

Two Perspectives on American Imperialism from the 1890s

Excerpts from *The Conquest of the United States by Spain*, William Graham Sumner

Spain was the first, for a long time the greatest, of the modern imperialistic states. The United States, by its historical origin, its traditions, and its principles, is the chief representative of the revolt and reaction against that kind of a state. I intend to show that, by the line of action now proposed to us, which we call expansion and imperialism, we are throwing away some of the most important elements of the American symbol and are adopting some of the most important elements of the Spanish symbol. We have beaten Spain in a military conflict, but we are submitting to be conquered by her on the field of ideas and policies.....

[Spain] had as much self-government as any country in Europe at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The union of the smaller states into one big one gave an impulse to her national feeling and national development. The discovery of America put into her hands the control of immense territories. National pride and ambition were stimulated. Then came the struggle with France for world-dominion, which resulted in absolute monarchy and bankruptcy for Spain. She lost self-government and saw her resources spent on interests which were foreign to her, but she could talk about an empire on which the sun never set and boast of her colonies, her gold-mines, her fleets and armies and debts. She had glory and pride, mixed, of course, with defeat and disaster, such as must be experienced by any nation on that course of policy; and she grew weaker in her industry and commerce and poorer in the status of the population all the time. She has never been able to recover real self-government yet....

The [Spanish] king spent the revenues in extending the imperial system in Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands [wars to conquer parts of these countries], so that the revenues really became a new cause of corruption and decay. The only people who were well off, in the midst of the increasing distress, were the ecclesiastics and nobles, who were protected by entails and charters [i.e., legal provisions that allowed them to avoid taxation], which, in their turn, were a new cause of restriction and destruction to the industries of the country....

A great many people talk about the revenue which we are to get from these possessions. If we attempt to get any revenues from them we shall repeat the conduct of England towards her colonies against which they revolted. England claimed that it was reasonable that the colonies should pay their share of imperial expenses which were incurred for the benefit of all. I have never been able to see why that was not a fair demand. As you know, the colonies spurned it with indignation, on the ground that the taxation, being at the discretion of a foreign power, might be made unjust.... The revolt was made on the principle of no taxation, not on the size of the tax. The colonists would not pay a penny. Since that is so, we cannot get a penny of revenue from the dependencies, even for their fair share of imperial expenditures, without burning up all our histories, revising all the great principles of our heroic period, repudiating our great men

of that period, and going over to the Spanish doctrine of taxing dependencies at the discretion of the governing State.

....Our modern protectionists have always told us that the object of their policy is to secure the home market.... In order to have trade with another community the first condition is that we must produce what they want and they must produce what we want. That is the economic condition. The second condition is that there must be peace and security and freedom from arbitrary obstacles interposed by government. This is the political condition. If these conditions are fulfilled, there will be trade, no matter whether the two communities are in one body politic or not. If these conditions are not fulfilled, there will be no trade, no matter what flag floats. If we want more trade we can get it any day by a reciprocity treaty with Canada, and it will be larger and more profitable than that of all the Spanish possessions. It will cost us nothing to get it. Yet while we were fighting for Puerto Rico and Manila, and spending three or four hundred millions to get them, negotiations with Canada failed through the narrow-mindedness and bigotry which we brought to the negotiation.¹ Conquest can do nothing for trade except to remove the political obstacles which the conquered could not, or would not, remove. From this it follows that the only justification for territorial extension is the extension of free and enlightened policies in regard to commerce....

Summaries and excerpts from the writing of Alfred Mahan

The world is getting more violent, not less

All over the world, the German push for further trade and colonial expansion is causing conflict with other nations: in the Caroline Islands with Spain; the partition of New Guinea with England; the problems in Africa (in which they negotiated with each other, to the exclusion of France); Samoa and other islands of the western Pacific, as well as Germanic influence in Central and South America. In the six years from 1884 to 1890, Great Britain, France, and Germany have *each* acquired colonial possessions, varying in extent from one million to two and a half million square miles,² chiefly in Africa. This means a perpetuation of the traditional animosity between these three nations, as their colonial domains encroach upon each other.

¹ The McKinley Tariff of 1890 raised tariffs against foreign goods to a very high average of 48%. Canada at the same time, entered a low-tariff agreement with the British Empire.

² By way of comparison, the territory of the 50 United States is some 3.8 million square miles. By the outbreak of WWI (1914), all of Africa fell under European colonial control except for Liberia and Ethiopia.

Recent technology has changed the geo-political landscape, and our shores are now vulnerable in ways that they weren't, in earlier times

“It should be an inviolable resolution of our national policy, that no foreign state should henceforth acquire a coaling position within three thousand miles of San Francisco,—a distance which includes the Hawaiian and Galapagos islands and the coast of Central America. For fuel is the life of modern naval war; it is the food of the ship; without it the modern monsters of the deep die of inanition [starvation]. Around it, therefore, cluster some of the most important considerations of naval strategy. In the Caribbean and in the Atlantic we are confronted with many a foreign coal depot, bidding us stand to our arms, even as Carthage bade Rome; but let us not acquiesce in an addition to our dangers, a further diversion of our strength, by being forestalled in the North Pacific.”³

Mahan insisted that one could not stress enough, one major point—the danger that any enemy would pose to us, if they were to acquire a coaling-station within 2,500 miles of American shores. If there were many of these such stations available along the Pacific coast, it would be very difficult to keep all foreign countries away. But in the Pacific, there is only one place that could serve as a fueling station for a naval attack on the United States—and that place is Hawaii. If foreign countries were to be excluded from Hawaii, they would have to start an attack on the US, from 3,500 to 4,000 miles away (meaning a round-trip journey of some 7 to 8 thousand miles)—much too far for a naval attack.

The US has very long, but poorly-defended, coastlines

Having grown up as a nation, with two large oceans on our borders (the Pacific and the Atlantic), we have not maintained strong defenses of our coastlines—nor are we showing any inclination to do so. Along the Caribbean, we have not built up any strong armed position, although other nations have in fact done so. It would be incredibly difficult to defend the 10,500 miles of coastline of the 48 contiguous United States.⁴ This long stretch of relatively unpopulated, and undefended coastline would be very vulnerable to attack by a foreign navy.

³ From *The United States Looking Outward*.

⁴ This figure does not take into account each and every foot of coastline as it curves around a bay, for example, but is a general figure taken from the lines of latitude and longitude that the US extends through.