

American Foreign Policy in the Progressive Era

by Sophia



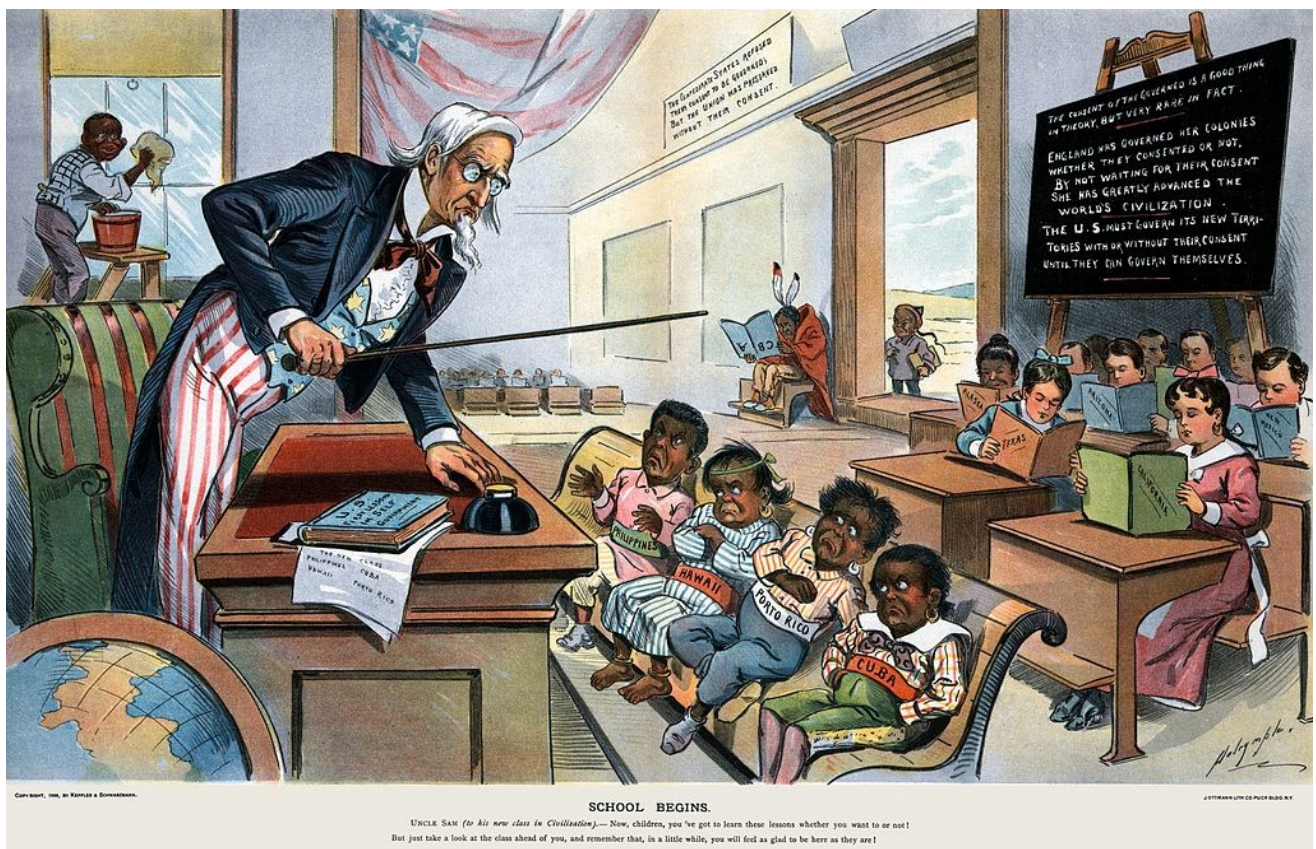
WHAT'S COVERED

During the Progressive Era, the United States encountered challenges and contradictions in its foreign affairs similar to those identified by Progressive reformers in domestic matters. The administrations of Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft consolidated control of the American empire and asserted American influence around the globe. They felt empowered to intervene in the affairs of other countries, especially in Latin America and the Pacific. Although the methods they used to advance the American empire differed, both believed that the best interests of the United States were also aligned with those of the regions.

This tutorial examines American foreign policy during the Progressive Era in five parts:

1. “School Begins”

Following the Spanish–American War, Americans took stock of their new territories and debated whether the United States should become an imperial power. As they had during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, political cartoonists illustrated this public debate. Perhaps none of the cartoons published after the war were more pertinent than “School Begins,” which appeared in *Puck* on January 25, 1899.



A political cartoon titled “School Begins.”

The cartoon portrays Uncle Sam as a teacher standing behind a desk and scolding a group of new, unhappy students labeled “Philippines,” “Hawaii,” “Porto Rico” [sic], and “Cuba.” Behind them, students hold books titled *California*, *Texas*, *New Mexico*, *Arizona*, and *Alaska*. The blue book on Uncle Sam’s desk is titled *U.S. First Lessons in Self-Government*. The caption for this cartoon quotes Uncle Sam telling his new pupils, “Now, children, you’ve got to learn these lessons whether you want to or not! But just take a look at the class ahead of you, and remember that, in a little while, you will feel as glad to be here as they are!”



DID YOU KNOW

U.S. officials attempted to Anglicize the name of Puerto Rico by changing the spelling to “Porto Rico.” The new name never caught on; even the National Geographic Society refused to use it on maps. Note that the cartoon portrays certain groups being excluded from the day’s lesson. To the left, an African American boy cleans the window. Toward the back wall, a Native American child sits by himself, reading a book labeled *ABC* upside down. A Chinese boy stands outside the doorway, looking in.



BRAINSTORM

1. Recall previous tutorials: For what reasons are the African American, Native American, and Chinese students excluded from the day’s lesson?
2. Why must the Philippines, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and Cuba receive the day’s lesson? Did the students sitting behind them have a choice?

Following the War of 1898, American imperialism was based on two key concepts. The first, the assumption of White, Anglo-Saxon racial superiority, is clearly depicted in the cartoon above. White Americans assumed that the White, Anglo-Saxon race and American values were superior to the people and values of the territories the

United States had acquired. In accordance with the concept of “**the White man’s burden**,” the cartoon reinforces the idea that White Americans had a responsibility to mentor and uplift “backward” populations.



TERM TO KNOW

The White Man’s Burden

The belief that Anglo-Saxons owed other races their stewardship and social uplift.

Another concept that impacted foreign policy during the Roosevelt and Taft administrations was **unilateralism**.



TERM TO KNOW

Unilateralism

The practice of participating in foreign affairs with little to no consultation with allies or other nations.

In the cartoon above, Uncle Sam teaches from a book titled *U.S. First Lessons in Self-Government*, which indicates that only the United States knew the proper path to civilization and governance for the inhabitants of its new territories. The presidents believed that the United States had the right—and an obligation—to enforce its interests in regions it deemed vital, particularly Latin America and the Pacific.

2. The Philippine–American War

After the War of 1898 ended, the Philippines descended into violence. America’s empire in the Pacific was not yet secure.

Like the Cubans, many Filipinos desired independence. When it became clear that the United States wanted to use the Philippines for its own purposes, the Filipinos led by **Emilio Aguinaldo** fought back.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Emilio Aguinaldo

Leader of the Philippine independence movement against the Spanish and the United States until his capture in 1901.

The Philippine–American War (known in the United States at the time as the “Philippine Insurrection”) began in 1899 when Filipino soldiers besieged American forces in the capital of Manila. Fighting over the next 3 years was brutal: Over 4,000 American and 20,000 Filipino combatants died. Press reports of atrocities toward Filipino civilians by American troops tarnished the nation’s image.



DID YOU KNOW

The civilian death toll during the Philippine–American War has been estimated to be as high as 250,000. In 1901, President **William McKinley** appointed William Howard Taft as the civil governor of the Philippines. Under Taft’s leadership, Americans built a new transportation infrastructure, hospitals, and schools, in an attempt to win over the local population. Shortly thereafter, a joint Filipino–American force captured Aguinaldo, and most of the fighting ended by the summer of 1902.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

William McKinley

President from 1897 until his assassination in 1901, who prosecuted the War of 1898 and oversaw the establishment of an American overseas empire.



Filipino independence leader Emilio Aguinaldo was captured after 3 years of fighting U.S. troops. He is seen here boarding the U.S.S. *Vicksburg* in 1901 after being captured and taking an oath of loyalty to the United States.



DID YOU KNOW

The Philippines did not gain independence from the United States until 1946.

3. The Panama Canal and the Roosevelt Corollary

President **Theodore Roosevelt** firmly believed in the superiority of White Americans and in the right of the United States to act unilaterally in the areas it controlled, particularly in Latin America. His foreign policy for that region was based on an African proverb: “Speak softly, and carry a big stick, and you will go far.”



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Theodore Roosevelt

President from 1901 to 1909, who established a “big stick” foreign policy approach in Central and

South America. His Roosevelt Corollary stated that the United States would use military force to ensure stability in the western hemisphere.

Roosevelt's "big stick" was the U.S. Navy. He devoted significant energy to the continued improvement of the Navy, increasing its budget to construct more battleships and enlist more sailors.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1907, Roosevelt ordered 16 American battleships, each painted white, to sail around the world in a display of American goodwill—and might. The ships, dubbed the "Great White Fleet," completed their journey in 1909.



The San Francisco Sunday Call welcomes the arrival of the Great White Fleet to San Francisco on April 26, 1908. The caption at the bottom of the image reads "White armada, awe inspiring, Thunders at the Golden Gate: California volleys roses, hastens to capitulate."



In this political cartoon from 1904, Theodore Roosevelt wields a “big stick” over Latin America with the U.S. Navy in tow in a display of American power.



THINK ABOUT IT

How does the image above reflect the key concepts associated with American imperialism during the Progressive Era?

The crux of Roosevelt’s foreign policy was a thinly veiled threat. He believed that in light of the country’s recent military successes, it was unnecessary to *use* force to achieve foreign policy goals, so long as the military could credibly *threaten* force.

Roosevelt first applied this policy to begin the construction of a canal across Central America. The most strategic location for the canal was the 50-mile-wide isthmus of Panama, which, at the turn of the century, was part of Colombia. Roosevelt negotiated with the Colombian government, sometimes threatening to build the canal further north through Nicaragua. The Colombian government was unwilling to cede any land to the United States and argued that the proposed payments for the canal route were too low.



DID YOU KNOW

Prior to the construction of the Panama Canal, it took ships in the Pacific approximately 2 months to reach the East Coast of the United States by steaming around the tip of South America.

Roosevelt wielded the “big stick,” making it clear that he would support the Panamanian people in the event

they revolted against Colombia and formed their own nation. When an uprising began in November 1903, Roosevelt sent American battleships to prevent Colombia from moving troops to Panama. He immediately recognized the new country and offered it \$10 million, plus an annual \$250,000 rental fee (the same terms he had offered to Colombia), to secure American access to the canal site.



DID YOU KNOW

Construction of the Panama Canal began in May 1904. In 1914, after workers had removed over 170 million cubic yards of earth, the canal opened.

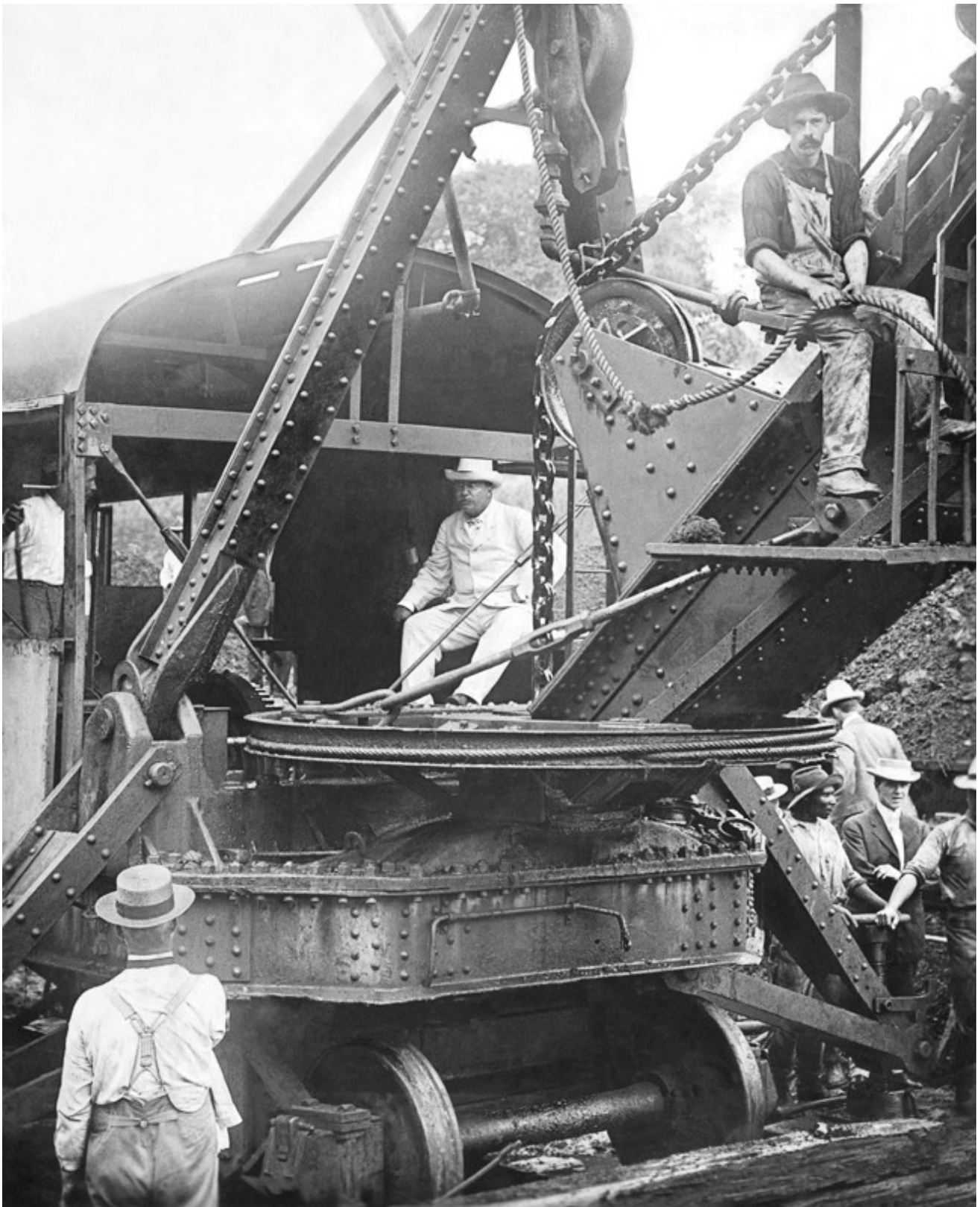


Photograph of the construction of the Panama Canal in 1907.



DID YOU KNOW

Theodore Roosevelt toured the Panama Canal construction site in 1906. It was the first time a president had left the country during his term in office.



President Roosevelt sitting on a steam shovel at the Panama Canal site in 1906.

Roosevelt's conduct of negotiations with Colombia and his recognition of Panamanian independence sent a clear message to other countries in Central and South America. When problems erupted in the region, the United States would intervene to reestablish and maintain peace and stability. In 1904, the administration formalized its unilateral intentions by issuing the **Roosevelt Corollary** to the Monroe Doctrine.



TERM TO KNOW

Roosevelt Corollary

Stated that the United States would use military force to correct any action by a Latin American nation that threatened the stability of the region.

The Roosevelt Corollary was an extension of the Monroe Doctrine, enacted by President James Monroe in 1823.



DID YOU KNOW

The Monroe Doctrine warned European powers not to interfere in the affairs of Latin American countries, most of which had recently gained independence from Spain. In return, the United States would refrain from intervening in European wars.

The Roosevelt Corollary modified the Monroe Doctrine and reinforced Roosevelt's "big stick" foreign policy by committing the United States to use military force "as an international police power" to maintain stability in the region and advance American interests.

Roosevelt immediately put the corollary to work. Later in 1904, he ordered American forces to invade the Dominican Republic, which had not paid its debts to American and European investors. In 1906, Roosevelt sent troops to Cuba to maintain order, following a disputed election.

Additional Resource

Visit the [Theodore Roosevelt Center](#): over 200 digitized primary sources related to Theodore Roosevelt and the acquisition of the Panama Canal Zone.

4. Dollar Diplomacy

William Howard Taft succeeded Roosevelt as president in 1909, he combined Roosevelt’s “big stick” policy with one that became known as “**dollar diplomacy**.”



PEOPLE TO KNOW

William Howard Taft

President from 1909 to 1913, who adapted Roosevelt’s “big stick” foreign policy approach to a philosophy that became known as “dollar diplomacy.”

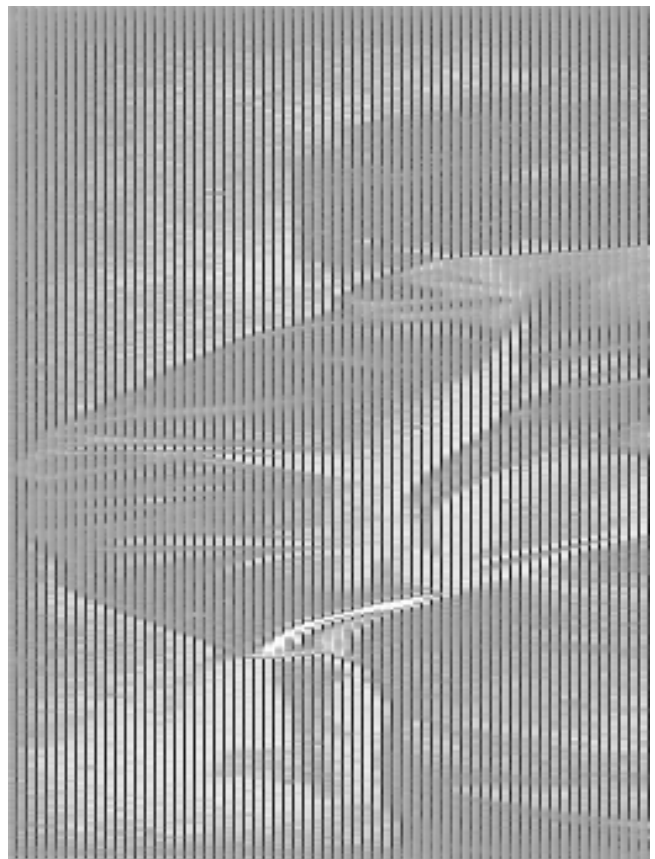


TERM TO KNOW

Dollar Diplomacy

William Howard Taft’s foreign policy approach, which involved the use of economic power and influence to secure American interests abroad.

In a departure from Roosevelt’s foreign policy, Taft (pictured below) announced his intention to “substitute dollars for bullets” when securing markets and opportunities for American businessmen.



Like the “big stick,” Taft’s use of America’s economic clout coerced countries, including many in Latin America, to enter agreements that benefited the United States.

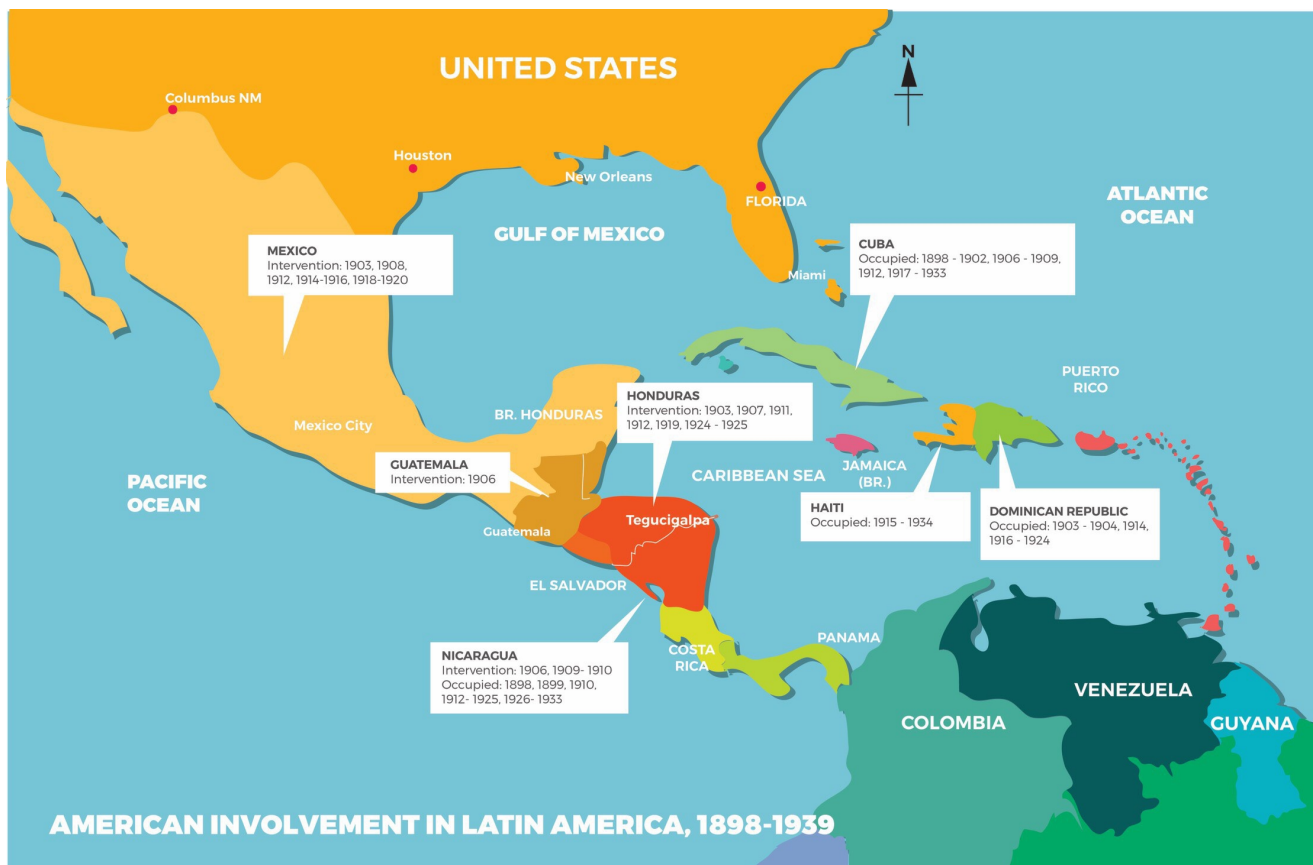
Of key interest to Taft were the debts that Nicaragua and other Latin American nations owed to European countries. To allay fears that European countries might intervene in Latin America to collect the money owed to them, the Taft administration offered to pay their debts in American dollars. Not all Latin American nations approved of this solution, as it would make them indebted to the United States.

When Nicaragua refused American loans to pay its debts and threatened to invade nearby El Salvador in 1909, Taft sent in U.S. Marines. American forces occupied Nicaragua until 1933, indicating that the Taft administration would resort to bullets when economic coercion did not produce desired results.



DID YOU KNOW

The period between 1901 and 1920 is often referred to as an “era of intervention” in U.S.–Latin American relations. During this period, American Marines were deployed to Latin American nations over 20 times.



Through a combination of military might and economic coercion, the United States dominated Latin American affairs during the Progressive Era.

5. The New Diplomacy

U.S. involvement in the Philippines and Latin America during the Progressive Era revealed important changes in foreign policy that contributed to the rise of the United States as an economic and military power.

Regardless of whether it was called “big stick” or “dollar diplomacy,” a new form of American diplomacy emerged during the Progressive Era. The United States was confident in its superiority and ability to act unilaterally to end disputes and protect its interests. Depictions of the United States as the world’s policeman were common in the political cartoons of the era.



Louis Dalrymple, “The World’s Constable,” *Judge*, January 14, 1905.

The cartoon above, from January 1905, shows President Roosevelt as a police chief standing before the people of Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Folded in Roosevelt’s belt and arms are papers labeled “Tell Your Troubles to the Policeman” and “Arbitration.” The president’s baton is labeled “The New Diplomacy”. Below the president stand people from all over the world. Some of them carry papers labeled “Controversy” or “Dispute” and appear to want the United States to help them. Others, particularly the figures on the lower left, representing Latin America (and one carrying a rifle, representing the Philippines), cower beneath Roosevelt’s “big stick”—indicating that these groups bore the brunt of the “new diplomacy” of the Progressive Era.



THINK ABOUT IT

1. What do you think the creator of this image meant by “The New Diplomacy”?
2. How many examples of the two elements of Progressive foreign policy—racism and unilateralism—can you find?



BRAINSTORM

Compare this image with “School Begins” (included at the beginning of this tutorial). What similarities and differences do you see? How do they depict examples of U.S. foreign policy conduct during the Progressive Era?



SUMMARY

By expanding U.S. influence in the Pacific and in Latin America, U.S. foreign policy sought to promote American geopolitical and economic interests while helping the inhabitants of less industrialized countries build democratic governments and a higher standard of living. Some American foreign policy achievements, such as the construction of the Panama Canal, were remarkable. However, many initiatives included the elements of social control that tainted domestic Progressive reforms. American forces fought a bloody war to maintain control of the Philippines. Believing that U.S. interests were also the best interests of Latin America, Presidents Roosevelt and Taft sometimes used political, military, and economic coercion and ignored the sovereignty of Latin American nations.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Dollar Diplomacy

William Howard Taft's foreign policy approach, which involved the use of economic power and influence to secure American interests abroad.

Roosevelt Corollary

Stated that the United States would use military force to correct any action by a Latin American nation that appeared to threaten the stability of the region.

The White Man's Burden

The idea that Anglo-Saxons owed other populations their stewardship and social uplift due to their race.

Unilateralism

The practice of participating in foreign affairs with little to no consultation with allies or other nations.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Emilio Aguinaldo

Leader of the Philippine independence movement against the Spanish and the United States until his capture in 1901.

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President from 1901 to 1909, who established a "big stick" foreign policy approach in Central and South America. His Roosevelt Corollary stated that the United States would use military force to ensure stability in the western hemisphere.

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