



BOSTON GLOBE (1898)

EMPIRE

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Lincoln's successors in the Republican Party increasingly stressed the martyred President's line of argument in building their constituency in the West. Ulysses S. Grant, James G. Blaine, Benjamin Harrison and William McKinley all responded to the rising demand for markets and sought to reform various heathens while challenging Europe's global power.

Expansion was also advocated by many non-economic groups. One of the most charming bits of our folklore that the Navy was beached and broken from 1865 until it was refloated in the 1890s on the imperial rhetoric of Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan. The truth is rather different. On the one hand, the wind-blown wooden ships remained quite effective. Even without continuing the Atlantic and European squadrons, the fleets on other stations made 5,980 port calls between 1869 and 1897. Those visits were concentrated in areas noted for their potentials as markets and sources for raw materials. Their sailing orders emphasized the importance of preventing European powers from obtaining special advantages and of supporting local government favorable to American interests.

On the other hand, leaders like Benjamin F. Tracy quietly began, early in the 1880s, to build a new battle fleet of coal-powered steam-driven steel ships with the latest in high-technology armaments. As often happens, the delayed start of that program enabled the United States to build ships that were significantly better than the first generation of European vessels. None of that detracts from Mahan's importance, but it places him in proper perspective. As a result, it was the Navy that defined the imperial strategy for a war against Spain to free Cuba — namely, take Manila as well as Santiago and Havana.

Mahan was only one of many American intellectual leaders, moreover, who were developing systematic theories and arguments for imperial expansion. There is a significant amount of vigorous Christianity in Mahan's writing, for example, and the late-19th century missionary movement did a good deal to excite people about spreading the American gospel (and its attendant commercial rights) in the Middle East and China. And when combined with the doctrine of Social Darwinism by such spellbinders as John Fiske and Josiah Strong, it created imperial best sellers.

The people who made policy were probably more directly influenced by less flamboyant analyses and syntheses.

Some were offered by thoughtful and informed business leaders like Charles Conant and J. P. Morgan. They understood how the once relatively open marketplace had come to be dominated by a few large operators in each major part of the economy (including many aspects of agriculture) and how the increase in productivity had generated an insatiable demand for markets and raw materials. They viewed the marketplace as an integrated system that required close management at home and expansion overseas. Others, typified by Brooks Adams and Frederick Jackson Turner, offered grand historical interpretations that directly or indirectly indicated that expansion was the key to sustaining welfare and democracy.

Such imperial ideas (and related actions) were persistently criticized by a range of socialists on the left to traditional *laissez-faire* conservatives on the right. They never mustered enough support to change the imperial policy between 1890 and 1920, but they did occasionally limit its thrust — as in Cuba, the Philippines and Mexico. Even so, in several crucial episodes, most strikingly Panama and World War 1, many of the critics became imperial patriots eager to extend American power and reform the world.

During those three decades the United States evolved and acted upon a coherent and dynamic imperial outlook. The image of themselves that Americans developed in those years is best characterized as one of the United States as a benevolent, progressive policeman. That view was classically expressed by Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson: the former in his famous corollary to the Monroe Doctrine ("Speak softly and carry a big stick") and the latter in his cry to make the world safe for democracy.

Modern criminology defines three primary idioms of police activity: the watchman, the legalistic and the service. The first concentrates on keeping the peace, preferably by intimidation but if necessary by recourse to violence. The second functions on the assumption that there is a single standard of conduct. The third honors the values and priorities of its particular community. Between 1890 and 1920, Americans synthesized all three on a global scale: keeping the peace as defined by one community's standard of conduct.

But Americans also knew what they wanted to do with that peace. Elihu Root, who served as Secretary of State as well as Secretary of War, explained it with his typical clarity and candor. The issue was "the door, being open, shall lead to something." — "Intercourse with (a country like Algeria) demands the existence of internal conditions favorable thereto....Equality of opportunities for trade with all natives....Improvement of the condition of the people that will enable them to profit by the opportunities of foreign traffic....The power to repress subversive disorder and preserve the public peace....(And) people shall be made in a measure fit and able to profit by the advantages" of being integrated into the imperial system.

Woodrow Wilson's grandiose effort to institutionalize America as the benevolent progressive policeman of the world provoked two major debates. The most famous one concerned whether or not it was possible — let alone wise — to undertake that project. Wilson was defeated by a fascinating coalition. One group was composed of imperial-minded leaders who concluded it was pragmatically possible; the others were anti-imperialists who effectively portrayed the proposal as one that would destroy the image of America as benevolent and progressive.

The second discussion grew out of the fight over the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations and became a long dialogue from 1920 to 1940 between the two elements in the coalition that defeated Wilson. To a surprising degree, moreover, it was conducted in the candid language of the nature and limits of empire. The majority of historians who matured during that debate committed a grievous disservice to themselves, and the rest of us, by using the clichés of isolation and internationalism to define and analyze that highly significant dialogue.

The protagonists fully understood that those terms grossly distorted both the issues and their own high seriousness. The substance concerned the fundamental matters of political economy. That is:

~ Who makes policy on the basis of what perceptions and interests;

~ To what extent are welfare and democracy dependent upon empire;

~ Granted that it is necessary, what is optimum size of the empire; and what are the effective and proper means of structuring, controlling and defending the empire so that it will in practice produce welfare and democracy with the lowest possible negative consequences;

~ What is the minimum effective size of empire; and
~ What happens if we simply say no to empire as a way of life?

The dialogue had many focuses: from the power of concentrated economic wealth within America, to revolutions in Russia and China, the oil of Arabia, Mexico and the Caribbean. I will get to China and Russia in due time, but for the moment let us concentrate on oil because that black, messy stuff wonderfully clarifies the issues; and also the perceptions and ambivalences of all the participants in the debate.

Our first oil scare occurred between 1919 and 1924 at a time when the United States was still pumping almost more of the gunk than the rest of the world combined. The symbol of that panic is the Teapot Dome Scandal, a crisis defined by smaller oil companies like Sinclair attempting to use piddling amounts of cash as sort of a Rapid Deployment Force to defeat giants like Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company.

That early oil crisis gives us important insights into how responsible American leaders were thinking about empire as a way of life. At a distance, such as in Arabia, it was empire as usual. They used economic power (Europe's need for capital) to force England and France to give the U.S. access to the black stuff that was the blood of their Mediterranean empires. Standard Oil became the chosen instrument of our imperial expansion.

But when the empire began to bubble closer to home, next door in Mexico (or Cuba and elsewhere in the Caribbean) reliable people began to understand that 19th century empire was in trouble. Gunboats, even gunboats loaded with Marines, do not navigate so well amid seas of people who have decided that the oil is their oil. The debate became very serious. Indeed. We came as close as we ever have, even including John Taylor of Virginia and John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, to facing the issues inherent in empire as a way of life. Standard Oil and other imperial spokesmen wanted to sustain empire everywhere under any and all conditions. But thoughtful and moral conservatives like Herbert Clark Hoover and Dwight Morrow argued for coming to terms with reality and negotiating equal relationships. And anti-imperialists like Charles Austin Beard began to face and explore the gut issue, the question asked by Eugene Debs: How do we remain democratic without an empire?

Leaders like Hoover, Morrow and Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes were not isolationists. They did not refrain from using American power and influence. But they did entertain grave doubts about the imperial policies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. They wanted to reduce armaments and avoid military interventions, and they manifested a far more relaxed attitude toward the various movements for social change throughout the world. They also enjoyed a sense of history that gave them a perspective on the limits of empire and the counter-productive consequences of trying to control everything that happened around the globe.

Morrow expressed that very simply in the course of his efforts to work out an accommodation with the leaders of the Mexican revolution. "It sometimes amuses me," he commented, "when people say 'settle the Mexican question.' You and I know that neither the Mexican nor the Cuban question will be 'settled' in the lifetime of anyone now living." In the same vein, Hoover understood that "a large part of the world had come to believe that they were in the presence of the birth of a new imperial power intent upon dominating the destinies and freedom of other people." He was at great pains, in his actions as well as his words, to make it clear that he "absolutely disapproved" of the Big Brother conception of American foreign policy.

Given the approach those leaders were attempting to put into operation, and the dynamics of their dialogue with more explicitly imperial spokesmen, it is clear the United States was beginning to come to terms with empire as a way of life. That process was aborted when, for the fourth time in a century, the capitalist economy collapsed in a massive depression. The Great Depression of the 1930s was a vast social trauma of immense intensity, and the culture proved incapable of dealing with the crisis by evolving an alternative way of life.

The debate about foreign policy continued, but the talk rather quickly focused on its role in saving the system and on the question of going to war against Germany and Japan. The overriding concern with saving the system meant that serious talk about alternatives was lost in the scramble to find and apply traditional remedies. From the outset, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (who was elected in 1932) and his associates viewed expanded foreign trade and rearmament as central features of the New Deal.

Neither those nor other programs proved effective. One does not have to cite radical critics. Harry Hopkins and

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