on the need for the establishment of a liberal capitalist world order. This ideal world order would have replicated American representative government and private capitalistic enterprise, guaranteed the access of industrialized nations to the raw materials and markets of less developed countries, and instituted government action to maintain the order and stability necessary for economic penetration and growth and to protect overseas markets and investments. The practical pursuit of these objectives led the United States to oppose virtually all revolutions during these years.¹¹

With business clamoring for aggressive government support through trade associations such as the National Association of Manufacturers and the American Asiatic Association, and establishing a worldwide presence in everything from Heinz ketchup to McCormick reapers, the “promotional state” was born. Most importantly, argue the revisionists, the United States promoted and protected American economic interests by working to exclude European influence and to suppress political and social disorder in Latin America and to enforce the open door policy of equal access for trade and investment in China. Government pursuit of these ends encompassed a broad range of actions. In Latin America, the United States threatened and carried out military interventions, established protectorates, administered customs houses, and applied political and economic pressures. The government also employed “chosen instruments” or groups of American bankers in efforts to counter Russian or Japanese influence in China or to promote order in the Caribbean through loans to favored clients. And, as the US government-business relationship solidified, the United States reformed the consular

service, adopted "bargaining" tariffs aimed at forcing concessions from other nations, established the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce and the National Foreign Trade Council, and allowed American banks to establish branches abroad – all with an eye toward augmenting foreign commerce and investment.¹²

The revisionist critique of US foreign relations elicited one of the most bitter debates within the American historical profession. Opponents of the so-called "New Economic Determinists" charged them with misunderstanding and perhaps even consciously misrepresenting the history of the late nineteenth century. Rather than a period of panic and depression, the Gilded Age was, they argue, an era of growth and optimism. American business looked first to the home market, and Congress signaled its agreement with this focus by repeatedly enacting protective tariffs that impeded commercial expansion. Critics charged the revisionists with exaggerating the closeness of government–business relations. For example, there was no unimpeachable evidence that McKinley had acted principally from economic concerns. As Julius W. Pratt had argued in the 1930s, business had opposed war until the very eve of the conflict and had been "indifferent to imperialism or definitely opposed" until Dewey destroyed the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay. Official policy was hesitant and contradictory, and "tenuousness of the contacts . . . characterized the structural relationship between business and government."¹³

These critics further asserted that only by concentrating on the "rhetoric" of expansionists at the expense of "objective realities" could one make the economic argument. Business was far from unitary on the issue of commercial expansion, with larger, more concentrated companies providing the bulk of the exports and smaller concerns being the most solicitous of government aid. The most successful US exporters, such as the Singer Sewing Machine Company or Standard Oil, carved out foreign markets with little government assistance, and the value of exports and investments in Europe and North America far exceeded those in Latin America or China, the focus of most expansionist strategies. Indeed, the fabled "China market" was statistically a "myth," since it constituted only 0.3 per cent of American exports in 1890 and less than 1 per cent in 1910. Given these "realities," placing economic expansion at the center of US policy made the process unduly "rational" and "unitary" and helped make treatments of this period "the worst chapter in almost any book."¹⁴

Such cautions, especially those treating the structural relations of business and government, the most successful export companies, the geographic distribution of American exports, and the overly rational portrayal of policy, are well taken. However, these critics have not refuted the depiction of the liberal–capitalist ideology which, according to the revisionists, provided the essential intellectual context for policy formation. While "realistic" trade figures are useful, they did not prevent generations of Americans from coveting *potential* profits in China. Finally, the Gilded Age was not an era of optimism for farmers. Plagued by chronic hard times, both cotton planters

and midwestern producers of livestock and grain clamored for expanded export markets throughout this period.

THE PRATT SCHOOL AND ITS ADHERENTS

Most of the remaining writing on the motivation for American empire has investigated alternatives to the economic interpretation. Building particularly on the work of Julius W. Pratt and Samuel Flagg Bemis, who responded to Beard and Nearing in the 1930s and 1940s, and on subsequent studies by Richard Hofstadter and Ernest R. May in the 1950s and 1960s, scholars emphasizing non-economic explanations have more often portrayed US actions in the twenty-five years after 1890 as humane and well-meaning rather than selfish and exploitive, as ad hoc and accidental rather than systemic and predictable, and as breaking with rather than continuing American foreign policy traditions.

Like the revisionists, Hofstadter and Robert Dallek linked foreign policy to domestic events; however, they contend that the American public's response can be understood best in psychological rather than material terms. Buffeted by the post-1893 depression, by the Populist Movement, by the growth and consolidation of big business, by urbanization and the changing nature of immigration, by the labor violence, and by the ostensible closing of the frontier, the nation experienced a "psychic crisis." Americans channeled their domestic frustrations and humanitarian concerns into a chauvinistic, jingoistic foreign policy; both the war and colonial empire "had more to do with relieving internal strains than with serving American interests abroad."¹⁵ Extending this argument, other historians have decried the nation's failure to deliberately weigh "interests and responsibilities." Instead of acting from "political realism" (or economic self-interest), the nation had gone to war out of an "explosive combination of altruism and self-assertive national egoism" and acquired an "empire in a fit of absent-mindedness."¹⁶

The concept of national hysteria driving the nation to war raised the crucial question of how this overwhelming public pressure was translated into governmental action. If businessmen were reluctant followers in the decisions for war and empire, who provided the impetus for these momentous steps? Writing in the 1930s, Julius Pratt offered several seminal interpretations. First, he credited scholars and publicists such as Admiral Alfred T. Mahan, Congregationalist minister Josiah Strong, and Columbia University professor John W. Burgess with instructing the American public in the merits of a "new manifest destiny." Burgess and Strong assured Americans of the superiority of their Anglo-Saxon governmental institutions and Protestant Christianity and urged them to spread this superior civilization abroad. Mahan argued for a "large policy" featuring the construction of a great navy and an isthmian canal and the holding of key naval bases in the Caribbean and the Pacific for both strategic and commercial purposes. Therefore, when the American public sought an emotional, psychological release from the

problems of the 1890s, they had before them a racial, religious, and strategic blueprint.¹⁷ To these domestically-produced prescriptions, subsequent historians have added the influence of the contemporary example of European imperialism and the assumption that imperialism was a requisite of the great power status to which the United States aspired.¹⁸

Other historians, writing contemporaneously with Pratt, agreed that an aroused public had driven McKinley and the Republican Party into war; however, these historians cited the sensational reporting of the American press as primarily responsible for focusing American sympathy on the plight of the Cuban people. Drawing on their own reporters and information provided by the Cuban junta in New York City, the "yellow press" had inundated readers with a flood of biased stories depicting Spanish cruelty and Cuban suffering. The American public's intensely humanitarian response, when combined with its outrage over the sinking of the battleship *Maine*, dictated war.¹⁹

Pratt augmented these explanations by providing another ostensible point of linkage between the public outcry and the McKinley administration. Although Mahan was the principal popularizer of the "large policy," Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge were the government officials most responsible for laying the "fruits of war" at the feet of this aroused public. Roosevelt and Lodge had adopted and advocated Mahan's ideas, had anticipated that war with Spain would afford the opportunity for its consummation, and had helped manipulate a weak McKinley (who was "clay" in their "hands") into the acquisition of empire. In sum, a skilled group of "large policy" conspirators had utilized their positions and the war brought on by a public convinced of its racial, humanitarian, and nationalistic mission to launch the nation on its imperial voyage.²⁰

Regardless of the exact source of the stimulus, the concept of an overly-excited public forcing war on a resistant political and business establishment became common staple by the 1950s. Ernest R. May cited the "feverish emotion" and "mass passion" that gripped the nation, while providing the most forceful depiction of still another linkage between popular opinion and government action: "Overshadowing all other factors . . . was the domestic political aspect of the Cuban problem." May's study culminated a long tradition of portraying McKinley as weak and politically expedient. His "duty to the Republican party was much clearer than his duty to the nation," and he bowed to public opinion in order to avert the threat of Democratic victories in the mid-term congressional elections of November 1898.²¹ If then, as the cumulative "Pratt approach" contended, the US decision for war and empire had been unplanned and accidental, manipulated by a few conspirators, or the result of sincere (if misplaced or misguided) humanitarian concern, the nation was absolved of the selfish, calculated, and exploitive motives ascribed to it by the revisionists.

The emphasis on idealistic and humanitarian objectives provided another alternative to the economic argument for explaining not only the onset of war

and empire but also the essence of US foreign policy during the decade and a half after 1900. Pratt's treatment of the "imperialism of righteousness" had again anticipated this new trend when he contended that "the missionary minded" among Protestant religious groups had argued effectively that the United States had a "moral and religious responsibility" to spread Christianity and uplift mankind in Cuba, the Philippines, and the world over. Concentrating, particularly on Asia, the missionary movement experienced its "golden age" from 1900 to 1915. As a group, missionaries had much greater exposure to Asia than other Americans. They and the domestic religious establishment had the greatest influence over general American perceptions of the Far East, and, according to some historians, exercised considerable control over general policy formation.²²

Although the missionary movement provides the most obvious example of humanitarian motives, scholars have not confined this argument to organized religion. They have asserted that the benign impulse to aid others characterized US policy in general, within both the insular empire and the Caribbean. By promoting sanitation, furthering education, building public works, maintaining order, and instituting democratic institutions, the United States sought to prepare these less developed countries for material prosperity and self-governance. Within this interpretive framework, presidents from McKinley through Wilson are seen as acting to extend "civilization" to others, as promoting "progressive" societies abroad, or as practicing "missionary imperialism."²³ Working from this reform dimension of US policy, other historians have suggested that American imperial actions abroad were natural extensions of the progressive movement for honesty, efficiency, and expanded opportunity at home.²⁴

Historians seeking to refute the "sinister and sordid motives" associated with the economic interpretation have also accentuated strategic considerations. Focusing particularly on the Caribbean region, these writers make "continental security" the essence of policy: the United States acted to safeguard the isthmian canal route and to prevent European nations from securing bases or threatening the safety of the continental United States. Following the nation's rapprochement with Great Britain at the turn of the century, both US civilian and military leaders feared German meddling in Latin America, and similar apprehensions over German intentions had prompted retention of the entire Philippine archipelago rather than a single coaling station. Maintaining the order and stability necessary to block European intrusions had required annexations, formal protectorates, administration of customs houses, military interventions and occupations, and the general suppression of revolutions. But these actions were undertaken reluctantly and for defensive purposes rather than to gratuitously dominate and exploit smaller, weaker nations. Termed by some "protective" or "preclusive imperialism," such ostensibly defensive, non-economic behavior has led others to dismiss "North American imperialism" during these years as a "myth."²⁵

Accomplishing such strategic objectives required power or the "tools of empire." Foremost among these tools was the development of US military capacity and especially a modern navy. With increased strength came an enhanced institutional and professional role for the American military. From their positions on the Navy General Board and the Army General Staff, military leaders endorsed the antirevolutionary drive for order and stability in the Caribbean, favored the exclusion of Europeans from the western hemisphere, and sought additional resources and bases in the Far East. Significantly, historians have contended that these military spokesmen were motivated primarily by strategic concerns, and secondly by their desire to strengthen their own branches of the service.²⁶

According to other historians, enhanced American naval power was part of the larger process of modernization by which the United States and Europe outstripped the rest of the world technologically. The resulting disparity in power, together with parallel differences in national coherence and purpose, undergirded empire. Making modernization the essential context, Richard H. Collin has portrayed a vibrant, materialistic, technologically advanced, conjoint, and Protestant United States confronting a less developed, comparatively inert, disparate, and Catholic Latin America. Against this background of cultural dissonance and of US strength and Latin weakness, both conflict and American predominance were virtually inevitable.²⁷ This analysis represents "imperialism as an objective process due fundamentally to the unavoidable impact of advanced western civilization on the comparatively backward native cultures of the third world." Objectivists also emphasize the necessity for advanced nations "to intervene . . . to impose order on chaotic conditions" and the interventions as "primarily a work of education and civilization."²⁸ If the process is inexorable and progressive, then selfish national or political interests are minimized or excluded.

Just as the economic analysis elicited stringent criticism, the "Pratt approach" has not gone unscathed. Students of American naval policy have discredited a central aspect of the "large policy" conspiracy by demonstrating that a group of navy officers, rather than Theodore Roosevelt, formulated the battle plan directing Admiral Dewey to attack the Spanish fleet at Manila Bay. Drafted before Roosevelt took office as assistant secretary, the plan had been personally approved by President McKinley prior to its implementation.²⁹ This portrayal of the president controlling strategic planning is part of the more recent depiction of McKinley as a masterful politician and adept manager of men who dominated his administration and its foreign policy. H. Wayne Morgan, Lewis L. Gould, and John L. Offner have argued convincingly that McKinley was neither manipulated by large policy conspirators nor overwhelmed by public pressure. Instead, he opted for war and empire based on a deliberate assessment of US interests. In the most recent and exhaustively researched of these volumes, Offner constructs a strong case for the influence of domestic political over economic considerations in McKinley's thinking.

But Offner's McKinley is a much stronger, more competent, and reflective leader than the man presented by Ernest May.³⁰

Even with Offner's meticulous reconstruction of the political and diplomatic context, definitively proving that the reticent McKinley acted *principally* from humanitarian or political motives remains only slightly less difficult than demonstrating his primary economic aims. Similarly, determining the true nature of "public opinion" at the turn of the century, and linking such sentiment to the actual formation of policy has proven most difficult. Who constituted the public? In the absence of Gallup polls, how can public opinion be gauged? Were editorial opinions synonymous with and representative of public opinion? Other scholars have questioned the influence of intellectuals and publicists. Men such as Strong and Mahan, according to James A. Field, Jr, were more concerned with internal problems or strategic defense than with aggressive expansion or imperialism, and their decisive impact on American public perceptions remains unsubstantiated.³¹

More generally, the analytical approach of finding exceptions to the economic argument or comparing "rhetoric" to "reality" might also be applied to the humanitarian or strategic reasoning. For example, even the most ardent practitioners of the Pratt approach are embarrassed by Theodore Roosevelt's high-handed treatment of Colombia and his expedient response to the Panama "revolution"; nor were the fixing of elections in Nicaragua and Santo Domingo or the violent military rule of Haiti consistent with democratic doctrine. Similarly, Melvin Small has questioned the widely held view that Germany constituted a military and strategic threat in the Caribbean after 1903.³² If the reality were not so menacing, then the rhetoric of contemporaries and those historians who justified US interventions in the Caribbean or Mexico must also be challenged. Such "exceptions" or discrepancies between rhetoric and reality raise the larger issue of American "innocence." Can such innocence and alleged devotion to principle and self-defense be reconciled with the uncanny promotion of US material interests by humanitarian and strategic policies?³³ And can the innocent and aberrant nature of US policy from 1890 to 1916 be sustained other than by narrowly defining imperialism and by ignoring the continuity of an acquisitive, domineering policy toward Mexicans, Indians, and other nonwhites?

DEVELOPMENT AND DEPENDENCY

Such questions demand an assessment of the impact of American imperialism on other nations and peoples. Generally, but not exclusively, those scholars working within the conceptual boundaries of the Pratt approach have positively evaluated the outcomes of American policies. They emphasize that the United States undertook imperialism with an "uneasy conscience" and a commitment to prepare others for self-government. This commitment distinguished American imperialism from the European variety and operated as a "safety valve" protecting the United States from "some of the temptations

– to abuse, to disillusionment, and to cynicism – of its great power.” As the requisite first step to imparting respect for democratic processes, the United States imposed order and stability on the Philippines and the Caribbean. By subduing chronic banditry and suppressing revolution, Americans reduced the persistent violence in these societies and rescued them from the threat of European intervention.³⁴

According to these historians, this greater domestic tranquility facilitated other positive achievements. American control in Cuba, Puerto Rico, or the Philippines improved public sanitation, eradicated disease, extended education, and transformed public facilities. The enhanced political and social order also attracted foreign investments for economic development, at least a portion of which trickled down to the general population. While acknowledging that US policies had kept some unpopular governments in power, that the lessons in self-government had not always been learned well, or that development had not brought general prosperity, these scholars concluded that “by the comparative standard, the United States had no reason to apologize for its record.”³⁵

Other students of US policy in the Philippines and Caribbean have been less complimentary, arguing that the costs of the US quest for order and stability have been far too high. Suppressing the Philippine revolution between 1899 and 1902 resulted in eighteen thousand Filipino battle casualties and contributed to at least another hundred thousand deaths from disease and starvation. Other interventions led to several hundred Mexican and more than two thousand Haitian deaths. Critics have also attributed deleterious social and economic developments to these military occupations. Louis A. Pérez, Jr argues convincingly that US intervention against Spain stifled the social portion of the Cuban revolution that had called for the distribution of land to the dispossessed. Similarly, the American military has been credited with extending discriminatory racial codes and opposing labor organization in areas under its control.³⁶

This conservative bent has also been detected in the political realm where the order imposed by the United States repeatedly produced or sustained elitist, usually autocratic, domination rather than effectively promoting the adoption of democratic institutions. American-trained and armed national guards provided the bases for decades-long dictatorships, and catering to American wishes became more crucial than public service to successful office holding. Corruption and narrow personal and upper-class self-interest, in the absence of clear domestic accountability, too often characterized these distorted polities. Those emphasizing the negative aspects of US control have vigorously disputed the contention that an American presence benefitted smaller nations economically. They argue that increased US and foreign investment, better roads and ports, enhanced technology, greater productivity, and expanded exports failed to improve the standard of living for the great majority of Filipino, Caribbean, or central American peasants and workers. Instead, these countries developed export economies focused on agricultural

or extractive products that were often controlled by foreign owners or local elites and were especially vulnerable to international economic forces. The poor repeatedly lost small, food-producing farms to large haciendas and were left as migrant workers subject to seasonal unemployment. The experience of Puerto Rico provides perhaps the most telling refutation of the “exaggerated claims” for the benign influence of US administration and economic presence. Despite orderly, honest, efficient government imposed by the United States, despite significant private investment in sugar, tobacco, and public utilities, and despite greatly expanded exports, the overall standard of living remained static between 1898 and 1930. As Daniel R. Headrick has perceptively noted, “growth” and “development” are not synonymous. The latter requires investment in human rather than physical capital – a process that seldom occurred under the imperial mantle.³⁷

Dependency theory has provided one of the most provocative attempts to explain the developmental experience of smaller, poorer countries. In essence, this complex body of thought contends that the development and prosperity of the industrialized, technologically sophisticated “metropolitan” nations and the agrarian, non-industrialized, and poor “peripheral” countries have been incompatible. Using their wealth and technology, their control of markets, and their military might, metropolitan nations have forced the periphery to supply raw materials and consume foreign-produced industrial goods. According to dependency theorists, this relationship compels the poor countries to concentrate on a few exportable products, and leaves them with little control over economic decisions and with severely limited capacity to industrialize and enhance national welfare. Real power resides with the metropolitan nations: they determine the terms of trade and, together with local elites, derive the profits from the system.³⁸

Dependency theory has evoked spirited rejoinders. Dissenters assert that this analysis gives insufficient weight to local conditions, such as the colonial history of elite rule, neglect of education, or lack of physical and human resources for industrialization in Latin America. Others complain that *dependencistas* fail to devote proper attention to non-pecuniary ideologies or to account for different rates of development among third-world countries.³⁹ Given these and other criticisms, dependency theory fails to demonstrate direct US responsibility for *all* the ills of its client states, but this analytical shortcoming does not refute the theory’s accurate description of dismal conditions in the Philippines or Latin America.

While dependency theory has addressed the imperial relationship in economic terms, the concept of “cultural imperialism” encompasses ideas and beliefs. Once more differences over definition abound. Some scholars believe that the process must be forcefully imposed and promote political or economic ends. Others reject this “functional” approach for a “structural” theory that accentuates the discrepancy in power between two societies and the ability of the stronger one to provide the teachers and to define topics (ranging from religion to technology) worthy of study. The latter approach

coincides most closely with the broad working definition of imperialism adopted earlier in this essay. Regardless of definition, the concept of cultural imperialism facilitates an examination of the roles of often-overlooked “non-state actors” such as missionaries, teachers, and medical personnel in US foreign relations and promotes a more inclusive assessment of the impact of US presence abroad.⁴⁰

In the broadest sense, American insistence that others should adopt democratic and capitalistic institutions has been “profoundly imperialistic.”⁴¹ By pressuring Cubans to eschew political violence or Filipinos to prepare for self-government based on a US model, the United States demanded that these countries remake their societies according to American values. Clearly, the “reforms” aimed at stabilizing economies, or instituting honest, efficient, representative governments, or promoting improved sanitation or medical practices embodied a critical cultural dimension. To effect changes in any of these societal or political areas required alterations of cultural beliefs and practices.

Missionaries were the most prominent group of non-state actors propagating American cultural beliefs abroad from 1890 through 1916. Indeed, this era has been characterized as the most aggressive in American missionary history. Phrasing their goals in a language of conquest, missionaries went to China and the Philippines not as “passive cultural intermediaries” but as “conscious agents of change, of radical transformation. They came to Asia to do something to Asia and Asians.” Missionaries sought to impose religious codes that they deemed to be superior; they also labored tirelessly on educational and medical projects.⁴²

Education obviously provided a mechanism for disseminating western values and technology, but historians have also included western medicine among the “tools of empire.” On an immediate and practical level, Americans instituted measures for improved sanitation to protect their administrators and soldiers in Cuba, Mexico, or the Philippines and to help prevent the spread of disease from the Caribbean to the mainland. But Americans also viewed medicine as a “superior form of propaganda for the benefits of western civilization and capitalism.” Missionaries perceived medicine as a way to do good while at the same time making contacts with and acquiring influence over indigenous populations. Medicine, contends David Arnold, was a “celebration of empire itself,” since it often involved massive exercises in state and military intervention and the reordering of indigenous societies along western lines.⁴³

If US imperialism produced mixed economic results, what was the cultural impact? Historians once referred to tremendously “constructive activities” and “useful reforms and achievements” in the Philippines and other areas under American control.⁴⁴ More recent scholarship either questions the positive effects of the American presence or suggests that the impact has been exaggerated – both negatively and positively. Virtually all historians agree that efforts to transplant US political institutions were largely futile. Even if client

states adopted an ostensibly representative government, they were invariably plagued by dictatorships, elite domination, politically related violence, inefficiency and corruption. In short, patterns that existed prior to US control persisted. The same was often true in education or medicine. For example, US efforts to promote education in the Philippines were well intentioned and aided tens of thousands of Filipinos, but by 1913 the average child spent only two years in school and the overall literacy rate had not improved. Similarly, the US occupation of Vera Cruz in 1915 produced a startling medical and sanitary transformation of the city into a much cleaner and healthier place; soon after the US departure, all had returned to “normal.” Finally, missionaries in the Philippines and China contributed to a spirit of individualism promoting democracy in the former and revolution in the latter. The missionaries in China also furthered education and medical innovations on a scale similar to that in the Philippines, but they converted few Chinese to Christianity. Again, the native culture was tenaciously resistant to change. A. B. Campbell’s observation concerning political transference seems more generally applicable: “They [subject peoples] cannot be made more civilized, and therefore fitter for self-government, if civilization is defined in alien terms.”⁴⁵

Both dependency theory and cultural imperialism raise the issue of collaboration between Americans and the people they sought to control. This, like the impact of the US presence more generally, has been a relatively neglected topic. But, as European scholars have emphasized, collaboration was an essential component of the imperial process. From the European and American perspective, it was directly related to the cost of empire. Without indigenous collaborators, the administration of either colonies or informal empire would have been prohibitive. Discerning the motives of local collaborators has proven more difficult. Politicians often cooperated with the United States or solicited US aid or intervention as a means of gaining or retaining control of their governments. Merchants who were well placed usually profited from US trade and investment. Elites in Cuba or the Philippines understood the US tendency to block revolution and thereby preserve their social and economic positions. Still, narrow self-interest was not the only motive for collaboration. Many politicians, merchants, or aristocrats also considered US political institutions, economic practices, and technology as the most viable route to modernization and general prosperity. Therefore, elite collaborators were often complex figures who pursued national as well as personal goals within severely constricted choices. For the masses in Cuba or the Philippines the reality of American power and the futility of resistance were probably more responsible for their acquiescence, if not active collaboration.⁴⁶

IMPERIALISM, AMERICAN STYLE

What conclusions emerge from this welter of interpretations? First, the United States was neither so exceptional nor so innocent as scholars once contended. Like their European contemporaries, Americans possessed and

employed superior power to control others. After all the justifications have been stripped away, the essential process remains one of "Big Dog eats Little Dog."⁴⁷ Second, the economic, social, and political dislocation of the 1890s provided an essential backdrop for a more assertive foreign policy, but American imperialism was not the result of conspiracy, mass irrationality, incompetent leadership, or national absent-mindedness. McKinley, Roosevelt, and Wilson were competent leaders who dominated their foreign policies and acted from considered assessments of national and international interests.

When evaluated from the perspective of long-term ideological and policy patterns, the events of the 1890s were neither an accident nor an aberration. American imperialism followed logically from a heritage of continental expansion at the expense of Mexicans and Indians and from an ideology that had long emphasized the inequality of races and the superiority of white Anglo-Saxons, had linked US expansion to a "mission" extending liberty to others, and had made economic growth central to obtaining national greatness.⁴⁸ The campaign after 1890 for a liberal world order featuring democratic institutions and capitalism was built on solid foundations.

Regardless of the specific motive or objective – whether economic expansion, strategic security, democratic reform, cultural uplift, or religious conversion – those who made policy in the United States, and those who attempted to influence it, invariably sought order and stability and opposed all revolutionary change they felt unable to control. Indeed, the pursuit of order and stability and a predictable international environment open to American ideals and interests provided the principal operational theme for US policy from 1890 through 1916. Turn-of-the-century Americans were not, however, completely cynical and selfish. Although variously interested in national welfare and personal and economic fulfillment and certainly ethnocentric and patronizing toward their supposed "inferiors," Americans sincerely believed that US imperialism would benefit those being controlled. And the various motives for American imperialism reinforced one another; they were not mutually exclusive. National aggrandizement and altruistic motives coexisted quite comfortably with one another; economic, strategic, racial, philosophical, and religious influences fused imperialism and idealism.⁴⁹

Still, any assessment of American imperialism must not divorce even the most benign motives from their impact abroad. The effects of American policies have received much less scholarly consideration than the domestic roots of imperialism, and greater attention needs to be devoted to the role of the periphery and collaboration within the American empire. Interestingly, the desire to prepare others for self-government and the conviction that these clients should follow the developmental example of the United States has persuaded many observers that their policies were less exploitive than those of the Europeans; but these objectives simultaneously rendered Americans more imperialistic, not less, because they were more ambitious in their insistence upon instituting more fundamental changes in indigenous societies. Moreover, the claims for the benefits of American control must not be

overstated. Order was imposed; education was promoted; sanitation and medical care were improved; roads, railroads, and ports were constructed; private capital was infused; productivity was enhanced. But such reforms usually proved transitory and did little to improve the lot of the majority of local inhabitants. Neither democratic institutions nor true economic development and general prosperity proved exportable to the Caribbean or the Philippines. This failure resulted in part from the tenacity of indigenous cultural, political, and economic forces. But the US presence also contributed to the deaths of thousands of Filipinos and Latin Americans, to elite-controlled and dictatorial politics, and to static or declining economic conditions for the masses. Only by ignoring such outcomes and the coercion involved or by attempting to narrowly define US imperialism out of existence can the image of American innocence and the fundamental uniqueness of imperialism, American style be sustained.

NOTES

- 1 Joseph A. Fry, "Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America to World Power," in Howard Jones (ed.), *Safeguarding the Republic: Essays and Documents in American Foreign Relations, 1890–1991*, New York, 1992, pp. 26–7; Robert L. Beisner, *Twelve Against Empire: The Anti-Imperialists, 1898–1900*, New York, 1968, p. 162.
- 2 Edward P. Crapol, "Coming to Terms with Empire: The Historiography of Late-Nineteenth Century American Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 16, 1992, pp. 573–97; Robin W. Winks, "The American Struggle with 'Imperialism': How Words Frighten," in Rob Kroes (ed.), *The American Identity: Fusion and Fragmentation*, Amsterdam, 1980, pp. 143–77.
- 3 Schumpeter quoted in Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Missionary Enterprise and Theories of Imperialism," in John K. Fairbank (ed.), *The Missionary Enterprise in China*, Cambridge, Mass., 1974, p. 336; Waller quoted in David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, New York, 1970, p. xiii.
- 4 Samuel Flagg Bemis, *A Diplomatic History of the United States*, New York, 1950, p. 468; Dexter Perkins, *The American Approach to Foreign Policy*, Cambridge, Mass., 1962, pp. 30–4, 41–7; Ernest R. May, *American Imperialism: A Speculative Essay*, 1968; rept, Chicago, 1991, pp. xxx, 3, 14–16.
- 5 William A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, New York, 1972, pp. 47, 50–1, 55. See also: Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1963; Thomas J. McCormick, *China Market: America's Quest for Informal Empire, 1893–1901*, Chicago, 1967.
- 6 Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (eds), *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities*, Boston, 1986, p. ix.
- 7 Graham quoted in Thomas G. Paterson and Stephen G. Rabe (eds), *Imperial Surge: The United States Abroad. The 1890s–early 1900s*, Lexington, Mass., 1992, p. xviii.
- 8 Williams, *Tragedy*; LaFeber, *New Empire*; McCormick, *China Market*; Crapol, "Coming to Terms."
- 9 Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, New York, 1984; Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy*, Athens, Ga, 1990; Thomas D. Schoonover, *The United States in Central*

- America, 1860–1911: *Episodes of Social Imperialism and Imperial Rivalry in the World System*, Durham, N.C., 1991.
- 10 LaFeber, *New Empire*, p. 400.
 - 11 Robert Freeman Smith, *The United States and Revolutionary Nationalism in Mexico, 1916–32*, Chicago, 1972, pp. 23–5; N. Gordon Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution*, New York, 1968; Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890–1945*, New York, 1982, pp. 7–13.
 - 12 Rosenberg, *American Dream*, pp. 38–86.
 - 13 Paul S. Holbo, "Economics, Emotion, and Expansion: An Emerging Foreign Policy," in H. Wayne Morgan (ed.), *The Gilded Age*, Syracuse, N.Y., 1970, pp. 199–221; Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898: The Acquisition of Hawaii and the Spanish Islands*, 1936; rept, Chicago, 1964, p. 257; William H. Becker, *The Dynamics of Business–Government Relations: Industry and Exports, 1893–1921*, Chicago, 1982, p. 184 (final quote).
 - 14 Becker, *Dynamics*; David M. Pltchor, "Rhetoric and Results: A Pragmatic View of American Economic Expansionism, 1865–1898," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 5, 1981, pp. 93–105; Paul A. Varg, *The Making of a Myth: The United States and China, 1897–1912*, East Lansing, Mich., 1968, pp. 37–53; James A. Field Jr, "American Imperialism: The Worst Chapter in Almost Any Book," *American Historical Review*, vol. 83, 1978, p. 645.
 - 15 Richard Hofstadter, "Manifest Destiny and the Philippines," in Daniel Aaron (ed.), *America in Crisis*, New York, 1952, pp. 173–200; Robert Dallek, *The American Style of Foreign Policy: Cultural Politics and Foreign Affairs*, New York, 1983, p. 4; Marilyn Blatt Young, *The Rhetoric of Empire: America's China Policy, 1895–1901*, Cambridge, Mass., 1968, pp. 1–4.
 - 16 Robert E. Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations: The Great Transformation of the Twentieth Century*, Chicago, 1953, pp. 18, 27, 42; Norman A. Graebner, *Ideas and Diplomacy: Readings in the Intellectual Tradition of American Foreign Policy*, New York, 1964, p. 339.
 - 17 Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898*, pp. 1–22.
 - 18 May, *American Imperialism*, pp. 116–230; David Healy, *US Expansionism: The Imperialist Urge in the 1890s*, Madison, Wis., 1970, pp. 9–33.
 - 19 Joseph E. Wison, *The Cuban Crisis as Reflected in the New York Press, 1895–1898*, New York, 1934.
 - 20 Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898*, pp. 242, 327.
 - 21 Ernest R. May, *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power*, New York, 1961, pp. 82, 129, 143.
 - 22 Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898*, pp. 279, 282; James C. Thomson Jr, Peter W. Stanley, and John Curtis Perry, *Sentimental Imperialists: The American Experience in East Asia*, New York, 1981, pp. 45–56; James Reed, *The Missionary Mind and American East Asia Policy, 1911–1915*, Cambridge, Mass., 1983.
 - 23 Whitney T. Perkins, *Denial of Empire: The United States and Its Dependencies*, Leyden, 1962; Richard Collin, *Theodore Roosevelt's Caribbean: The Panama Canal, the Monroe Doctrine, and the Latin American Context*, Baton Rouge, La, 1991; Richard H. Abrams, "United States Intervention Abroad, The First Quarter Century," *American Historical Review*, vol. 79, 1974, pp. 72–102; Frederick S. Calhoun, *Power and Principle: Armed Intervention in Wilsonian Foreign Policy*, Kent, Ohio, 1986.
 - 24 Jerry Israel, *Progressivism and the Open Door: America and China, 1905–1921*, Pittsburgh, Pa, 1971; Howard E. Gillette Jr, "The Military Occupation of Cuba, 1899–1902: Workshop for American Progressivism," *American Quarterly*, vol. 25, 1973, pp. 410–25.
 - 25 Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Latin American Policy of the United States: A Historical Interpretation*, New York, 1943, pp. 140, 166; Dana G. Munro, *Intervention and Dollar Diplomacy in the Caribbean, 1900–1921*, Princeton, N.J., 1964, pp. 530–1; Lester D. Langley, *The Banana Wars: An Inner History of American Empire, 1900–1934*, Lexington, Ky, 1983, pp. 5–6, 8.
 - 26 Richard D. Challener, *Admirals, Generals, and American Foreign Policy, 1898–1914*, Princeton, N.J., 1973, pp. 406–12; Kenneth J. Hagan, *This People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power*, New York, 1991, pp. 228–47.
 - 27 Winks, "American Struggle," p. 144; Akira Iriye, *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American–East Asian Relations*, New York, 1967, pp. 54–5; Richard H. Collin, *Theodore Roosevelt, Culture, Diplomacy and Expansion: A New View of American Imperialism*, Baton Rouge, La, 1985, pp. 8, 103, 198; Collin, *Roosevelt's Caribbean*, pp. 9–11, 547.
 - 28 Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Theories of Imperialism*, New York, 1982, pp. 76, 78.
 - 29 John A. S. Grenville and George Berkeley Young, *Politics, Strategy, and American Diplomacy: Studies in Foreign Policy, 1873–1917*, New Haven, Conn., 1966, pp. 269–76.
 - 30 H. Wayne Morgan, *America's Road to Empire: The War with Spain and Overseas Expansion*, New York, 1965; Lewis L. Gould, *The Spanish–American War and President McKinley*, Lawrence, Kan., 1982; John L. Offner, *An Unwanted War: The Diplomacy of the United States and Spain over Cuba, 1895–1898*, Chapel Hill, N.C., 1992.
 - 31 Field, "American Imperialism," pp. 646–50.
 - 32 Melvin Small, "The United States and the German 'Threat' to the Hemisphere, 1904–1914," *The Americas*, vol. 28, 1972, pp. 252–70; David Healy, *Drive to Hegemony: The United States in the Caribbean, 1898–1917*, Madison, Wis., 1988, p. 289.
 - 33 For American innocence, see Stuart Crichton Miller, "Benevolent Assimilation": *The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899–1903*, New Haven, Conn., 1982, pp. 253–68.
 - 34 D. Perkins, *American Approach*, p. 31; W. Perkins, *Denial of Empire*, pp. 343, 351; Munro, *Dollar Diplomacy*, pp. 534–43.
 - 35 D. Perkins, *American Approach*, p. 47.
 - 36 Pérez, *Cuba and the United States*, pp. 80–3, 97, 105–10, 117, 161; Schoonover, *United States in Central America*, p. 111; Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Haiti and the Great Powers, 1902–1915*, Baton Rouge, La, 1988, p. 124.
 - 37 LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, pp. 5–78; Healy, *Drive to Hegemony*, pp. 260–74; Glenn A. May, *Social Engineering in the Philippines: The Aims, Execution, and Impact of American Colonial Policy, 1900–1913*, Westport, Conn., 1980, pp. 142–3, 146, 150, 166, 175; Daniel R. Hendrick, *The Tentacles of Progress: Technological Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850–1940*, New York, 1988, pp. 383–4.
 - 38 Christobal Kay, *Latin American Theories of Development and Underdevelopment*, New York, 1989; Mommsen, *Theories of Imperialism*, pp. 121–37; Tony Smith, *The Pattern of Imperialism: The United States, Great Britain and the Late-Industrializing World since 1815*, New York, 1981, pp. 59–84.
 - 39 Smith, *The Pattern of Imperialism*.
 - 40 Schlesinger, "Missionary Enterprise," pp. 363–5; Paul W. Harris, "Cultural Imperialism and American Protestant Missionaries: Collaboration and Dependency in Mid-Nineteenth Century China," *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 60, 1991, pp. 311–15.
 - 41 W. Perkins, *Denial of Empire*, p. 342.
 - 42 Thomson, et al., *Sentimental Imperialists*, p. 45; Kenton J. Clymer, *Protestant Missionaries in the Philippines, 1898–1916: An Inquiry into the American Colonial Mentality*, Urbana, Ill., 1986; Jane Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility:*

- American Women Missionaries in Turn-of-the-Century China*, New Haven, Conn., 1984.
- 43 David Arnold (ed.), *Imperial Medicine and Indigenous Societies*, Manchester, 1988, pp. 2, 10, 14–19.
- 44 Julius W. Pratt, *America's Colonial Experiment: How the United States Gained, Governed, and In Part Gave Away a Colonial Empire*, 1950; rept, Gloucester, Mass., 1964, p. 201; W. Perkins, *Denial of Empire*, p. 208.
- 45 Peter W. Stanley (ed.), *Reappraising an Empire: New Perspectives on Philippine-American History*, Cambridge, Mass., 1984, pp. 1–7; May, *Social Engineering*, p. 123; Robert E. Quirk, *An Affair of Honor: Woodrow Wilson and the Occupation of Vera Cruz*, Lexington, Ky, 1962, pp. 123–54, 170–1; A. E. Campbell, "The Paradox of Imperialism: The American Case," in Mommsen and Osterhammel (eds), *Imperialism and After*, p. 37.
- 46 All the articles in Stanley, *Reappraising an Empire*, address this theme, as does the *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 68, 1979, pp. 467–591, entitled "American Empire, 1898–1903"; Peter W. Stanley, *A Nation in the Making: The Philippines and the United States, 1899–1921*, Cambridge, Mass., 1974, pp. 52, 268–75; Glenn A. May, *Battle for Batangas: A Philippine Province at War*, New Haven, Conn., 1991, pp. 198–201; Pérez, *United States and Cuba*, pp. 113–17; Gilbert M. Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States, 1880–1924*, New York, 1982.
- 47 Friedrich W. Horlacher, "The Language of Late Nineteenth-Century American Expansionism," in Serge Ricard (ed.), *An American Empire: Expansionist Cultures and Policies, 1881–1917*, Aix-en-Provence, 1990, p. 40.
- 48 Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, New Haven, Conn., 1987; Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History*, 1935; rept, Chicago, 1963.
- 49 David L. Anderson, *Imperialism and Idealism: American Diplomats in China, 1861–1898*, Bloomington, Ind., 1985, pp. 2, 191; on the synthesis of motives, see also Robert L. Beisner, *From the Old Diplomacy to the New, 1865–1900*, 2nd rev. ed., Arlington Heights, Ill., 1986.