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## How the US Began Its Empire

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The election of Donald Trump will no doubt have many calamitous consequences, but one of the most insidious is likely to be its impact on foreign policy. During the campaign, Trump voiced misgivings about the recent string of unwinnable wars that have followed military interventions abroad—exercises in regime change and nation-building, conducted in the name of humanitarian democracy—and he suggested that his administration would be reluctant to embark on similar projects. Yet Trump enveloped this sane skepticism (rarely if ever articulated in American presidential campaigns) in a cloud of racist bombast, bellicose posturing, and xenophobic nationalism.

What has emerged from Trump’s rants is a self-contradictory vision of a Fortress America with tightly controlled borders that invites foreign conflict by maintaining a provocative, overextended presence abroad. This is hardly a recipe for international stability. What might have been an overdue debate on the limits of interventionist overreach has not materialized, while Trump has been dismissed as a dangerous isolationist. A debate on American intervention is as necessary as ever.

Since the 1930s, the word “isolationist” has been used pejoratively by those who reject any tendency toward restraint in the use of American power abroad. Yet the objections to open-ended military interventionism cannot be reduced to isolationism. They have a rich and complex history—rooted in the classical republican mistrust of empire and articulated by thinkers as diverse as William James, Mark Twain, Walter Lippmann, George Kennan, and William Fulbright, none of whom was a xenophobic nationalist. Stephen Kinzer’s *The True Flag* locates

the origins of this anti-imperial tradition in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, and argues for its continued relevance to public life today.

One could not ask for a timelier argument. For decades, anti-imperial thought has been largely absent from public discourse. So has the word “imperialism.” The chief substitute for it has been “internationalism.” This word evokes a vision of global cooperation, with examples ranging from the Allied war against fascism to contemporary grapplings with climate change. No one can deny the necessity of the United States engaging constructively with the rest of the world; the problem is that engagement has so often involved imperial aims and military methods. The rhetorical shift from imperialism to internationalism suggests a sanitizing process at work during the twentieth century, as the United States moved away from a formal empire based on the occupation of foreign territory to an informal empire based on proxy governments backed by occasional US invasions.

Kinzer shows how that sanitizing process got started, carefully reconstructing both sides of the debate over the acquisition of an overseas empire during the years around 1900. Andrew Carnegie and William Jennings Bryan joined William James and Mark Twain in facing off against Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, Albert Beveridge, and other imperialists. Kinzer’s abundant quotations reveal two contrasting styles of thought, which have persisted to the present.

The anti-imperialists’ arguments were rooted in the immediate experiences they cited as historical examples. Whether or not they considered themselves pragmatists, as William James did, they remained true to the fundamental philosophical meaning of pragmatism: a concern to evaluate principles with respect to their consequences. Anti-imperialists shared a pragmatic tendency to judge ideas and policy proposals by their likely impact on both the empire and its subjects, an impact that could be inferred from historical as well as contemporary evidence. They were worried about what happened to fundamental values—the separation of powers, the consent of the governed—when a republic became an empire. And since imperial expansion depended on violence, anti-imperialists were equally pragmatic in their concern for the consequences of war, perhaps the least predictable of human enterprises.

The imperialists, in contrast, embraced a style of thought that claimed to be pragmatic but was in fact abstract and teleological, untethered to the actualities of experience. Apologists for empire acknowledged the importance of foreign investment opportunities, raw materials, and markets, but more commonly they traded in euphemisms masquerading as concepts—destiny, responsibility, civilization, progress—the ancestors of such contemporary banalities as “globalization.” This habit of mind arose from a faith in a providentially decreed American mission to regenerate the world, accompanied by an equally fervent belief that the rest of the world desired regeneration.

The core of this imperial creed was the exceptionalist equation of America with God’s New Israel, articulated in various forms by orators from Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln. For centuries this belief had merely called for the US to serve as an example to the rest of the world; but when applied to foreign affairs it created problems. The chosen nation could hardly acknowledge that other nations might choose other ways of life, might create a multipolar world. Whether in its earlier, providentialist form or its later, more secular versions, exceptionalism has encouraged an international double standard, an inability among American policymakers to hold the United States to the same rules of conduct they demand of other nations—a failure (for

example) to understand why the Japanese might be less than enthusiastic about American demands for an “Open Door” to Asian markets in the early 1900s, when Americans would have deemed Japanese intrusion into the Western Hemisphere an outrageous violation of the Monroe Doctrine.

The exceptionalist double standard was reinforced by racial hierarchies and intensified by preoccupations with gender. Filipinos and Cubans, despite their desires for independence, were alleged to be unready for self-government—a racist argument that has survived in muted form down to the present. Another long-standing exceptionalist theme has been the virtue of reinvigorated masculinity in imperial discourse. These enduring preoccupations in American foreign affairs stem at least in part from educated men’s desire to vindicate their manhood in a society suspicious of thought, from Theodore Roosevelt’s *Strenuous Life* to John Kennedy’s *New Frontier* to George W. Bush’s *Mission Accomplished*.

In each case there was celebration of unthinking activism, preferably military, as a source of renewed vitality; the refusal of reflection as effeminacy; an obsession with toughness as an end in itself. At its most extreme, this longing for revitalized manhood led to a veneration of war as “a purifying, invigorating, unifying force,” in Kinzer’s words. In recent years, some women in Washington have also felt compelled to embrace a reified masculinity—a bias toward action rather than reflection. This sounds benign enough until one realizes that the action in question, as in Iraq, is usually military, often mistaken, and rarely reversible.

As imperialism became interpreted as internationalism, nearly all the major imperial themes survived and flourished, though sometimes in subtler forms. During much of the twentieth century, the belief in regenerative war lost legitimacy, except in fascist circles, but resurfaced in the Kennedy years and with renewed virulence after September 11. Kinzer is right: the first debate over American empire at the end of the nineteenth century speaks to our own time.

## 2.

By the 1880s, Americans had created a continental settlers’ empire. The next move was toward an overseas empire, at least in the minds of the young patricians Theodore Roosevelt and his mentor, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts. Roosevelt was an asthmatic, nearsighted boy who by the age of twelve had committed himself to a lifelong project of building physical strength and courage. With Lodge’s help, as Kinzer writes, Roosevelt transformed his personal project into a parable of revitalization for his entire class—which in the view of many needed to reclaim “the stern and manly qualities which are essential to the well-being of a masterful race.” Manliness and mastery required regeneration through violence, and by the 1890s, Roosevelt was spoiling for a fight: “I should welcome almost any war, for I think this country needs one,” he wrote. Any opponent would do, but “the most ultimately righteous of all wars is a war with savages.”

Soon an opportunity arose. Lodge secured Roosevelt an appointment as assistant secretary of the navy, and the younger man used the position to push for involvement in the Cubans’ war for independence against Spain. Roosevelt was helped by William Randolph Hearst, whose *New York Journal* reported falsely that American citizens had been assaulted by Spaniards. Worried that unsettled conditions on the island threatened American plantations and mines, President McKinley dispatched the armored cruiser *Maine* to Cuba in January 1898. On February 15, the

*Maine* exploded. Though later investigation showed it was an accident, Hearst claimed the explosion was caused by a Spanish torpedo.

The *Maine* disaster intensified the clamor for war with Spain. On February 25, Secretary of the Navy John Long reported he was ill, and Roosevelt took charge, putting Admiral George Dewey on alert in Hong Kong to be ready to sail for Manila, where most of the Spanish fleet was moored. Meanwhile imperialists in Congress orchestrated an argument for humanitarian intervention. Their main assumption was that Spain was on the wrong side of history. We must intervene in Cuba, Lodge said,

because we represent the spirit of liberty and the spirit of the new time, and Spain is over against us because she is medieval, cruel, dying....

The two nations were at war by April 24.

It quickly became apparent that this war was not just about Cuba. A week after the declaration of war, Dewey smashed the Spanish fleet at Manila Bay. Like the Cubans, the Filipinos were struggling for their independence. Dewey met with the insurgent leader Emilio Aguinaldo and promised Filipino independence in exchange for helping the Americans defeat the Spanish, according to Aguinaldo; Dewey later denied this.

Closer to home, Roosevelt could hardly wait to get into the Cuban war. "I know now that I would have turned from my wife's deathbed to have answered the call," Roosevelt later said. He formed a cavalry regiment he called the Rough Riders and led a charge up Kettle Hill, where four hundred Americans dislodged one hundred Spaniards. "Oh, but we have had a bully fight!" Roosevelt said. "I feel as big and strong as a bull moose!" He had fulfilled his boyhood dream.

He had also acquired a wealth of political capital. Lodge was ecstatic. "Ordinary rules do not apply to you," he told TR, who quickly demonstrated this by running for governor of New York on a platform of overseas expansion. Like most imperialists, he struck the pose of reluctance, deployed the rhetoric of inevitability, and personified the nation as a creature with moral will: "There comes a time in the life of a nation, as in the life of an individual, when it must face great responsibilities, whether it will or not.... We are face to face with our destiny and we must meet it with a high and resolute courage," he announced.

This sort of rhetoric appealed to an electorate that was entirely male as well as largely white and well-off. It carried TR to Albany and eventually to Washington, as McKinley's vice-president and then president in 1901, when McKinley was assassinated. "Our nation, glorious in youth and strength, looks into the future with eager eyes," Roosevelt told the Republican Convention in 1900. The imperialists claimed to be the party of youthful dreams and energy, the party of the future.

But their triumph was by no means a foregone conclusion. Part of their problem stemmed from the discrepancy between war aims and outcomes. What began as a war of liberation ended as an imperial land grab. In fifty-five days, the United States gained control over five island territories with over eleven million inhabitants, including the Philippine and Hawaiian archipelagoes as well as Guam, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. Terms of surrender were drawn up between the Americans and the Spanish; local insurgent forces were conspicuous by their absence. Such was the birth of the American empire. As Kinzer shows, its advocates created a foreign policy at odds with national political tradition and with the supposed sanctity of such ideals as the consent of the governed. No wonder Lodge inaugurated a long euphemistic tradition by calling imperialism

“the large policy.” And no wonder the acquisitions of 1898 provoked a protracted and ferocious debate.

### 3.

After the crushing American military victory over Spain, what were we to do with the “little brown brothers” placed under our care? Since the doctrine of consent of the governed “applies only to those who are capable of self-government,” said Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana, we must continue to occupy the Philippines while we civilize the natives. We could not fly from a duty ordained by God, who “has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world.” This was the exceptionalist position in its purest form.

McKinley’s anguished indecision culminated in what Kinzer calls “the most influential divine visitation in recorded presidential history.” The president entered a trance state, during which God counseled him to deny independence to the Philippines. By a “happy coincidence,” Kinzer observes wryly, “God sounded remarkably like Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge.” Ultimately, McKinley embraced what his Secretary of State John Hay called “the responsibility of duty which we cannot escape.” The result was the suppression of Filipino freedom fighters in a bloody mess of a war.

Imperialists were equally reluctant to grant Cuban independence. American fruit and sugar companies feared that a truly free Cuba might mean a push for agrarian reform. Senator Orville Platt of Connecticut worked with leading imperialists to calm agribusiness fears. The Platt Amendment (to an army appropriations bill) set the terms of Cuban independence in what would become a common pattern of proxy empire—in Kinzer’s words, “formal independence, rule by natives who cooperated with American businessmen, and military intervention as necessary.” This *Plattismo*, as Latin Americans called it, became the characteristic structure of American empire throughout the Western Hemisphere and beyond.



Theodore Roosevelt; drawing by David Levine

But the decision to annex the Philippines had the more immediate impact, provoking anti-imperialist fervor and a fierce guerrilla resistance. Imperialists’ effort to justify the war required more than pronouncements about duty. The race card was also in play. To Roosevelt, the “savage

tribes” who populated the Philippines were little more than “wild beasts.” The fundamental fact was that the US had planted its flag on these new possessions and had to finish what it started: “There must be control! There must be mastery!” he insisted.

The quest for mastery provoked prolonged debate in the US Senate when the Treaty of Paris between the US and Spain was introduced. The treaty sanctioned the US occupation of the Philippine Islands, ignored the Filipino independence movement, and foretold the decisive transition from republic to empire. For Mark Twain, who had supported the war for Cuban liberation, the annexation of the Philippines changed everything, leaving the United States with a “stained flag.” To keep the Philippines would make the stain permanent. Fear that an imperial America would never be the same animated anti-imperialist efforts to defeat the treaty in the Senate. Ultimately they fell one vote short, but the arguments against US imperialism remain powerful and deserve scrutiny.

#### 4.

Imperialists charged that the anti-imperialists’ lament for lost innocence was delusory, that the national enterprise had been one big land grab from the beginning (as the history of the conflict with Native Americans showed). But if the anti-imperialists were sentimental about the American past, they were clearheaded about the stakes in the shift toward overseas empire. They were intensely aware of the corrupting effects of concentrated power on representative institutions and what republican tradition called “civic virtue”—commitment to a common good that transcends private gain. As the Unitarian minister Charles Ames warned, imperialism threatened “to put us into a permanent attitude of arrogance, testiness, and defiance towards other nations.... We shall be one more bully among bullies.”

For Mark Twain and William James, the bullying mentality was epitomized in Theodore Roosevelt. Twain called him “clearly insane” and “the most formidable disaster that has befallen the country since the Civil War.” James marveled that TR

gushes over war as the ideal condition of human society, for the manly strenuousness which it involves, and treats peace as a condition of blubberlike and swollen ignobility, fit only for huckstering weaklings, dwelling in grey twilight and heedless of the higher life.

Both Twain and James rejected Roosevelt’s conflation of moral and physical courage—the confusion at the core of imperialist thought.

But Roosevelt’s “deepest ideological enemy,” according to Kinzer, was Carl Schurz, a German émigré, Union Army general, and former Republican senator from Missouri. Like other anti-imperialists, Schurz had been an abolitionist: apparently there was a link, in some minds, between keeping people as slaves and ruling nations against their will. Against the rhetoric of “new responsibilities,” Schurz demanded fidelity to the originally professed aim of Cuban liberation. Dismissing “high-sounding cant about destiny and duty,” he reaffirmed his commitment to “the flag of our country—not as an emblem of reckless adventure and greedy conquest...but the old, the true flag...of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, the flag of the government of, for, and by the people....”

The costs of conquest became apparent when Filipinos began resisting the American occupation. The sociologist William Graham Sumner wrote: “We assume that what we like and practice, and what we think better, must come as a welcome blessing” to subject peoples, but “they like their

own ways, and if we appear amongst them as rulers, there will be social discord.” As a soldier wrote home: while the “sassy niggers used to greet us daily with a pleasant smile and a Benhos Dias, Amigo, they now pass by with menacing looks.” Soon the Filipinos were fighting their liberators, attacking by stealth and disappearing into darkness. Lodge had a racial explanation: “After the fashion of Orientals, they have mistaken kindness for timidity.”

After the election of 1900, when McKinley defeated the anti-imperialist Bryan, his administration openly embraced what we now call counterinsurgency tactics—burning native villages, cutting off food and medical supplies, torturing prisoners for information, and murdering suspected collaborators, including women and children. “It is not civilized warfare,” wrote *The Philadelphia Ledger*, “but we are not dealing with civilized people.” Yet not even uncivilized warfare could end the insurgency. When TR appointed General Jake Smith to subdue the rebellious Samar province, Smith ordered his men to kill anyone capable of bearing arms—a population he defined as anyone over ten.

News of atrocities filtered back to the United States, outraging anti-imperialists but leaving the larger public unmoved. “The idea of overseas empire had taken root in the American soul,” Kinzer writes. As the *New York World* observed in early 1902, the Philippines war had become something Americans read about over breakfast, mildly disapproving such “abuses” as the “water cure” (“How very unpleasant!”).

During subsequent decades, the American empire expanded in transmuted form. Imperialists restyled themselves as internationalists. Overt possession of territory gave way to *Plattismo*, in Latin America and the Caribbean, in the Philippines and China.

The pattern of informal empire surfaced clearly in the Philippines, which achieved formal independence in 1945 while it remained the host of US military bases and the home of governments friendly to American business. By then the indirect expression of American power was well established in both hemispheres. As early as 1931, the Marine General Smedley Butler surveyed his long career and concluded he had been a “gangster for capitalism” on three continents. The protection of foreign investments remained wrapped in the rhetoric of exceptionalism, which intensified after the United States emerged from World War II as the most powerful country on the planet.

Throughout the cold war and its successor, the war on terror, the exceptionalist creed maintained the international double standard—the willingness to pursue policies deemed intolerable elsewhere, the inability to imagine how Americans might react were other nations to behave as the United States does—if the Chinese, for example, were to conduct naval exercises in the Caribbean. Manichaeism justified constant interventions, covert and overt, in other nations’ affairs. Only occasionally did anti-imperial voices—Walter Lippmann, George Kennan, William Fulbright—raise the counsel of pragmatic restraint.

*The True Flag* captures the tragic impact of American hubris at home and abroad. The anti-imperialists had correctly feared the effects of empire on American political life—the concentration of unchecked power in the executive branch, the corrosive impact of secrecy on public debate, the insulation of decision-making in unapproachable bureaucratic hierarchies. But interventionist foreign policy has had catastrophic consequences abroad as well, from the counterinsurgency campaigns in the Philippines and Vietnam to the chaos arising from “regime change” in Iraq and Libya.

Kinzer concludes by returning to the republican tradition: “Nations lose their virtue when they repeatedly attack other nations,” he writes.

That loss, as Washington predicted, has cost the United States its felicity. We can regain it only by understanding our own national interests more clearly. It is late for the United States to change its course in the world—but not too late.

The recovery of civic virtue and the clarification of national interest are urgently necessary goals, and the only way we can hope to achieve them is by reviving the debate over American empire.