

The West and the Building of Empire

THE NEW IMPERIALISM OF THE WEST

Economic motivation. The chief motive for the new imperialism was economic self-interest, and was directly connected to the spread of the Industrial Revolution. Great Britain, for example, feared the possibility that France and Germany would raise tariff barriers in their colonies, thus hurting British trade. New colonies were seen as ways to expand markets, as well as hedges against the expansion of competing powers. They also contributed to national security, military power, and international prestige. In addition, colonies provided naval bases and provisioning stations necessary to protect worldwide trade upon which the economies of the imperial powers were being built.

Those who promoted colonial expansion included vested interests of all sorts. Manufacturers, bankers, and other financial interests saw expanding markets as economic necessities. Shipping companies stood to make large profits. White settlers needed more protection, missionaries were in search of more souls to save and humanitarians were concerned with improving the lot of underprivileged humans worldwide. Explorers sought adventure, and military men sought excitement and, perhaps, promotion.

Social Darwinism and “White Man’s Burden.” Social Darwinism, although perhaps not the most important initial motive for imperialism, was a powerful tool for those who wished to rationalize and justify it. From Darwin’s theories of natural selection and survival of the fittest, social theorists devised the ideology that human societies, too, evolved and that the white races of European stock had become inherently superior to other peoples. Imperialists argued that the Anglo-Saxon race was the superior race and thus had a great moral obligation to spread the blessings of its superior “civilization” to underprivileged peoples everywhere. Taking over their countries, dominating their economic development, teaching them “superior” political doctrines, and Christianizing them was all a part of the “white man’s burden.”

The British imperialist ideal could hardly be suggested more clearly than on the dedication page of a book on East Asia published in 1894:

TO THOSE
WHO BELIEVE THAT THE BRITISH EMPIRE
IS, UNDER PROVIDENCE, THE GREATEST INSTRUMENT FOR
GOOD
THAT THE WORLD HAS SEEN
AND WHO HOLD, WITH THE WRITER, THAT
ITS WORK IN THE FAR EAST IS NOT YET ACCOMPLISHED
THIS BOOK IS INSCRIBED

In 1899 Great Britain’s Rudyard Kipling wrote his famous poem “The White Man’s Burden” in an effort to urge the United States to follow Britain’s lead in taking up the course of empire.

Military Power. America, too, had its Social Darwinists and imperial propagandists. Perhaps the most persuasive political argument for American expansionism came from Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, prominent naval historian and for many years president of the Naval War College at Newport, Rhode Island. In his book *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* and in speeches around the country and in popular journals, he argued that national greatness and economic prosperity were dependent upon sea power. A large navy, a strong merchant marine, foreign commerce, colonies and naval bases were all essential to economic development. It was America’s destiny, he preached, to control the Caribbean, build a canal across the isthmus of Panama and spread Western civilization throughout the Pacific.

CLASH BETWEEN WESTERN EUROPE AND ISLAM

At the peak of its power in the sixteenth century the Ottoman Empire controlled most of North Africa, much of Arabia, the Balkans and other parts of eastern Europe. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, European powers whittled away at Ottoman holdings. It was not long before the Ottoman state would be broken up.

The Balkans. Contributing to this breakup was a surge of nationalism throughout the Balkans, which played right into the hands of the western European powers. Serbia rebelled in 1804, gaining a limited independence by 1815. During a Greek rebellion that began in 1821 the European powers refused to support Turkey against the rebels. Eventually England, France and Russia put pressure on the Ottomans to accept Greek independence, which finally came in 1830. From 1854 to 1856 the Crimean War made it

further evident that the European powers were no longer to work together to maintain existing borders, as agreed at the Congress of Vienna. Later the Ottomans lost Serbia, Moldavia and Walachia (the latter two becoming Romania in 1861).

The “Sick Man of Europe.” The significance of all this was not just the breakup of Ottoman power but also the fact that it was opening the door to further European incursions into what was once a Muslim stronghold. In a short time, the western powers were competing for colonial possessions in the Middle East. These western powers were becoming increasingly troubled with the Ottomans. In addition to its problems with nationalistic rebellions, financial mismanagement, administrative incompetence, and a lack of reform characterized Turkey. By the late nineteenth century the sultanate was becoming known as the “Sick Man of Europe.” European diplomats had their eyes on the “sick man’s” territories, but the problem of how to take them over without coming to blows among themselves was complex. If one power obtained too much or too little, it would surely upset the delicate balance of power that they still theoretically supported. Actually, however, they were already going against the principles of the Congress of Vienna, and in the long run they would have few scruples about carving up the territory of either the “sick man” or of anyone else.

AFRICA

After mid-century the explorations of the African interior, especially by the English, French and German explorers, stepped up dramatically. Some were interested in opening up new fields for missionary work. Others, including the missionaries, were part of the larger British effort to eradicate the slave trade. Still others hoped to find the sources of Africa’s great rivers and to open up trading possibilities.

Beyond French-held Algeria, some Portuguese possessions in Angola and Mozambique and a few European trading posts elsewhere, there was little European control in Africa until 1880. Then the great scramble began, and within twenty years nearly the entire continent had been carved up and distributed among Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Belgium and Spain. Only Ethiopia, in eastern Africa, and Liberia, in West Africa, remained as independent states.

South Africa. During the Napoleonic Wars, Cape Colony, the Dutch settlement in South Africa, was taken over the British. Many disgruntled Boers (Dutch farmers and cattlemen) responded in what is known as the Great Trek. Beginning informally earlier but proceeding seriously in 1836, they put all their possessions into ox-drawn wagons and marched into the interior. There they successfully fought native tribes, particularly the Zulu, for control of land. About 4,000 people had left Cape Colony by the end of 1837. For a time the Boers remained under British control, but in 1852 and 1854, respectively, they established their own independent republics – the South African Republic and the Orange Free State. At the end of the century the British in the Boer War defeated them, and soon afterwards all the South African colonies became known as the Union of South Africa, with British dominion status.

The Congo. At the heart of Africa was the Congo, where King Leopold II of Belgium decided to carve out a foothold. In the late 1870s he formed an organization to promote his aims and made Henry Stanley its agent. Stanley made alliances with tribal chiefs, set up trading posts, and eventually gained control of what became the Congo Free State. The French, unsettled by Belgium’s sudden expansiveness, sent their own expedition into the area in 1880 and established a French protectorate of the Congo. It was just at this time that the British were taking over Egypt in North Africa.

Carving up the Continent. Like a raging land rush, the race for territory was on, but major powers of Europe did not see Africa as a place for direct military confrontation with each other. If they could achieve their imperialist goals without shedding European blood, it was much the better. As a result of such concerns, and sparked by some immediate disagreements between the major powers, French premier Jules Ferry and Otto von Bismarck, chancellor of the recently united German Republic, set up an international conference. Meeting in Berlin, the conference began in October 1884 and went on for three months. The European colonial powers and the United States were all there, mainly to establish rules for a partitioning process that was already well along. Gaining the most immediate benefit was Leopold II. In a treaty negotiated outside the regular meetings, the Congo Free State, and Leopold’s personal sovereignty over it, was recognized. In effect, the new state became Leopold’s personal fiefdom, for he considered it his private property and ruled it as such in order to obtain as much commercial benefit as possible. At the end of the conference the powers signed the Berlin Act, in which they agreed that if any power planned any further annexation or protectorate, it would first notify the others and would guarantee “effective occupation” of the area in question. What this amounted to was an open invitation for European states to

press from all sides and establish effective claims. The conference also agreed to work toward eliminating both the slave trade (Spain was still using slaves in the Caribbean) and slavery in Africa.

Germany and France. Germany began to play a role in Africa after Bismarck had a sudden conversion to the advantages of acquiring colonies. In 1884 and 1885 Germany took over the Togoland, Camaroons and German Southwest Africa as protectorates. The French gained control of Somalia and Tunisia before the Berlin Conference. Later they moved south from Algeria, across the western and central Sudan, and into Guinea, the Ivory Coast, Dahomey, and the kingdom of the Samori. They also moved into the Lake Chad region and occupied a large area north and west of the Belgian Congo. In all this Bismarck supported France if it came in conflict with British interests.

Great Britain. The British, meanwhile, pushed northward from Cape Colony and also their long-held colony of Zanzibar, partly to protect themselves from moves of Belgium, Portugal and Italy. In order to maintain its position in Egypt, Britain knew it must also control access to Egypt through the valley of the upper Nile. When it became apparent that the French were preparing to invade the Sudan, the British became alarmed and planned an expedition of their own into the area. They built a railroad in order to supply arms and reinforcements and slowly move up the Nile. In 1898, fervently nationalistic Muslims attempted to block their progress. The most brutal battle occurred near Omdurman, where Muslim defenders charged the British in wave after wave, only to be cut down by machine guns – newcomers in the modern military arsenal. Eleven thousand Muslims died, at a loss of only twenty-eight British soldiers. The British were confronted then by a small French force at Fashoda. However, the French decided to withdraw rather than fight, averting a major Anglo-French conflict.

INDIA

In the great conquest for world empire, Great Britain eventually won India; the most important colonial possession in the Afro-Asian world. It is sometimes called the “jewel” in Britain’s imperial crown. The British presence in India started when the East India Company established its first foothold in 1608. After defeating the French in the Seven Years’ War, the British gradually extended their control until in the mid-nineteenth century the East India Company controlled fully three-fifths of India.

British Government in India. British policies, however, were not designed to create much love on the part of the Indians. People of Indian origin were excluded from high government posts. The social and economic gap between British settlers and Indians widened. The British refused to allow large-scale industrial development, which only exacerbated the already appalling problem of large-scale poverty. In addition, the British seemed insensitive to Indian social and religious traditions. Indian resentment finally broke out in the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, which was crushed in a year. Afterward the crown took over most of the functions of the East India Company, thus finalizing imperial rule. But the feelings of mistrust only intensified, especially as the disparity between British wealth and Indian poverty became increasingly apparent.

Governing India. After 1858 an elite British civil service governed India’s 300 million people. A military force consisting of British officers and Indian troops supported this administrative core. Indians were not allowed to hold top posts in the government or commissions in the military. British rulers tended to believe in their own inherent superiority. Such elitism was hardly conducive to warm relations.

Advantages for the Indians. There were, however, some positive results of British rule. A number of reforms were introduced among the people, including educational reforms. Many Indians developed administrative and other skills by serving in various second-level military and government positions. In addition, India again became a unified state.

SOUTHEAST ASIA

British Expansion. It soon became important for Great Britain to connect its Indian possessions with those in Burma, an important source for rice. In 1886 British troops took northern Burma. Britain already held Singapore and was thus in a strategic position to affect trade between the Indian Ocean and the China Sea. Siam (modern Thailand), on the other hand, was in a good position to be a buffer state between French Indochina and English Burma. Britain and France signed an agreement in 1907 guaranteeing the independence of Siam, but making sure that the kingdom was divided into two separate “spheres of influence.”

French in Indochina. After France lost India to England in 1757 (during the Seven Years War), it shifted its interest to the Indochinese peninsula. In the 1840s the government of Vietnam began to suppress Christianity. Thousands of people were killed, including priests. In response, in 1859 the French

seized Saigon as well as three surrounding provinces. It set up a protectorate over Cambodia in 1864 and seized Hanoi in 1882. China responded by sending troops in 1883, but after two years of fighting, the French forced China to abandon any of its claims to Vietnam.

CHINA AND THE WEST

In 1839, the Chinese rebelled against British attempts to influence the Chinese mainland. For two years the British and Chinese fought the Opium War. The British bombarded Chinese forts from the sea and seized some their cities.

The Treaty of Nanking (1842), ending the Opium War, was the first of a series of humiliating “unequal treaties” in which China was forced to accede to Western demands in exchange for considerably less benefit than accrued to the Western powers. A clear expression of advanced imperialism, the Nanking treaty not only reopened trade but also gave to Britain the island of Hong Kong, along with its great port. In addition, five other ports were opened, and under an extraterritorial provision, British merchants and their families were subject to British rather than Chinese law. Finally, China was forced to accept a “most favored nation” clause in the treaty. This meant that whenever China made a treaty with another nation, it was automatically required to provide Great Britain with whatever additional rights the other nation gained.

The Second Opium War. After the Nanking Treaty, opium (extremely valuable in the making of modern medicine) imports rose dramatically. Other trade, however, grew more slowly, causing Western merchants to complain that the Chinese were not honoring their trade agreements. They were right, for the Chinese were finding various ways to circumvent incursions. The Westerners were also expressing complaints on several other issues. In 1856, another war broke out. This time the French and the British joined together to defeat the Chinese. The result was more unequal treaties. In the Treaties of Tientsin, finally ratified in 1860, China agreed to open eleven more ports, to permit foreign travelers to the interior, and to admit Christian missionaries to any part of China. The opium trade was also legalized. Other unequal treaties were signed later in the century.

Russian Encroachment. China also find it impossible to resist Russian encroachments from the North. Russia planted a colony along the Amur River in the 1850s. In an 1858 treaty, it gained the whole north bank of the river. Two years later, Russia obtained territory in the area between the Ussuri River and the Pacific.

Spheres of Influence. Japan’s victory over China in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) demonstrated to Western powers how vulnerable China was. This led them to carve up China, though not as they did in Africa. Rather, they began to define “spheres of influence,” areas where each of them had special leasing and commercial privileges. Russia obtained the right to build a railroad across Manchuria and to control the Liaotung Peninsula, including Port Arthur. Germany got Shantung, while the French received Kwangchow Bay. Britain obtained control of Wei-hai-wei, on the Shangtung Peninsula, and also extended its holdings in the Hong Kong area, which eventually became its major port of entry to the Chinese trade. After the second Opium War, the peninsula of Kowloon, on the mainland, was added as a British colony. In 1898, all of the British territories were combined and leased to Britain for ninety-nine years.

IMPERIAL JAPAN

The Tokugawa ruled Japan for over 250 years, and only toward the end of that time did Western ideas begin to slowly into the country. These ideas slowly built into the Meiji Restoration in 1868, which brought to power a group of reformers who believed that it was in the best interest of Japan to study Western ways, adopt the best things they found there, and catch up. Their response to the Western threat was just the opposite of that of China, and by the end of the century they had made Japan into the first modernized state in Asia. Under these reformers, the modernization of Japan proceeded rapidly. In the end, Japan succeeded not only in throwing off the Western yoke, but also in becoming an industrialized and imperial power itself. In 1871, about half of the most important Meiji leaders took a year and a half to travel to the West. Their purpose was to study and learn, though for home consumption they said they were going to the West in order to revise the unequal treaties.

Economic Reform and Industrialization. The Meiji government created a powerful modern army and navy that not only crushed internal rebellion but also helped push Japan’s imperialism at the end of the century. It also instituted sweeping economic reforms, beginning with a program of industrialization. It recognized that if Japan were to compete with the West at all, it would have to develop

the same kind of economic base. At first the government itself developed new industries and built new factories, to act as models and training grounds for what would come later. It also developed a variety of other essential institutions, modeled after Western examples, such as schools, banks, post offices, and a government university. In the 1880s and 1890s, with government encouragement, private entrepreneurs invested in a variety of enterprises such as cotton textiles, railroads, building materials and chemicals. The new industrial oligarchy showed remarkable talent, creating huge economic empires within Japan comparable to those being created by many American entrepreneurs. By the end of the century, Japan's successful economic development provided a stark contrast with that of China.

Japanese Foreign Relations. The Japanese had successfully adopted a Western economy, however, their islands proved to be lacking the raw materials necessary for industrial expansion. The fact that Japan had become so thoroughly westernized is aptly symbolized by the fact that it became an imperial power by the end of the century in order to expand their industrial base. Japan had a long long-standing interest in Korea; in the 1870s it forced Korea to open its doors to Japanese trade. In addition, the Japanese were not above cultivating a Korean political faction friendly to their interests. Japan also had a vital interest in China. As a result of the Sino-Japanese War, it obtained trading rights in Taiwan, the Pescadores Islands, and the Liaotung Peninsula in Manchuria. It also got an indemnity and a most favored nation treaty with China. Later, however, imperialist Russia was able to use French and German support to force Japan to give up rights to Liaotung.

Japan's new status was soon recognized by other nations. Beginning with Britain in 1894, the old humiliating treaties requiring extraterritorial rights were rescinded. Japan full-blown imperialist adventure began immediately. In 1894 it went to war with China over influence in Korea. In 1902 Japan and England joined in an alliance intended to check Russian expansion. Then in 1904 and 1905 came the Russo-Japanese War, the result of continuing disagreement over Chinese territory. In a convincing display of its new military might, Japan drove the Russians from Port Arthur and seized Mukden. Then, in a decisive two-day naval battle in May 1905, Japan almost completely destroyed the Russian fleet of thirty-six ships. In the Treaty of Portsmouth, negotiated by American President Theodore Roosevelt, Japan received the Liaotung Peninsula. Russia also gave up its southern Manchuria railway, the southern half of Sakhalin Island and its own sphere of influence in Korea. In 1910, Japan annexed Korea outright.

IMPERIALIST AMERICA

The American westward movement and "Manifest Destiny" reasserted itself immediately after the American Civil War, when Secretary of State William Seward took the controversial step of purchasing Alaska for \$7.2 million, thus ending Russian colonialism in the Western Hemisphere. Later, American economic intervention in Latin America and its expansion in the Pacific demonstrated American Imperialism in action.

Samoa. As American shipping in the Pacific increased after its civil war, its interests in two important island groups became increasingly intense. Both Samoa and Hawaii had major harbors and both could be important fueling and provisioning stations for the American navy and merchant fleet. In Samoa, the Americans negotiated a treaty in 1878 that gave the United States a naval station at Pago Pago, as well as extraterritorial rights. Other powers negotiated similar treaties. After a civil war broke out in Samoa in 1887, however, Germany, the United States and Great Britain established a tripartite protectorate.

Hawaii. American interests in Hawaii were more vital. In particular, American sugar growers had attained important economic status and had forced their way into dominating the government. The in 1891 Queen Liliuokalani began her heroic but ultimately hopeless campaign to minimize foreign influence and preserve "Hawaii for the Hawaiians." The result was a coup by American settlers, supported by the American minister in Hawaii, in which the queen was deposed and an independent government set up. Immediately the American minister recognized that government, which then sent a delegation to Washington asking for annexation. After a bitter four-year debate, Congress approved annexation in July 1898 under the argument that if the United States did not annex Hawaii, another power – possibly Japan – would.

The Spanish-American War. Spain, meanwhile, was mismanaging the island of Cuba. A series of Cuban uprisings resulted in ruthless suppression by the Spanish. New civil strife broke out in January 1898, and to protect American citizens in Cuba, President William McKinley sent the battleship *Maine* into Havana harbor. In the midst of increasing tension, the *Maine* blew up. No one knows what exactly happened, but American newspapers fanned the angry flames in the United States, accusing the Spanish of

the deed. The United States used the incident to declare war on Spain, which the United States won within six months.

The Philippines, Cuba and Puerto Rico. The chief American benefit from the war with Spain was the acquisition of an enlarged Pacific empire. Weeks before war broke out, an expansionist assistant secretary of state, Theodore Roosevelt, had alerted Commodore George Dewey, Commander of the U.S. Asiatic Squadron, to move against the Spanish at Manila if war came. Dewey acted promptly, before the war was barely begun, the Spanish fleet in Manila harbor was destroyed; the Philippines had been taken. The Spanish-American War was over in less than a year. Spain agreed to leave Cuba and to cede both Puerto Rico and the Philippines to the United States. An American protectorate was established over Cuba, though an independent government took over in 1902 under a new constitution approved by the United States. However, the new constitution contained a clause authorizing the United States to intervene whenever necessary to preserve Cuban independence or to maintain a government adequate to protect life, liberty and property.