

“American Imperialism and the War on Terrorism”

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I. Introduction

Imperialism, war, and terror are inevitably topics of heated debate. For the United States of America, the rise of imperialism following the Spanish-American War of 1898 as well as the War on Terrorism presently being waged in Iraq are not exceptions to the rule. Motives and justifications for such events are not easily identified nor categorized. However, by examining the social, economic, and political contexts of these two eras as well as addressing critiques and defenses of opposing sides, this paper hopes to do just that. In so doing, it will contend two things. First, it will claim that the motivation for American involvement in the Spanish-American War and the imperialism of the early 19th century was primarily economic and political in nature while the primary justification for these actions was racism. Second, it will claim that today, although the economy and politics are contributing factors, the primary motivation for American involvement in the War on Terrorism in Iraq is the desire to see our justification, the right of all men to have freedom and life regardless of their ethnicity, religion, or social status, come to fruition.

II. Context of the Spanish-American War and the Rise of American Imperialism

“We are not trying to subjugate a people; we are trying to develop them and make them a law-abiding, industrious, and educated people, and we hope ultimately a self-governing people. In short, in the work we have done we are but carrying out the true principles of our democracy.”¹ With words remarkably reminiscent of those of the American people today, President Theodore Roosevelt addressed the crowd present at the Minnesota State Fair in 1901.

¹ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life* (New York: The Century Co., 1902), 296.

Although the words may be reminiscent of those of President George Bush, the social context in which Roosevelt spoke was one very different from the one we now dwell in.

The atmosphere of the United States in the late 19th Century was so thoroughly permeated with racist thought that few managed to avoid it. The belief that the American race in particular had been endowed with peculiar virtues that made it both desirable and necessary to expand throughout the world was known as Anglo-Saxonism. This idea, according to Julius Pratt, had much of its roots in the “Manifest Destiny” ideals of the 1840s and “had been largely a matter of emotion...simply one expression of a half-blind faith in the superior virility of the American race.”² However, with the publication of the writings of Charles Darwin, support for the transfer of Anglo-Saxon ideals into an accepted, scientifically-based system known as Social Darwinism became widely accepted.

In 1856 and 1871, Darwin published *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, respectively. These two books, beyond being scholarly inquiries into biology and evolutionary theory, provided a people already engrossed by racist ideas with scientific evidence to support them. Americans who were in favor of racism and imperialism had a very specific reason to rejoice when Darwin penned:

There is apparently much truth in the belief that the wonderful progress of the United States...[is] the [result] of natural selection...Looking to the distant future, I do think that...all other series of events...only appear to have purpose and value when viewed in connection with, or rather as subsidiary to...the great stream of Anglo-Saxon emigration to the west.”³

² Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898* (Gloucester: Johns Hopkins Press, 1959), 2-3.

³ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York: Hurst & Company, 1875), 157-158.

President Roosevelt echoed this passage when he claimed that “the spread of the English-speaking peoples...[was] not only the most striking feature in the world’s history, but also the event...most far-reaching in its effects and its importance.”⁴ With support from such reputable sources, the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon to the “savages” and “barbarians” of the world became more than a theory; it became a fact established by science.

Still, Americans, many of whom denied racism as a fundamental foundation for their beliefs, cited many other justifications in their case for imperialism in the 19th Century. One such case was the economic gain that would result from such an enterprise. With monetary lenses, “trade experts were...pointing out, with an alert eye for the dollar, that half the people of the earth lived within reaching distance of the Philippines.”⁵ To deny one’s country from creating a flourishing civilization with a priceless resource such as the Philippines was to possess a “warped, perverse and silly morality,” according to Theodore Roosevelt.⁶ The desire for an expanded economy ceaselessly grew as a case for imperialism, but the imperialistic movement could not justified by a preoccupation with money. Rather, it “took its rationale from more general ideological conceptions.”⁷

A fundamental ideology known as the “white man’s burden” found its expression in a poem by Rudyard Kipling. A portion of it states:

Take up the White Man’s burden,
And reap his old reward –
The blame of those yet better
The hate of those ye guard –

⁴ As cited in H.W. Brands, *TR: The Last Romantic* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 232.

⁵ Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969), 472.

⁶ Howard Beale, 149.

⁷ Richard Hofstadter, 179.

The cry of hosts ye humour
 (Ah, slowly!) toward the light:--
 "Why brought ye us from bondage,
 Our loved Egyptian night?"⁸

Jim Zwick writes, "imperialists within the United States latched onto the phrase "white man's burden" as a euphemism for imperialism that seemed to justify the policy as a noble enterprise."⁹ The imperialists maintained that to abandon "backward, barbaric, and uncivilized" people who were shackled and unable to free themselves would be truly barbaric. Therefore, expansion for a "masterful" people such as Americans would not be "a matter of regret but of pride," for they would bear the burden of civilizing the colonial peoples of the world even if it meant doing so against the will of those peoples.¹⁰ In a speech Theodore Roosevelt delivered in 1899 before the Hamilton Club of Chicago, he asserted:

The timid man, the lazy man, the man who distrusts his country, the over-civilized man, who has lost the great fighting, masterful virtues, the ignorant man, and the man of dull mind, whose soul is incapable of feeling the mighty lift that thrills 'stern men with empires in their brains' – all these, of course, shrink from seeing the nation undertake its new duties.¹¹

If one chose not to undertake this duty, he was not only choosing to be anti-expansionist – he was choosing to be anti-American. The cases for advocating nationalism and taking up the "white man's burden" were prominent, but never would they have reached such heights were it not for their common underlying foundation of racism.

⁸ Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden," *BoondocksNet.com*; available from <<http://www.boondocksnet.com/ai/kipling/kipling.html>>; Internet; (accessed 15 November 2003)

⁹ Jim Zwick, "The White Man's Burden and Its Critics," *BoondocksNet.com*: available from <<http://www.boondocksnet.com/ai/kipling/>>; Internet; (accessed 15 November 2003)

¹⁰ Howard Beale, 47, 39.

¹¹ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life* (New York: The Century Co., 1902), 7.

In addition to appeals to Darwin, American ideals, and economic gain, the practice of invoking God as the chief designer and supporter of superior race theory and imperialism was not uncommon in nineteenth-century America. In fact, it was surprisingly “easy to find men who called upon eternal truths of the Christian religion to justify expansion. Some came close to putting the seal of divine approval upon the doctrine of the survival of the fittest.”¹² Countless religious journals championed this view, but none gained the attention that Josiah Strong, the most prominent Protestant leader of the late Nineteenth Century, drew with his every word.

Josiah Strong, in 1886, published and sold over 175,000 copies of his book *Our Country* professing that his primary motive was to raise awareness and money for foreign missions.¹³ He might have prepared the book to prove the case for worldwide evangelization but “really succeeded in laying bare the racism and expansionism congenial to so many Americans.”¹⁴ Strong associated imperialism with God’s will for the favored races of the world to seek as their “mission” the domination of the lowered races. He claimed that anti-imperialists not only opposed the will and destiny of America but the will of God as well. In one of his most famous passages, Strong questioned:

Can anyone doubt that the result of this competition of races will be “the survival of the fittest?...Nothing can save the inferior race but a ready and pliant assimilation...Is there room for reasonable doubt that this race...is destined to dispossess many weaker races, assimilate others, and mold the remainder, until...it has Anglo-Saxonized mankind?”¹⁵

¹² Thomas Gossett, 214-215.

¹³ The Philippines had actually already been exposed to Catholic Christianity for over 300 years by Spanish priests, so they were not completely uninformed regarding the Gospel.

¹⁴ Frank H. Tucker, *The White Conscience* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1968), 156.

¹⁵ Josiah Strong, 213-214, 217.

Strong foresaw his nation “leaving behind the barbarism of war” and making progress toward completing this civilization.¹⁶ The height of this progress would come in the form of the most prolific imperialist spokesman of them all, President Theodore Roosevelt.

Theodore Roosevelt urged the country to live the “strenuous life,” to seek its destiny throughout the world regardless of the difficulty posed. It would, however, be unfair to highlight racism as Roosevelt’s sole motivation in expansion. He did, for example, place a high value on peace, primarily that peace which comes only from war. He also strongly exhorted each American to take responsibility for his duties as a citizen and to have a healthy pride in his nation. Underlying all of these, however, were the unmistakable racial distinctions he made between his own people and the “uncivilized peoples” of the world. In speeches, essays, and books, Roosevelt commonly referred to colonial peoples with terms such as “savages, barbarians, little brown brothers, warlike Moslems, wild pagans, uncivilized,” and various other degrading titles which would have been unacceptable if applied to any “civilized” nation.¹⁷

III. Critique of Imperialism

For each case imperialists made for expansion (economy, duty, nationalism, and racism), anti-imperialists had a critique prepared. Regarding the imperialist claim that expansion was primarily concerned with noble duties rather than consumed with greed, William Jennings Bryan remarked, “Imperialism finds its inspiration in dollars, not in duty.”¹⁸ That it was the religious and political duty of the white man to “civilize” the colonial peoples of the world who were

¹⁶ Ibid., 209.

¹⁷ Rudyard Kipling referred to the Filipinos as “half devil and half child” and “lesser breeds” while Theodore Roosevelt called them a group of “half-caste and native Christians, warlike Moslems, and wild pagans...[showing] no signs of becoming fit.” Ironically, Roosevelt himself was not Anglo-Saxon and had to espouse the term “American race” to compensate for his Dutch heritage.

¹⁸ William Jennings Bryan, *Bryan on Imperialism* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), 8.

otherwise incapable of governing themselves was also combated by anti-imperialists. Mark Twain satirically wrote, “Perhaps [the “uncivilized man”] is saying to himself: ‘It is yet another Civilized Power, with its banner of the Prince of Peace in one hand and its loot basket and its butcher knife in the other. Is there no salvation for us but to adopt Civilization and lift ourselves down to its level?’”¹⁹ In writing this, Twain was claiming that the people of the Philippines were perfectly capable of stabilizing themselves religiously and politically but were forced instead to comply with the system which Western civilization had brought them. Imperialists, especially President Roosevelt, never seemed to recognize that many “backward peoples” developed the same aspirations as Americans regarding freedom and self-government but could never implement them because America was too busy “civilizing” them.

Few anti-imperialists combated directly the racial superiority questions raised by the Darwinian framework.²⁰ Instead, most chose to appeal to time-honored, American beliefs such as the right of all men to life, liberty, and happiness and the assumption that all men were created equally. Regarding the economy, anti-expansionists pointed out that becoming involved overseas would be costly to the nation. America would be forced to maintain a strong military and incur the expenses of a colonial bureaucracy, both of which would require higher taxation rates. Creating an empire also included the lingering risk of military conflict with other empires interested in the area.²¹

¹⁹ As cited in Charles Neider, ed., *The Complete Essays of Mark Twain* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc.), 289.

²⁰ It is important to note that the reason many anti-imperialists did not combat directly the racial superiority questions raised by Darwinian ideology was because many believed in the concept of racial superiority themselves. The key difference between them and the imperialists, however, was that they did not support imperialism based on these beliefs.

²¹ Richard E. Welch, *Anti-Imperialists and Imperialists Compared: Racism and Economic Expansion in American Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*, ed. Thomas Paterson (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company,

Anti-imperialists claimed contrary to imperialists that colonial peoples were perfectly capable of ruling themselves. They needed no “duty” of Anglo-Saxons which compelled them to leave their own countries in order to civilize others. Nationalism, according to the anti-imperialist, need not express itself by forcibly expanding into the territory of others. Exploitation of people in this way shamed the finest traditions of American democracy which had always insisted on the importance of government only with the consent of the governed.

Mark Twain served as the vice-president of the Anti-Imperialist League in 1901 and as the most outspoken opponent of imperialism. He was no stranger to foreign affairs, having lived abroad for a decade, and was certainly informed regarding the Philippines and every other colonial endeavor the United States publicly embarked upon. He was actually in favor of what the United States had done in Cuba in freeing them from Spain’s oppression and assisting them in establishing their own government, because it seemed to have been congruous with American democratic ideals. However, he considered what America was doing in the Philippines a completely different matter and expressed so in his 1901 essay “To the Person Sitting in Darkness”:

If it had been played according to the American rules, Dewey would have sailed away from Manila...after putting up a sign on shore guaranteeing foreign property and life against damage by the Filipinos, and warning the Powers that interference with the emancipated patriots would be regarded as an act unfriendly to the United States...Dewey could have gone about his affairs elsewhere, and left the competent Filipino army to starve out the little Spanish garrison and send it home, and the Filipino citizens to set up the form of government they might prefer, and deal with the friars and their doubtful acquisitions according to Filipino ideas of fairness and justice – ideas which have since been tested and found to be of as high an order as any that prevail in Europe or America.”²²

1973), 123. Very soon after, the United States did have conflict with various countries attempting to gain control of the Philippines such as Germany and China.

²² As cited in Charles Neider, 290-291.

Later, criticizing the need of America to expand its empire, Twain asked, “Shall we go on conferring our Civilization upon the peoples that sit in darkness, or shall we give those poor things a rest?”²³ The anti-imperialist leaders sought in all their writings and actions to give the racism, jingoism, and subsequent imperialism in America that rest.

IV. Critique of Anti-imperialism

Two common critiques of anti-imperialists were that they were racists themselves, although they claimed to be against racism, and that they lacked concern for colonial peoples who genuinely needed their assistance. Because of the widespread permeation of Social Darwinism, imperialists could state accurately that most anti-imperialists “did not question the idea that Anglo-Saxons were superior to other people” nor did they disagree with the notion that Anglo-Saxons were “destined to eventually conquer the world.”²⁴ Also, controlling an island in order to help those who were unable to govern themselves was a logical policy. It seemed, however, that while anti-imperialists shared the basic assumptions of the imperialists, they were “perfectly willing to leave the Filipinos to their fate – certainly a most un-Christian policy.”²⁵

These critiques had some truth to them, but in the end, were not strong enough to successfully stand. Anti-imperialists did not deny their belief in the inequality of races, but their racism was “of a very different kind and degree than that of their opponents” and their policies were dramatically opposed in many ways.²⁶ “If many of them were infected by racial snobbery, few suffered the virus of racial domination; if they did not want the Filipino as a fellow citizen,

²³ As cited in Charles Neider, 285.

²⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The Anti-Imperialist as Racist in American Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*, ed. Thomas Paterson (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1973), 111-112..

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁶ Richard Welch, 119.

neither did they wish him a vassal.”²⁷ One must see the critique that anti-imperialists were acting in an “un-Christian” manner by remaining uninvolved with colonial peoples who could not govern themselves as unfounded, an argument from silence. Refraining from acting upon beliefs, moral or immoral, in order to practice benevolence or self-restraint is a positive characteristic that cannot be so easily twisted to mean otherwise.

It has been concluded then that the desire to expand the economy and political power of the United States on the basis of prejudicial presuppositions occurred in the early 20th Century. What little resistance there was fell abysmally short of success. But what of the current war? Is the same thing occurring today, only under a different name? What of the critiques regarding the United States administration and their motives and justifications for engaging in this war? To such questions, we now turn.

V. Historical Context for the War on Terrorism in Iraq

“We do love life, the life given to us and to all. We believe in the values that uphold the dignity of life; tolerance and freedom and the right of conscience. And we know that this way of life is worth defending.”²⁸ These words were spoken by President George Bush, affirmed by the United States government, and are believed by most Americans regardless of their political leanings. They exemplify the nature of the justification America maintains for engaging in the War on Terrorism in Iraq, namely that the Iraqi people deserved to have been freed from a tyrannical leader and given rights inalienable to all men. The primary motivation then in America’s involvement in this war is to see this justification come to life. However, one cannot

²⁷ Ibid., 121-122.

²⁸ “President Bush’s Remarks,” *The New York Times*, 19 March 2004; <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/19/international/middleeast/19TEXT-BUSH.html>>

altruistically and ignorantly ignore other motivations that certainly contribute to America's involvement in Iraq.

The United States economy has had a vested interest in the Middle East, including in Iraq, for decades. To lose such a lucrative investment would certainly adversely affect the economy, and most would agree, whether Republican or Democrat, that such a loss is not desired. Thus the country is certainly motivated by the prospect of losing untold amounts of money. Political interest is also a key motivation for United States involvement in Iraq. Not only will America have more power and credibility in Iraq as a result of this war, but it will have taken a monumental step in hopefully alleviating much of the political and social struggle that has been rampant in the Middle East for centuries, particularly in Israel. That the present government has other motivations for invading Iraq than a genuine love for the Iraqi people must be conceded. However, by examining the progress and critiques of the war in Iraq thus far, one also comes to the conclusion that these motivations do not represent the heart of the matter.

As of today, the Coalition gathered in order to wage the War on Terrorism in Iraq is composed of forty-nine countries. As much as many might claim that this war is "unilateral" on the part of the United States, the fact that representatives of every major religion and ethnic group in the world are involved remains. Poland, with 2,500 of its own troops, commands an international force of 9,500 soldiers in south-central Iraq,²⁹ Great Britain leads a division in securing Basra, Kazakhstan has cleared more than half a million explosives, and former enemies Japan and South Korea have both committed historic numbers of troops to the cause in Iraq.³⁰

²⁹ The Associated Press, "Poland Says it Doesn't Regret Iraq War," *The New York Times*, 19 March 2004; <<http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/international/AP-Poland-Iraq.html>>

³⁰ "President Bush's Remarks."

With such forces, the Coalition hopes to turn the Iraqi government completely over to the Iraqi people by June 30, 2004.

VI. Critique of the War on Terrorism in Iraq

To support the thesis statement which claims that economic and political advantage are secondary motivations to the desire to create and protect freedom in Iraq, it will be best to examine critiques of America's current position and also provide proper defenses regarding them. One man wrote *The New York Times* comparing the war in Iraq and the subsequent involvement of America in establishing a democratic government to the "Spanish-American War in 1898, when the still unexplained sinking of the battleship *Maine* was used as a pretext to attack Spain and "liberate" the people of the Philippines."³¹

There are several reasons that the present war and America's motivations for involvement cannot be equated with the War of 1898 and American imperialism in the Philippines. First, weapons of mass destruction and a dictator who is known for using such weapons are not "pretexts" as was the blaming of Spain for the sinking of the *Maine* (The existence of weapons will be discussed more thoroughly in a later paragraph). Second, while the people of the Philippines were virtually unanimously opposed to the presence of the United States in their country in 1900, a vast number of Iraqis welcome wholeheartedly American assistance in 2004. Third, the same Philippines that was once unwillingly occupied by the United States is now part of the Coalition in Iraq. It is unlikely that this would be the case if the war in Iraq was simply a repeat of what occurred in the Philippines. Lastly, racism, which was the primary justification for occupying the Philippines and other former Spanish territories after 1898, is not even considered a factor by most Americans today.

A second common criticism of the Bush administration is that it did not do enough to build an international coalition³² and instead resorted to “blowing off the United Nations”³³ in favor of a “unilateral war” which it was not prepared for. However, one of the primary reasons for invading Iraq was to enforce U.N. demands that they had refused to enforce even after numerous threats made over the course of a decade. Once again, the idea that the United States “blew off” the U.N. in favor of a “unilateral” war is absolutely ludicrous, for it is a well-known fact that there are forty-eight other countries assisting in the rebuilding of Iraq. Furthermore, to label the military and government universally recognized as the most prepared, efficient, and powerful of their kind as unprepared and ill equipped is simply ignorant.

The most common critique of President Bush is that he is simply a liar and that there never were nor are there now weapons of mass destruction in the hands of Saddam Hussein’s regime. One such critic in *The New York Times* writes of President Bush:

He would have had a much harder time selling this war of choice to the American people if they had known that the Iraqi dictator had been reduced to a toothless tiger by the first Persian Gulf War and by United Nations weapons inspectors. Iraq’s weapons programs had been shut down, Mr. Hussein had no threatening weapons stockpiled, [and] the administration was exaggerating evidence about them.³⁴

Each major critique in this statement must be addressed, for they represent the most common critiques of the President and of American presence in Iraq.

³¹ “Letter to the Editor,” *The New York Times*, 20 March 2004; <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/20/L20IRAQ.html>>

³² Stevenson, Richard W. “Bush, on War’s Anniversary, Calls on World to Fight Terror,” *The New York Times*, 20 March 2004; <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/20/politics/20PREX/html>>

³³ “Letter to the Editor.”

³⁴ “One Year After,” *The New York Times*, 19 March 2004; <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/19/opinion/19FRI1.html>>

If Hussein truly had been reduced to a “toothless tiger” before the invasion of Iraq, he was certainly a powerful cat without his teeth. If the use of chemical weapons against his own citizens, the invasion of Iran and Kuwait, and the repeated firing on American and British aircraft patrolling no-flight zones in the last decade are any evidence, Hussein had certainly not been reduced to a state of helplessness. Regarding the claim that Iraq’s weapons programs had been shut down and that no threatening weapons were being stored, two responses must be made. First, if Iraq had already disarmed, why did the United Nations, the Clinton Administration, and virtually the entire world demand throughout the last decade that he disarm and show substantial proof of it? If there truly are no such weapons in Iraq, there has been a failure of intelligence on the part of the entire world, and one cannot simply blame President Bush and label him a liar. Second, referring to accepted rules of logic, one cannot prove a negative. If one claims, “There are no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq,” he is burdened to prove that an infinite amount of possibilities regarding the location of those weapons has been investigated exhaustively and definitively concluded, which is, of course, impossible. So, rather than accurately calling the President a liar, the best one can say is that he does not personally believe what the President has said. Finally, the critique that President Bush has been exaggerating evidence pertaining to the existence of weapons of mass destruction contradicts the previous criticism. After all, the exaggeration of evidence assumes the existence of some evidence. Logically, one cannot exaggerate evidence if there is no evidence to exaggerate!

Although much has been accomplished in Iraq and hopes of a free people soon living under a government of their choice are high, the present administration must keep in mind that the War on Terrorism is a war that will never be won. According to Spain’s Prime Minister-elect

José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, one cannot “win against terrorism or rout it through wars.”³⁵ One cannot demolish an ideology like he can a regime. Still, most Americans would concede that genuinely good strides have been made:

A bloodthirsty dictator who tortured and murdered his people...is locked up. An interim constitution has been adopted, a step toward laying the groundwork for a democratic government in Iraq...American-led efforts to rebuild Iraq have progressed to the point that some services [electricity, water, etc.] are better than they were under Mr. Hussein, and Iraqis are starting to express satisfaction with how things are going.³⁶

VII. Conclusion

The similarities between America’s venture into the Philippines after the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the present War on Terrorism in Iraq do exist, but at their roots, the two events remain starkly different. Racism had such a profound grounding in late nineteenth-century America that the imperialist argument provided for such exploits as the occupation of the Philippines against the will of its people to be viewed not as immoral, hypocritical, and malicious, but instead as magnanimous undertakings worthy of high esteem. In contrast, the cries of those who support America’s presence in Iraq do not dissonantly ring with prejudice of any kind but rather with tones of freedom and equality. A black trooper in a regiment sent to suppress defensive armies in the Philippines remarked, “Dis shyar white man’s burden ain’t all it’s cracked up to be.”³⁷ Time will tell how today’s regiments will deem United States involvement in striving for the Iraq of tomorrow.

³⁵ Knowlton, Brian, “European Leaders Seek to Separate Iraq and Terror Issues,” *The New York Times*, 21 March 2004; <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/21/international/europe/21CND-POLI.html>>

³⁶ “One Year After.”

³⁷ Richard Hofstadter, 194.