

Topic 7.2

Imperialism: Debates

You Will Learn To:

- Explain the similarities and differences among various attitudes about the nation's proper role in the world.

An Empire or Republic?

After the Spanish-American War in 1898, Americans were divided regarding the nation's new status as an imperial world power. There were expansionists who favored the US competing with other countries for new territories overseas, but also a small yet vocal minority against it. One group, the Anti-Imperialist League, rejected US imperialism outright as a contradiction of the nation's founding principles.



Imperialists and anti-imperialists debated US expansion on the following grounds:

Imperialists	Anti-Imperialists
Desire for new economic markets overseas	Sustaining US values of republicanism and self-determination
Competition with European powers for prestige and national honor	Belief that "uncivilized" races are unworthy of US-style democracy
Conquest of "uncivilized" peoples and diffusion of US values	Keeping long-standing US tradition of isolationism
Expansion of the United States' naval presence	Maintaining principle of noninvolvement in affairs of other countries

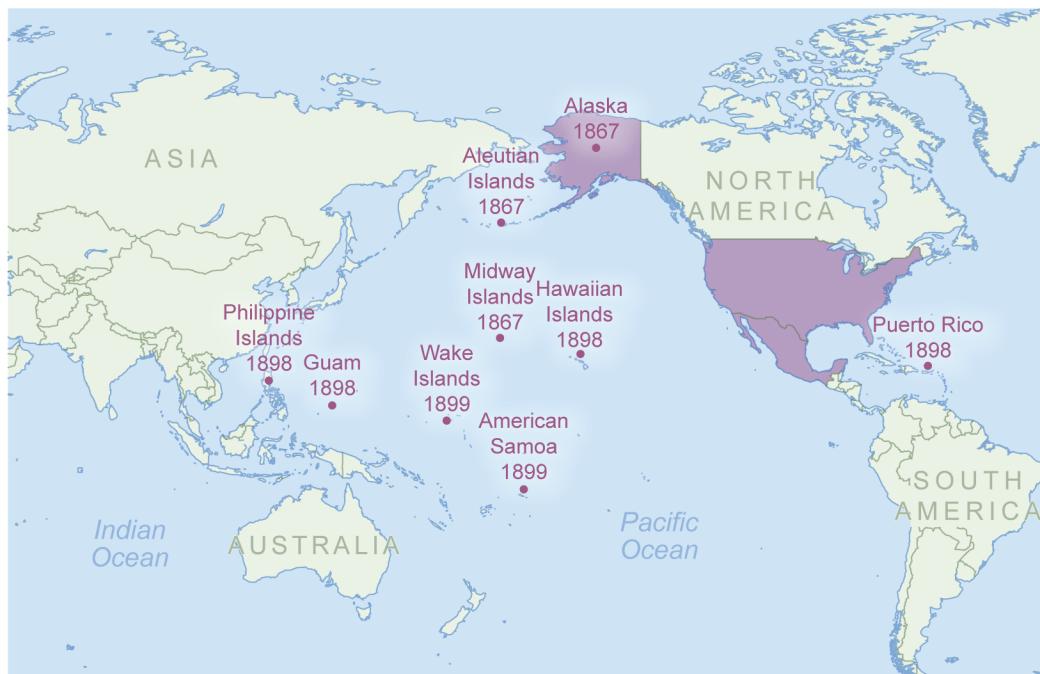
The Imperialist View

Historically, the US has embraced expansionism. In the mid-19th century, a widespread belief in the nation's Manifest Destiny drove westward expansion to the Pacific Ocean rather than expansion abroad. However, the 1890s gave Americans new opportunities overseas.

Economic Opportunities

In 1867, Secretary of State William Seward facilitated the purchase of Alaska from Russia. Dubbed "Seward's Folly" by a skeptical public, the purchase was part of a larger effort to expand US economic interests beyond US shores.

U.S. Imperial acquisitions 1865–1900

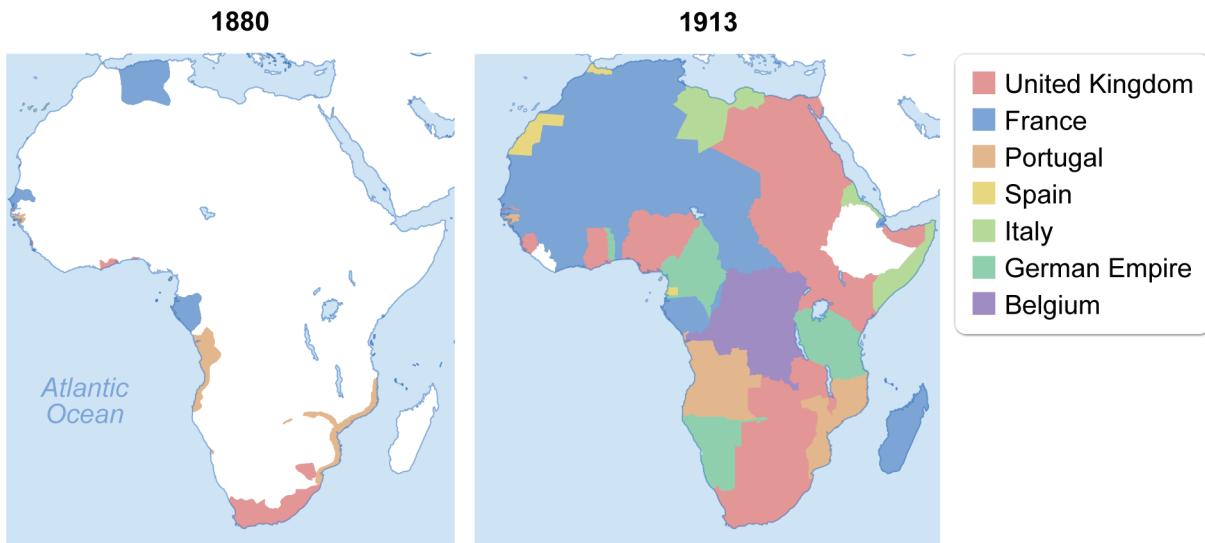


Additionally, Seward's treaty with Nicaragua in Central America and the acquisition of the strategic Midway Islands in the Pacific laid the foundation for further expansion. A canal between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, combined with coal refueling stations at Midway, would facilitate trade with lucrative Asian markets.

The Panic of 1893 left the US economy in shambles and businesses scrambling for new customers. Industrialists looked to expand sales of their products into new foreign markets, especially China. As US unemployment rose, business and government officials feared the spread of socialist ideas among restless workers. Industrialists believed demand for US products abroad could stimulate economic growth.

European Competition

Americans grew alarmed as European powers divided Africa. By the 1890s, some feared that imperial Europe might turn its attention to the Western Hemisphere and challenge US dominance. Challenging European domination of the seas, however, required updating the United States' fleet of wooden vessels.



Many expansionists looked to Alfred T. Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power on History*, which argued that a strong navy was essential to securing a global empire. The US Navy was largely preoccupied with protecting the United States' coastal waters. Mahan argued that an upgraded navy could patrol waters far from home, safeguarding vital shipping lanes needed for commerce and securing potential colonies.

Racial Theories



Americans were also motivated by racialized Social Darwinism to justify the domination of "inferior" races. Some Whites, however, while still believing that other races were inferior, also thought such people could advance to higher levels of civilization. Christians in particular used the idea of a "White man's burden" to justify inferior peoples, sending missionaries across Asia to bring their faith to peoples previously unreached by Whites.

Often interwoven with the gospel message of Christian missionaries was the doctrine of American exceptionalism. A racially paternalistic attitude of making decisions for other people, rather than letting them take responsibility for themselves, was also common among members of the Progressive movement, which sought to "Americanize" new immigrants in urban US settings.

The Closing of the Frontier

The 1890 census showed that populous US settlements stretched from the Atlantic Seaboard to the Pacific Coast. The reports showed that there was no longer a frontier of advancing settlement. Instead, the conclusion was that the frontier of western North America "closed," which sent potential cowboys and adventurers into a panic. Some Americans feared that the end of the frontier would erode the American sense of self. Expansionists like future president Theodore Roosevelt believed that the United States' vast frontier nurtured masculine virtues like hard work and individualism.

Similarly, some thought that the repetitive factory work resulting from the Industrial Revolution dulled workers' wits and eroded their sense of self. The "uncivilized" western frontier was considered a safety valve for those who sought escape from crowded and overpopulated cities.



The historian Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis created anxiety regarding the end of westward expansion. He argued that 19th-century settlement and colonization of the American frontier created a distinct US character. The American character forged on the frontier was steeped in individualism and democratic ideals, making the US unique from European nations. With the West "closed," Turner's followers believed that US survival depended on acquiring territory overseas.

The Anti-Imperialist View

Many Americans had supported the Spanish-American War as an act of liberation against Spain's imperial interests. But the potential annexation of the Philippines in 1899 led to the creation of the Anti-Imperialist League, a group that believed a US empire contradicted the nation's founding principles. Notable members included the social worker Jane Addams, the writer Mark Twain, and the steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie.

Self-Determination

Anti-imperialists pointed to the United States' history as subjects of Great Britain. Many Americans questioned how a former colony could justify building an empire. Anti-imperialists believed that imperialism and colonial rule were incompatible with US republicanism and self-determination.



Social critics like W.E.B. Du Bois drew correlations between the Jim Crow violence against African Americans and imperialism abroad. A nation that could tolerate the lynchings of Black people had no business exporting its brand of "civilization" abroad.

Racial Theories

Not all anti-imperialists opposed the annexation of territories on moral grounds. Although some White Anglo-Saxons used race to justify imperialism, Southern Whites and nativists used race to argue against expansion. US imperialism was occurring at the same time as new immigrants from Eastern Europe and Asia were settling in coastal areas. Southern racists and urban nativists found common ground in their opposition to incorporating other races into a US empire.

Labor Fears

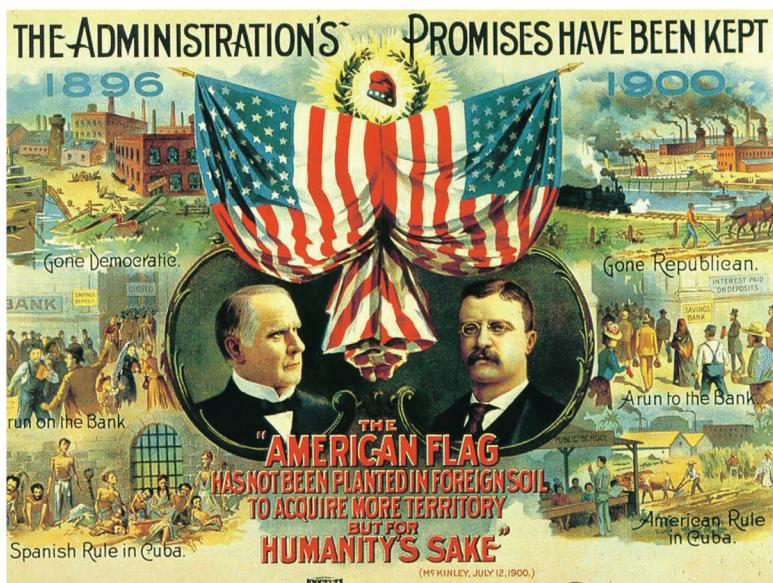
US labor unions were no friends to imperialists. Amid the depression of the 1890s, workers remained skeptical of expansion abroad. A US empire would force workers to compete with cheap, foreign labor from new lands.

Isolation, Not Expansion

Some conservative Americans were committed isolationists who adhered to the warning from Washington's Farewell Address to avoid mingling in the internal affairs of other nations. They also feared that large armies would be needed to maintain a distant empire.

Americans Embrace Imperialism

The presidential election of 1900 was a rematch of the 1896 contest but focused largely on the United States' new empire.



Republicans renominated the incumbent president, William McKinley, and embraced expansionism. William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic candidate, criticized the annexation of the Philippines as a step toward US tyranny. In part because Bryan had previously supported the Spanish-American War, the US victory in 1898 weakened his anti-imperialist message and gave Republicans a boost in the campaign.

Nevertheless, an ongoing Philippine-American War caused some Americans to question the nation's role as an imperial power. Notably, acquiring overseas territories proved easier than establishing stable governments there, even if many Americans saw themselves as liberators of the Filipino people. But to many Filipinos, the US occupation of their islands was no different than Spanish oppression.

Things to Remember

- The Spanish-American War in 1898 caused Americans to debate their new status as an imperial power.
- American imperialism in the 1890s was a continuation of previous expansionist policies of Manifest Destiny begun during the 1840s.
- Imperialists made several arguments in favor of expanding US interests overseas, including
 - the need to compete with European powers and restore national pride;
 - the need to search out new economic markets;
 - the duty to "civilize" supposedly inferior races; and
 - the desire to conquer new frontiers to renew the American spirit.
- Anti-imperialists argued against expansionism overseas for a variety of reasons, including
 - the United States history as a former colony, which made imperialism incompatible with the country's founding principles;
 - the idea that Americans lacked the moral high ground to "civilize" other people, given the United States' treatment of racial minorities at home; and
 - the belief that Americans should adhere to the Washingtonian tradition of not interfering in the internal affairs of other countries.
- Voters embraced US expansion in the election of 1900 despite the vigorous efforts of anti-imperialists.

Key Terms and Developments

White man's burden

Anti-Imperialist League

Philippine-American War

Nativism

Frontier thesis

Social Darwinism

7.2 Check for Understanding

- 1. Which of the following was a major goal of American expansionists in the 1890s?**
 - A. A desire to limit American involvement overseas
 - B. Create American style democracies abroad
 - C. The desire to bring non-White peoples western style civilization
 - D. To establish American colonies in Africa

- 2. Which of the following would be most likely to reject America's new imperialism?**
 - A. An American factory worker
 - B. An American factory owner
 - C. A military officer
 - D. A wealthy industrialist

- 3. American business interests were most concerned with expanding influence in which of the following regions?**
 - A. Africa
 - B. The Middle East
 - C. Asia
 - D. Europe

- 4. The imperialism of the 1890s and Manifest Destiny of the 1840s were similar in which of the following ways?**
 - A. Both were concerned with expanding US influence overseas
 - B. Both attempted to increase national prestige and honor
 - C. Both looked to expand slavery into new territories
 - D. Both looked to expand American institutions to indigenous populations