

The Origins of American Imperialism: Primary Sources

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Although it was seen by many as an isolationist nation prior to the 20th century, the United States has been anything but isolated from the outside world throughout its history. The expansion of U.S. control over territories outside North America, and direct intervention in foreign affairs, became particularly pronounced during the 1890s. At that time, Americans took an interest in distant lands and envisioned an American empire that rivaled those of Europe.

This tutorial examines the origins of American imperialism in three parts:

1. Foreign Policy During Reconstruction

In 1877, the United States lacked the tools—and the desire—to establish a strong position in international affairs. During Reconstruction, the federal government focused on reincorporating the former Confederacy into the Union and consolidating control over the Western territories (and their native inhabitants). As a result, it did not take any significant initiative in foreign affairs.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In 1865, the U.S. State Department, which oversees American foreign policy, had approximately 60 employees and no ambassadors to represent American interests abroad. Only two dozen American foreign ministers were deployed in key countries; many of them gained their positions through patronage or bribes rather than their diplomatic skill or expertise in foreign affairs.

➔ **EXAMPLE** A strong international presence required strong military forces—particularly a navy. The United States had scaled back its armed forces following the Civil War. By 1890, the U.S. Navy had been significantly reduced in size, and many of its ships had wooden or iron hulls.



DID YOU KNOW

The U.S. Navy introduced its first all-steel, triple-hulled steamship in 1883, but only 13 of these ships had been launched by 1890.

The foreign policy objectives of the United States following the Civil War were modest and sporadically pursued. Secretary of State **William Seward**, who held that position from 1861 through 1869, sought to extend political and commercial influence in two key regions:

Region	Influence
Central and South America (also known as Latin America)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 1866, Seward entered negotiations with Colombia for a treaty that would grant the United States a right-of-way to construct a canal across the Isthmus of Panama. The negotiations failed when the Colombian Senate refused to ratify such a treaty with the United States. • Seward wanted the United States to acquire the Virgin Islands, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba, believing these islands would be suitable locations for naval bases. However, because of the demands of Reconstruction, Congress paid little attention to his proposals.
The Pacific Ocean	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 1867, the United States formally acquired Midway Island. • Also, in 1867, Seward negotiated the purchase of Alaska from Russia for \$7.2 million.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

William Seward

Secretary of state from 1861 to 1869, who sought to extend American political and commercial influence abroad and was responsible for the acquisition of Alaska, also known as “**Seward’s folly**,” in 1867.



American and Russian representatives signing the treaty in which the United States purchased Alaska. Seward is seated at the center; the Russian ambassador stands next to a globe with his hand above Alaska.

Although many in the press mocked the acquisition of Alaska as “Seward’s folly,” the purchase furthered America’s strategic ambitions in the Pacific.



TERM TO KNOW

Seward’s Folly

The pejorative name given by the press to Secretary of State Seward’s acquisition of Alaska in 1867. Seward was particularly interested in the Aleutian Islands, the long chain of islands that extends southwest from the Alaskan mainland, believing that they could host valuable fueling stations for American merchant shipping in the Pacific. Unbeknownst to Seward, the purchase also gave the United States access to Alaska’s rich mineral resources, including the gold that triggered the Klondike Gold Rush at the end of the 19th century.

2. Reasons for Imperial Expansion

The late 19th century, particularly the 1890s, was a turning point in the development of American **imperialism**, because of the actions of two key groups.



TERM TO KNOW

Imperialism

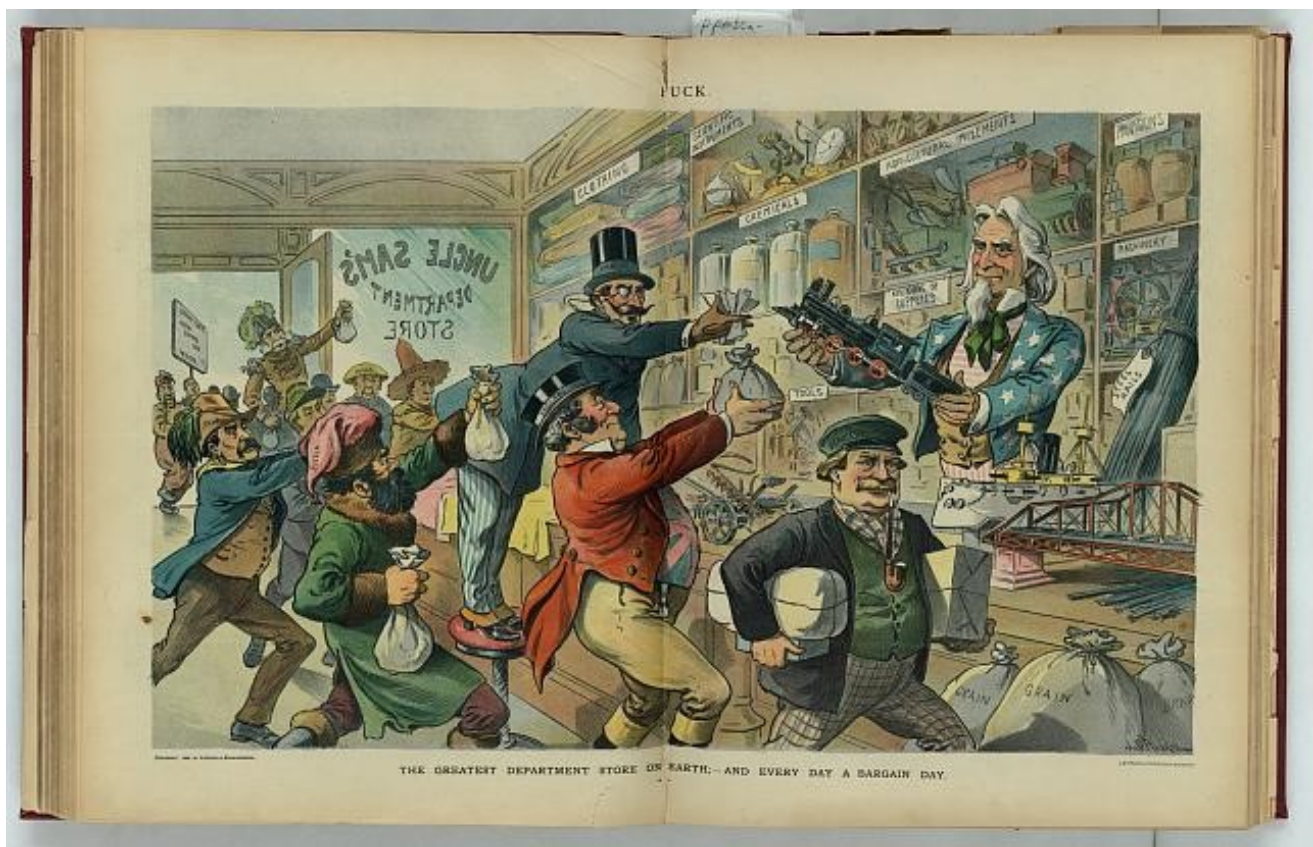
The policy of one nation acquiring the territory and resources of another through diplomacy, economic influence, or military force.

The most important of these groups was the American business community. As the United States began to industrialize in the 1870s, commercial interests called for the country to implement an imperial foreign policy. Businessmen argued that the United States would gain access to international markets for export, and receive better prices on raw materials, by forging new and stronger ties overseas.

As a result of industrialization, American exports to other nations skyrocketed between the Civil War and 1900.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Between 1865 and 1875, the value of American exports increased from \$234 million to \$605 million.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1898, the total value of American exports was \$1.3 billion.



“The Greatest Department Store on Earth—And Every Day a Bargain Day” by J. S. Pughe. Published in *Puck* on November 29, 1899, this cartoon shows Uncle Sam, the owner of “Uncle Sam’s Department Store,” doing brisk business. Standing behind his counter (and in front of shelves full of American-made goods), Uncle Sam deals with eager customers from around the world.



BRAINSTORM

Recall what you have learned about American consumerism during the Gilded Age. How might one use the image above to argue that consumerism fueled American imperialism and globalization? Imports also increased substantially during this period.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Between 1865 and 1898, the value of imports to the United States increased from \$238 million to \$616 million.

By the 1890s, a number of American entrepreneurs owned businesses or plantations in Latin America and the Pacific. For example, American businessmen owned fruit plantations in Hawaii and sugar plantations in Cuba. Others invested in mining and railroad construction ventures in Mexico and other Latin American nations. Increased investment in these countries also increased U.S. interest in foreign affairs. The other major group—besides the business community—that promoted American Imperialism consisted of Protestant leaders and missionaries. They sought to spread the democratic and Christian influence of the United States abroad.

Many American missionaries were motivated by a combination of ideologies and reform impulses associated with the Gilded Age. These included **social Darwinism** and the **social gospel**.



TERMS TO KNOW

Social Darwinism

The theory that human societies evolved much like a natural organism, wherein some individuals

succeeded because of inherent racial and ethnic traits or through their ability to adapt.

Social Gospel

The belief that churches should be as concerned about the conditions of people in the secular world as they are with their afterlife.

Works like Reverend Josiah Strong's *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (1885) encouraged Protestant missionaries to spread the gospel throughout the world, as in the following excerpt:

Reverend Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*

"... It seems to me that God, with infinite wisdom and skill, is training the Anglo-Saxon race for an hour sure to come in the world's future. Heretofore there has always been in the history of the world a comparatively unoccupied land westward, into which the crowded countries of the East have poured their surplus populations. But the widening waves of migration, which millenniums ago rolled east and west from the valley of the Euphrates, meet today on our Pacific coast. There are no more new worlds The time is coming when the pressure of population on the means of subsistence will be felt here as it is now felt in Europe and Asia. Then will the world enter upon a new stage of its history—the final competition of races, for which the Anglo-Saxon is being schooled.

Long before the thousand millions are here, the might centrifugal tendency, inherent in this stock and strengthened in the United States, will assert itself. Then this race of unequalled energy, with all the majesty of numbers and the might of wealth behind it—the representative, let us hope, of the largest liberty, the purest Christianity, the highest civilization—having developed peculiarly aggressive traits calculated to impress its institutions upon mankind, will spread itself over the earth."



THINK ABOUT IT

Why does Strong encourage American Protestant missionaries to spread the gospel throughout the world?

A number of religious leaders and reformers joined Strong in his cause, believing that the expansion of missionary work would not only benefit people around the world but also invigorate American democracy.

Many Protestant sects formed missionary societies that extended their reach into Latin America and Asia. Led by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and similar organizations, American missionaries conflated Christian ethics with American virtues. They spent as much of their time advocating American civilization as they did teaching the Bible.



DID YOU KNOW

The expansion of missionary work abroad provided opportunities to American women. By 1890, over 60% of the nation's foreign missionaries were women.

In keeping with the social gospel, American missionaries wanted to help people in less industrialized nations to achieve a higher standard of living. However, the influence of social Darwinism led them to assume that, without their guidance and assistance, people of non-White races were doomed to a life of poverty and ignorance. Most American missionaries believed that White Americans, and the Anglo-Saxon race they represented, were mentally superior to all others. As Christians, they were required to uplift the inferior races. This view was referred to by British writer Rudyard Kipling as **"the White man's burden."**



TERM TO KNOW

The White Man's Burden

The belief that Anglo-Saxons owed a debt of stewardship and assistance to people of other, inferior races to help them raise their standard of living.

3. The Plan for Empire

The efforts of businesses, missionaries, and reformers supported an expanded American foreign policy in the early 1890s.

American intellectuals, most notably historian **Frederick Jackson Turner** and naval strategist **Alfred Thayer Mahan**, justified the goals of American imperialism and suggested the ways in which they could be accomplished. Turner's **frontier thesis**, which he presented at the 1893 meeting of the American Historical Association, reflected the concern felt by many American intellectuals that the lack of a frontier in the West could mean the end of American democracy.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Frederick Jackson Turner

Late-19th-century historian whose "frontier thesis" argued for the significance of the frontier and expansion to the development of democracy and American identity.

Alfred Thayer Mahan

American naval strategist whose 1890 book *The Influence of Seapower Upon History* articulated a guide through which the United States could achieve an overseas empire and was influential in American foreign policy at the turn of the 20th century.



TERM TO KNOW

Frontier Thesis

A theory, developed by Frederick Jackson Turner, that proposed that the growth of American democracy depended on an expanding frontier.

Turner concluded that "the demands for a vigorous foreign policy, for an interoceanic canal, for a revival of our power upon our seas, and for the extension of American influence to outlying islands and adjoining countries are indications that the forces (of expansion) will continue." A foreign policy based on this theory would enable American businesses to find new markets. Turner also encouraged the United States to develop outlets for domestic population growth—for American settlement or to accommodate immigrants.

In 1890, Alfred Thayer Mahan's guide to how the United States could successfully build an empire, *The Influence of Seapower Upon History*, was published.



TERM TO KNOW

The Influence of Seapower Upon History

A book written by naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, which outlines the ways in which a strong navy would help the United States acquire an empire.

Mahan's book provided three strategies for the United States to pursue in constructing and maintaining an empire:

1. The construction of a larger, stronger, and more powerful navy
2. The acquisition of territory in Latin America and the Pacific for naval bases and refueling stations



DID YOU KNOW

Mahan and naval officials referred to these bases as “coaling stations” because steamships were powered by coal.

3. The construction of a canal across the isthmus of Central America, which would decrease the time and expense necessary to move ships between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans

Shortly after Mahan’s book was published, the federal government passed the Naval Act of 1890, which set production levels for the creation of a modern naval fleet.



DID YOU KNOW

By 1898, the U.S. Navy had reached an active fleet level of 160 vessels, 114 of which were built of steel. At the same time, the United States consolidated its influence over strategic areas in the Pacific, particularly Hawaii. Although Hawaii was an independent nation, American businessmen exerted significant control over its sugar industry.

➔ **EXAMPLE** By 1890, a series of reciprocal trade agreements enabled American sugar producers in Hawaii to export sugar to the United States, tariff-free.

When Hawaii’s leader, Queen Liliuokalani, challenged the power of the American sugar companies, businessmen worked with the U.S. minister to Hawaii, John Stevens, to stage a revolt against her in 1893. Hawaii became an American protectorate, and Queen Liliuokalani could do little besides protest that her kingdom had been taken away from her.



(a)



(b)

Queen Liliuokalani of Hawaii (a) was unhappy with Hawaii's one-sided trade agreement with the United States, (b) but her protests were ended by an American-led revolt in 1893.



DID YOU KNOW

The United States annexed Hawaii in 1898.

The events in Hawaii made it clear that the United States was committed to an imperialist foreign policy and that it was willing to use force to achieve its goals.



SUMMARY

During the late 19th century, the United States sought to expand its power and influence overseas, especially in pursuing strategic and economic opportunities in Latin America and the Pacific. Continued industrialization, which required raw materials and markets, helped fuel an imperialist foreign policy. The beliefs and efforts of Protestant missionaries, reformers, and intellectuals supported this policy. By the early 1890s, after the United States had expanded its naval power and acquired Hawaii as a protectorate, the framework for an American empire was in place.

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REFERENCES



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Social Darwinism

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Social Gospel

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A book written by naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, which outlines the ways in which a strong navy would help the United States acquire an empire.

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The belief that Anglo-Saxons owed a debt of stewardship and assistance to people of other, inferior races to help them raise their standard of living.



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