

history of american imperialism

The history of American imperialism is a complex and multifaceted narrative, tracing the United States' rise from a nascent republic to a global superpower. This journey involved territorial expansion, economic dominance, and the projection of political and cultural influence across the globe. Understanding this history is crucial for grasping America's current role on the world stage and the lasting impact of its foreign policy. From the early days of manifest destiny to the post-World War II era of global leadership, the motivations, methods, and consequences of American imperial ambitions have shaped both the nation and the world. This article delves into the key periods, pivotal events, and enduring debates surrounding the history of American imperialism.

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The Genesis of American Expansionism

The seeds of American imperialism were sown long before the nation's formal emergence. The early colonial period, marked by expansion across the North American continent, laid a foundational understanding of territorial acquisition as a means of growth and security. This westward movement, often justified by notions of racial superiority and divine providence, established a precedent for asserting dominion over lands and peoples deemed "uncivilized" or "underutilized." The very act of establishing thirteen colonies and pushing westward against indigenous populations and European rivals like France and Spain set a precedent for a nation that viewed expansion as an inherent right and a primary objective.

Colonial Expansion and Indigenous Dispossession

From the earliest English settlements at Jamestown and Plymouth, a pattern of territorial encroachment on Native American lands began. The concept of "Manifest Destiny," though formalized later, was implicitly present in the drive for settlement and control of vast territories. This expansion was often accompanied by conflict, displacement, and the devastating impact of disease on indigenous populations. The acquisition of land was not merely about space but also about resources, economic opportunity, and the extension of political control. This early history of westward expansion against indigenous peoples provided a cultural and ideological framework that would later be applied to overseas territories.

Early Diplomatic Maneuvers and Acquisitions

Even in its nascent stages, the United States engaged in diplomatic and military actions to secure and expand its territory. The Louisiana Purchase in 1803, while a diplomatic feat, effectively doubled the size of the nation and solidified American control over a vast expanse of the continent. The subsequent acquisition of Florida from Spain through the Adams-Onís Treaty (1819) further demonstrated a willingness to use both diplomacy and the implicit threat of force to achieve territorial goals. These early acquisitions, while largely continental, established a pattern of assertive foreign policy aimed at national aggrandizement.

Manifest Destiny and Early Territorial Acquisitions

The concept of "Manifest Destiny" became a powerful ideological force in the mid-19th century, providing a moral and philosophical justification for American expansion across the North American continent. This belief held that the United States was divinely ordained to spread its democratic institutions and way of life, extending its dominion from the Atlantic to the Pacific. This ideology fueled a period of rapid territorial growth, often through aggressive means, and solidified the nation's westward trajectory.

The Doctrine of Manifest Destiny

Coined by journalist John L. O'Sullivan in 1845, Manifest Destiny articulated a pervasive sense of American exceptionalism and the perceived duty to expand. It argued that the expansion of the United States was not only inevitable but also a righteous mission. This belief system served to legitimize the acquisition of territories previously inhabited by Native American tribes and claimed by European powers. It framed expansion not as conquest but as the spread of civilization and liberty, a narrative that resonated deeply within the American psyche.

Westward Expansion and the Mexican-American War

The most dramatic manifestation of Manifest Destiny was the territorial expansion into the West. This included the annexation of Texas in 1845 and, more significantly, the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). The war, sparked by border disputes, resulted in the Mexican Cession, where Mexico ceded vast territories including present-day California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and parts of New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming. This massive territorial gain cemented American control over the continent and further fueled the imperialistic spirit, though it also intensified internal debates about slavery and the nature of American expansion.

The Oregon Treaty and California Gold Rush

The Oregon Treaty of 1846 settled boundary disputes with Great Britain, securing the Pacific Northwest for the United States. This, coupled with the discovery of gold in California in 1848, dramatically increased American interest and settlement in the West. The Gold Rush, a pivotal event in American history, further solidified California's status and accelerated the westward migration, transforming the region into a vital part of the expanding nation and solidifying its Pacific presence.

The Spanish-American War and the Dawn of Overseas Empire

The late 19th century marked a significant turning point in American foreign policy, moving beyond continental expansion to embrace overseas territorial acquisitions. The Spanish-American War of 1898 served as the catalyst for this shift, transforming the United States into a nascent imperial power with possessions in the Caribbean and the Pacific. This conflict, fueled by a combination of economic interests, humanitarian concerns, and nationalist fervor, signaled a new era of American global engagement.

Causes of the Spanish-American War

Several factors contributed to the outbreak of the Spanish-American War. Growing American economic interests in Cuba, a Spanish colony undergoing a brutal struggle for independence, played a significant role. Sensationalized reporting by American newspapers, particularly William Randolph Hearst's "yellow journalism," inflamed public opinion by highlighting Spanish atrocities. The sinking of the USS Maine in Havana harbor in February 1898, though its cause remains debated, was seized upon as a direct act of Spanish aggression, providing the casus belli for war. President William McKinley's administration, influenced by expansionist sentiment and the desire to protect American investments, declared war.

Key Battles and Outcomes

The war itself was relatively short and decisive. American naval superiority was evident in the swift destruction of the Spanish fleet at Manila Bay in the Philippines by Commodore George Dewey. In Cuba, American forces, including Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders, fought in battles like San Juan Hill. The war concluded with the Treaty of Paris in December 1898. Spain ceded Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Guam to the United States and sold the Philippines to the U.S. for \$20 million. This treaty marked the formal acquisition of overseas territories and positioned the U.S. as a significant player in global affairs.

The Annexation of Hawaii

While the Spanish-American War is often seen as the start of overt American imperialism, the annexation of Hawaii in 1898 occurred concurrently and was a crucial step in expanding American influence in the Pacific. American businessmen, who had significant economic interests in Hawaii's sugar industry, had overthrown the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893. The U.S. annexed Hawaii as a strategic naval base and a stepping stone to Asia. This annexation, achieved through political maneuvering and a naval presence, bypassed the will of the native Hawaiian people and exemplified a pattern of acquiring territory for strategic and economic advantage.

American Imperialism in the Pacific

The acquisition of territories in the Pacific, following the Spanish-American War, significantly altered the United States' strategic position and its role in global trade and power dynamics. The Pacific Ocean became a new frontier for American influence, leading to engagements with local populations and complex geopolitical maneuvering.

The Philippine-American War

The annexation of the Philippines proved to be a controversial and bloody affair. Filipino nationalists, led by Emilio Aguinaldo, who had initially allied with the Americans against Spain, declared independence in 1899. The U.S. viewed the Philippines as a valuable strategic outpost and economic gateway to Asia, refusing to grant independence. This led to the Philippine-American War (1899-1902), a brutal conflict characterized by guerrilla warfare and significant loss of life on both sides. The war underscored the violent realities of American imperial expansion and the resistance it generated.

American Samoa and Other Pacific Islands

Beyond the Philippines, the United States also acquired other strategic islands in the

Pacific. American Samoa was annexed in 1900 as a naval coaling station. Other islands, such as Wake Island and Midway Atoll, became important for maritime and later aerial navigation. These acquisitions were driven by a desire to project naval power, secure trade routes, and establish military bases across the vast Pacific expanse, solidifying America's presence in a region increasingly dominated by European powers and Japan.

The Open Door Policy and China

While not a territorial acquisition in the same vein as the Philippines, the Open Door Policy, articulated by Secretary of State John Hay in 1899 and 1900, represented a significant aspect of American imperialism in Asia. Facing exclusion from lucrative trade with China due to the "spheres of influence" established by European powers, the U.S. proposed that all nations should have equal trading rights within China. This policy aimed to ensure American access to Chinese markets without the need for direct territorial control, demonstrating a preference for economic rather than outright colonial dominion where possible, though it still involved asserting American interests in another sovereign nation.

American Imperialism in Latin America: The Monroe Doctrine and Beyond

Latin America has been a primary theater for American imperialistic ambitions, deeply intertwined with the Monroe Doctrine and the pursuit of economic and strategic dominance in the Western Hemisphere. From the early 19th century onwards, the United States sought to assert its influence and prevent European intervention, often leading to direct intervention and control.

The Monroe Doctrine (1823)

The Monroe Doctrine, proclaimed by President James Monroe in 1823, declared that the American continents were no longer open to colonization by European powers. While initially intended to protect newly independent Latin American nations from European recolonization, it evolved into a justification for American intervention in the region. It asserted a unilateral American claim to a sphere of influence, effectively warning European powers to stay out, while simultaneously laying the groundwork for American dominance.

The Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine

In 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt expanded upon the Monroe Doctrine with the Roosevelt Corollary. This addition stated that the United States had the right to exercise

"international police power" in Latin American countries that were unable to maintain order or pay their debts to foreign creditors. This doctrine provided a rationale for frequent U.S. military interventions and occupations in countries like Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic throughout the early 20th century. It represented a more assertive and interventionist phase of American policy in the region.

Dollar Diplomacy and Economic Influence

Under President William Howard Taft, American foreign policy in Latin America shifted towards "Dollar Diplomacy." This approach emphasized using American economic power to exert influence, encouraging American investment abroad and using that investment to secure political and economic advantage. The U.S. government actively supported American businesses operating in Latin America, often through diplomatic pressure or military backing, thereby deepening economic ties and dependencies that served American interests. This strategy aimed to replace European loans with American ones, further consolidating U.S. economic hegemony.

Panama Canal and Strategic Interests

The construction of the Panama Canal, initiated by the United States in 1904, was a monumental engineering feat that also underscored American imperial ambitions. To secure the land for the canal, the U.S. supported a Panamanian rebellion against Colombia, leading to the establishment of Panama and a treaty that granted the U.S. perpetual control over the Canal Zone. The canal was vital for American naval power, allowing for rapid movement of ships between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and dramatically increased U.S. strategic and economic leverage in global trade and military projection.

The Open Door Policy and American Interests in Asia

American engagement in Asia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was primarily driven by economic aspirations and a desire to participate in the lucrative markets of China and the broader East Asian region. The Open Door Policy became the cornerstone of this strategy, aiming to prevent exclusion and ensure American access to trade and investment opportunities.

Securing Trade and Markets

As European powers carved out "spheres of influence" in China, gaining exclusive trading rights and economic concessions, American policymakers grew concerned about being

shut out of this potentially vast market. The U.S. lagged behind European nations in its territorial claims and concessions, prompting Secretary of State John Hay to issue the Open Door Notes. These notes proposed that all nations should have equal access to trade and investment within China, advocating for the territorial integrity of China while asserting American commercial rights.

The Boxer Rebellion and American Intervention

The Boxer Rebellion of 1900, an anti-foreign uprising in China, provided a critical test for the Open Door Policy. An international coalition, including the United States, intervened militarily to suppress the rebellion and rescue foreign legations. While the U.S. officially opposed the partitioning of China, its participation in the intervention further solidified its role as a player in Chinese affairs and demonstrated its willingness to use military force to protect its interests and uphold its diplomatic initiatives in the region.

American Relations with Japan

American imperialism in Asia also involved complex relations with Japan, a rapidly modernizing and expanding power. While there were periods of cooperation, such as during the Russo-Japanese War where President Theodore Roosevelt mediated a peace treaty, underlying tensions often surfaced. The influx of Japanese immigrants to the U.S., particularly on the West Coast, led to discriminatory policies like the Gentleman's Agreement of 1907, reflecting the racial undertones present in American foreign policy and the anxieties surrounding rising Asian powers. These relationships would ultimately contribute to the escalating tensions leading up to World War II.

Economic Drivers of American Imperialism

Economic imperatives were central to the expansionist policies of the United States. The burgeoning industrial economy of the late 19th and early 20th centuries created a demand for raw materials, new markets for manufactured goods, and opportunities for American investment abroad. Imperialism offered solutions to these perceived economic necessities.

The Need for Raw Materials

American industries, particularly those involved in manufacturing and production, required a steady and affordable supply of raw materials like rubber, sugar, minerals, and tropical products. Overseas territories provided direct access to these resources, bypassing the need to purchase them from competing industrial powers and ensuring supply chain security. The acquisition of territories like the Philippines and Hawaii directly served this need.

Seeking New Markets for Manufactured Goods

As American industrial capacity outpaced domestic demand, industrialists and policymakers looked to overseas markets to absorb surplus production. The vast populations of Asia and Latin America represented significant potential consumer bases. Imperial expansion provided a means to open these markets, often through a combination of trade agreements, economic pressure, and the establishment of favorable political conditions that promoted American goods and investments.

Opportunities for Investment

American financiers and corporations sought profitable avenues for investment beyond the domestic market. Latin America and Asia offered opportunities in sectors such as infrastructure (railroads, ports), agriculture, mining, and banking. The U.S. government's foreign policy, including military interventions and diplomatic support, often aimed to create a stable environment for these investments, thereby linking economic interests with national power and prestige.

The Ideological Underpinnings of American Imperialism

Beyond economic motivations, a potent blend of ideologies, including Social Darwinism, Anglo-Saxonism, and the concept of the "White Man's Burden," provided a powerful justification for American imperial expansion. These ideas framed the acquisition of territories and the assertion of American influence as a civilizing mission.

Social Darwinism and Racial Superiority

Influenced by the theories of Charles Darwin, some Americans adopted Social Darwinist principles, applying the concept of "survival of the fittest" to nations and races. They believed that Anglo-Saxon peoples, and particularly Americans, were inherently superior and destined to dominate "lesser" races. This ideology provided a pseudo-scientific basis for subjugation and the belief that it was natural and even beneficial for "civilized" nations to rule over those deemed less advanced.

The "White Man's Burden"

Popularized by Rudyard Kipling's poem of the same name, the "White Man's Burden" became a popular sentiment among proponents of American imperialism. It posited that white people, particularly Americans, had a moral obligation to uplift and civilize peoples

in other parts of the world. This paternalistic view encouraged the imposition of Western institutions, religions, and cultural norms, often disregarding the existing societies and traditions of the colonized populations. It framed imperialism not as exploitation but as a benevolent act of humanitarianism.

American Exceptionalism and the Spread of Democracy

A strong belief in American exceptionalism – the idea that the United States is unique and has a special role to play in world history – also fueled imperial ambitions. Proponents argued that by expanding its influence, the U.S. was spreading its democratic ideals, free markets, and institutions, thereby bringing progress and civilization to others. This narrative often overlooked the contradictions inherent in imposing democracy through military conquest and colonial rule.

Anti-Imperialist Sentiments and Resistance

While imperialism gained significant traction, it was not without its detractors. A vocal anti-imperialist movement emerged, challenging the moral, political, and economic justifications for overseas expansion. Furthermore, colonized peoples actively resisted American control and sought to preserve their own sovereignty.

The Anti-Imperialist League

Formed in 1898, the Anti-Imperialist League was a prominent organization that united a diverse group of Americans, including intellectuals, politicians, and ordinary citizens. Members like Mark Twain, Andrew Carnegie, and William Jennings Bryan argued that imperialism was un-American, contradicted the nation's founding principles of liberty and self-governance, and would lead to corruption and the suppression of democratic ideals at home. They highlighted the hypocrisy of a nation founded on anti-colonial sentiment engaging in imperial practices.

Moral and Ethical Objections

Many opponents raised serious moral and ethical objections to imperialism. They pointed to the violation of the rights of colonized peoples, the inherent inequality of colonial rule, and the brutality often employed in suppressing dissent. The U.S. Constitution was seen by some as a document that guaranteed liberty to all, and its extension to imperial possessions was viewed as a perversion of its core values. The acquisition of territories without the consent of their inhabitants was seen as a direct assault on the principles of popular sovereignty.

Resistance in Colonized Territories

Across the American empire, indigenous populations and nationalist movements resisted foreign domination. In the Philippines, the Filipino-American War was a testament to this resistance. In Cuba, while granted nominal independence, the U.S. exerted significant control through the Platt Amendment, which the Cuban people largely opposed. These acts of resistance, though often met with overwhelming military force, demonstrated the enduring desire for self-determination and challenged the narrative of benevolent assimilation.

The Legacy and Evolution of American Imperialism

The historical trajectory of American imperialism has left an indelible mark on both the United States and the regions it influenced. While the formal colonial era eventually waned, the underlying principles and practices of American foreign policy have evolved, continuing to shape global dynamics.

The Shift Towards Economic and Cultural Influence

Following World War II, the U.S. largely eschewed direct territorial control, a model that had become increasingly untenable in the face of rising anti-colonial movements and the changing global political landscape. Instead, American influence shifted towards economic dominance through trade, investment, and international financial institutions, and cultural influence through media, popular culture, and the promotion of American values. This "soft power" approach became a hallmark of post-war American global engagement.

The Cold War and Global Hegemony

The Cold War era saw the United States emerge as one of two global superpowers, engaging in a protracted ideological and geopolitical struggle with the Soviet Union. This period witnessed the expansion of American military bases, alliances, and interventions across the globe, often framed as efforts to contain communism. While not always direct territorial acquisition, these actions represented a continuation of imperialistic tendencies, projecting American power and influence into diverse regions and economies.

Contemporary Debates on American Hegemony

In the 21st century, the concept of American hegemony and its implications remain a subject of vigorous debate. Critics argue that contemporary American foreign policy,

characterized by military interventions, economic policies, and the promotion of specific political systems, continues to reflect imperialistic patterns. Others contend that American engagement is primarily aimed at promoting stability, democracy, and global economic prosperity. Understanding the historical roots of American imperialism is essential for critically evaluating these ongoing discussions and the enduring impact of the United States on the world stage.

Conclusion

The history of American imperialism is a vast and consequential narrative, charting the nation's transformation from a continental power to a global force. From the early westward expansion driven by Manifest Destiny to the overseas acquisitions of the late 19th century and the subsequent projection of economic and cultural power, the United States has consistently sought to expand its influence and secure its interests. Understanding the motivations—economic, ideological, and strategic—behind these actions, as well as the resistance they encountered, provides crucial context for comprehending America's role in the world today. The legacy of American imperialism is complex, shaping international relations, fostering global interconnectedness, and continuing to fuel debates about power, sovereignty, and the nature of global influence.

Frequently Asked Questions

What were the primary economic motivations behind late 19th and early 20th-century American imperialism?

Key economic drivers included the need for new markets for American manufactured goods, access to raw materials to fuel industrial growth, and opportunities for profitable investment abroad, particularly in Latin America and Asia.

How did the concept of 'Manifest Destiny' influence American expansionist policies beyond the North American continent?

Manifest Destiny, the belief that the U.S. was divinely ordained to expand its dominion and spread democracy, evolved from continental expansion to justifying overseas ventures, framing them as a civilizing mission and an inevitable national destiny.

What role did naval power and figures like Alfred Thayer Mahan play in shaping American imperial ambitions?

Alfred Thayer Mahan's influential works, emphasizing the importance of a strong navy and overseas bases for global power, significantly influenced policymakers like Theodore Roosevelt, leading to a build-up of the U.S. Navy and the acquisition of strategic locations

like naval coaling stations.

How did the Spanish-American War (1898) mark a turning point in American foreign policy and the beginning of its imperial era?

The Spanish-American War resulted in the U.S. acquiring territories like Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, transforming the nation from a continental power to a global one with overseas possessions and a significant role in international affairs.

What was the 'Open Door Policy' and its significance for American interests in China?

The Open Door Policy, introduced in 1899, advocated for equal trading rights for all nations in China, preventing any single power from monopolizing trade. It aimed to protect U.S. commercial interests and prevent the partition of China.

How did the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine alter the U.S. approach to Latin America?

The Roosevelt Corollary asserted the U.S. right to intervene in Latin American countries to stabilize their economic affairs and prevent European intervention, effectively transforming the Monroe Doctrine from a defensive statement to a justification for U.S. paternalism and interventionism.

What were the arguments of anti-imperialists in the United States during this period?

Anti-imperialists argued that imperialism was antithetical to American democratic ideals, promoted racial inequality, led to costly wars and entanglements, and threatened the republic's foundational principles of self-governance and liberty.

How did the acquisition of the Philippines lead to a prolonged conflict and shape American perceptions of its role in Asia?

The Philippine-American War (1899-1902) was a brutal conflict to suppress Filipino independence. It exposed the costs and complexities of maintaining overseas territories and led to debates about the U.S. 'civilizing mission' and its long-term commitment to Asia.

What was the 'Good Neighbor Policy' and how did it represent a shift in U.S. relations with Latin America

compared to earlier imperialistic approaches?

Introduced in the 1930s by Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Good Neighbor Policy aimed to improve relations with Latin America by renouncing direct U.S. intervention. It emphasized cooperation and mutual respect, seeking to counter anti-American sentiment fostered by earlier imperialistic policies.

Additional Resources

Here is a numbered list of 9 book titles related to the history of American imperialism, with descriptions:

1. *The American Crucible: Reimagining the American Revolution* by Peter S. Onuf and Nicholas J. Spulber. This book argues that the American Revolution was not just about gaining independence but also about establishing a new kind of imperial power. It explores how the early American republic grappled with the concept of empire and expansion, laying the groundwork for future imperial endeavors. The authors challenge traditional narratives by highlighting the continuity of imperial thinking in the formation of the United States.
2. *Manifest Destiny and American Territorial Expansion: Primary Sources* edited by Richard H. Kolin. This collection offers a diverse range of primary source documents that illuminate the ideology and practice of American territorial expansion. It includes speeches, letters, and writings from key figures involved in Manifest Destiny, allowing readers to directly engage with the arguments and justifications for expansion. The book provides essential context for understanding the motivations behind America's growth across the continent.
3. *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* by Maya Jasanoff. While focusing on Loyalists, this book implicitly addresses the early American imperial project from the perspective of those who rejected it. Jasanoff details the vast network of displacement and resettlement undertaken by Loyalists after the Revolution. It sheds light on the human cost of nation-building and the ways in which imperial structures influenced individual lives and choices.
4. *The Imperial Cruise: A True Story of the Far East at the End of the Old World Order* by David K. Adams. This vivid narrative chronicles the diplomatic and naval expedition led by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905. It explores the burgeoning American influence in Asia, particularly in the context of the Russo-Japanese War and the Open Door policy in China. The book offers a compelling account of America's early attempts to project power on a global stage.
5. *Battleship Bismarck: A Defense* by Captain Burkard von Müllenheim-Rechberg. While not directly about American imperialism, this book by a German officer on the Bismarck subtly highlights the global naval power dynamics of the early 20th century. Understanding the competition for naval supremacy and global influence provides crucial context for America's own imperial ambitions and its rise as a major world power. It speaks to the broader international landscape within which American imperialism developed.

6. The Philippine War, 1899-1902 by John M. Gates. This detailed military history examines one of the most significant and brutal episodes of American overseas expansion. Gates meticulously analyzes the campaigns, strategies, and the often-controversial tactics employed by U.S. forces against Filipino resistance. The book offers critical insights into the nature of American military imperialism and its impact on colonized populations.

7. The American Century: A History of the United States Since 1900 by Harold Evans. This comprehensive survey covers the entirety of the 20th century, with significant portions dedicated to understanding America's transition from a regional power to a global superpower. It details the economic, political, and military dimensions of American overseas influence and intervention. The book provides a broad overview of the forces that shaped American imperialism and its lasting legacy.

8. Imperial Democracy: The Reconstruction of American Ideology by Martin J. Sklar. Sklar revisits the ideological underpinnings of American expansionism, arguing that the pursuit of empire was deeply intertwined with American democratic ideals. He analyzes how concepts of liberty and self-governance were reinterpreted to justify overseas dominion. The book offers a nuanced look at the intellectual history of American imperialism.

9. Congo: The Pictorial History of an African Tragedy by Didier de Vleeschauwer. While focusing on the Belgian Congo, this powerful pictorial history provides essential context for understanding the broader era of European and American imperial exploitation of Africa. By showcasing the devastating impact of colonial rule, it highlights the global nature of imperialism and the interconnectedness of imperial powers. The book serves as a stark reminder of the human consequences of the imperial impulse.

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