

1898: Birth of an Overseas Empire

In a way, America's empire in the Pacific began with an explosion roughly 100 miles or so off the coast of Florida in the quiet waters of Havana Harbor.

On February 15, 1898, the USS *Maine*, a battleship moored just outside Cuba's capital, erupted in flames and sank, killing hundreds of crew on board. The ship had been sent there to monitor the growing conflict between Cuban revolutionaries and the Spanish regime that had maintained control of the island for centuries. It is not entirely clear how or why the ship exploded, but almost immediately war hawks in the United States blamed Spain. Tension grew until Congress declared war on April 25, 1898.⁴⁸

Although the United States fought in two major theaters—the Philippines and the Caribbean—the war was over quickly. After the U.S. Navy dispatched the Spanish squadron in Manila, U.S. servicemen took all of about four months to capture Cuba. When it was all said and done, the [William McKinley \(People/Detail/17980\)](#) administration went on what George C. Herring, a leading historian of U.S. foreign policy, has called an “island land grab.” By the time the ink dried on the Treaty of Paris ending the war, the United States had staked claim to Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Samoa, and a handful of other Pacific islands and had used the conflict to begin the process of annexing Hawaii.⁴⁹

The war and America's resulting overseas expansion came at the end of an anxious decade. The 1890s had unleashed an avalanche of social strife at home, including the collapse of the U.S. economy, the supposed closing of the American frontier, unemployment, labor unrest, and the entrenchment of Jim Crow laws limiting the rights of African Americans. The disorder at home led many to look abroad. “Since Jefferson's time,” the historian Herring wrote, “Americans had sought to deal with pressing internal difficulties through expansion, and in the 1890s they increasingly looked outward for solutions to domestic problems.”⁵⁰

But by the turn of the century, looking outward only seemed to bring up more questions than answers. Many Americans wondered if expansion was a good idea, whether the United States should enter the 20th century as an imperial power. Mostly, the debate split the population into those for expansion and those against it.



Image courtesy of the Naval History and Heritage Command

Shown here entering the harbor of Havana, Cuba, on January 25, 1898, the USS *Maine* exploded three weeks later, on February 15. Despite the lack of definitive proof that Spain was responsible for destroying the ship, Congress responded to cries for action by declaring war on Spain two months later.

mainland United States?

Would they have representation in Congress? From the start, America's racial politics featured prominently in debates about the Philippines and Hawaii. Popular ways of thinking, driven by trends like social Darwinism, shaped congressional discussions on citizenship, democracy, and the movement of goods and people across borders.⁵³

When Congress approved the annexation of Hawaii in July 1898, for instance, a substantial part of the debate focused on the racial characteristics of the inhabitants of the islands.⁵⁴ As we have seen, the United States had for decades followed a policy of exclusion that prevented people of Asian descent from integrating into American society. But after years of transpacific immigration, Hawaii had substantial Japanese and Chinese populations. The question became whether the U.S. government could reconcile this with the strict exclusionary policies of its immigration law.



Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana argued for an expanded U.S. role in the Pacific, suggesting that the Philippines and Hawaii could play an important part in U.S. commercial and military interests.

Those in favor envisioned the United States as an emerging global power in which American ships crisscrossed the Pacific to trade with untapped markets. Geography bestowed the Philippines and Hawaii with immense value to U.S. industries looking to trade with Asia.

Expansionists like Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana argued that the islands would be invaluable as way stations for American exporters and the U.S. military, lending credence to his theory that the Pacific would dominate “the commerce of the future.”⁵¹ Anti-imperialists, on the other hand, believed expansion endangered the future of the republic by antagonizing world powers and overextending America's resources.⁵²

Almost immediately Congress confronted a host of moral and legal conundrums about the nation's new island possessions: Did the Constitution even allow the United States to reach beyond the boundaries of North America to govern new territory? What did it mean for a former colony to possess colonies of its own? Would these territories be eligible for statehood, or did Congress have the authority to prevent them from joining the Union? Regardless of where *fin de siècle* Americans came down on expansion, they faced unavoidable questions about what would happen to the inhabitants of these new territories: Were they eligible for American citizenship? Could they move freely between the islands and the

Some in Congress saw this as a problem the United States could easily overcome.⁵⁵ But others, like future Speaker [James Beauchamp \(Champ\) Clark \(/People/Detail/11000\)](#) of Missouri, saw Hawaii's large Asian population as a direct threat to the republic. Clark deplored the idea that Hawaii might one day become a state—that Japanese and Chinese immigrants might one day become U.S. citizens—and he encouraged Congress to develop a solution “without polluting and weakening our system of government by taking to our bosom a horde of Asiatic savages.”⁵⁶

For Clark and Members of Congress who shared his beliefs, expansionism gambled with the future of the nation by overestimating the capacity of American society to assimilate new, nonwhite immigrants.⁵⁷ Imperial ambitions in the Pacific, Clark predicted, would lead the United States to acquire one new territory after another, reshaping the legislative branch along the way. He described what he considered to be a nightmarish future in which the House had to hire an “interpreter to the Speaker” in order to translate the “discordant voices” during debate. Underwriting his argument with pseudoscientific theories about race popular at the time, he warned against a “polyglot House” populated by Members from Cuba, Fiji, Hong Kong, Korea, and “the Cannibal Islands,” the last of which, he told the Speaker, would “gaze upon you with watering mouth and gleaming teeth.”⁵⁸



Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

This circa 1899 image, “Uncle Sam’s Burden (with apologies to Mr. Kipling),” shows a U.S. soldier carrying three children (representing the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Cuba) in a backpack made from the U.S. flag. The scene was inspired by Rudyard Kipling’s 1899 poem “The White Man’s Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands.”

For others, like Senator Beveridge, future President William H. Taft, and British author Rudyard Kipling, who put these anxieties to verse in his 1899 poem “The White Man’s Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands,” race was not a reason to avoid the Philippines. It was the very reason America needed to expand; it was the justification for American superiority. Beveridge dismissed Filipinos as “children utterly incapable of self-government.” As the head of a U.S. mission to the islands, Taft called them America’s “little brown brothers.”⁵⁹ Beveridge understood the U.S. role in the Philippines as a “divine mission” to establish a “system where chaos reigns.” American expansion was bigger than party politics, he said, bigger than popular opinion or constitutional authority. “It is elemental. It is racial.”⁶⁰

Taft likewise doubted the capacity of the Philippine people for self-government, a theory he based largely on the color of their skin, once predicting they would “need the training of fifty or a hundred years before they shall even realize what Anglo-Saxon liberty is.” The Filipinos were “born politicians,” Taft wrote to Secretary of War Elihu Root, “as ambitious as Satan and as jealous as possible of each others’ [sic] preferment.”⁶¹

Ultimately, the construction of an American empire contained an inseparable and volatile mix of race and nationhood. Americans for and against expansion used common racial theories and popular stereotypes to support their arguments. For some, the United States stood as a civilizing force in the Pacific territories. For others who saw no way of integrating America’s new territories into the Union, race became the chief reason to dial back the country’s overseas ambitions.⁶² In the first half of the 20th century, America’s dealings in the Philippines and Hawaii showcased the convergence of race and empire.

[Next Section \(/Exhibitions-and-Publications/APA/Historical-Essays/Exclusion-and-Empire/The-Philippines/\)](#)

Footnotes

⁴⁸ Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*: 214–321; Jennifer K. Elsea and Matthew C. Weed, “Declarations of War and Authorizations for the Use of Military Force: Historical Background and Legal Implications,” Report RL31133, 18 April 2014, Congressional Research Service: 4. On the USS *Maine*’s assignment in the Caribbean, see Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley*: 70–72.

⁴⁹ Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*: 319.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 299–309, quotation on p. 304.

⁵¹ *Congressional Record*, Senate, 56th Cong., 1st sess. (9 January 1900): 704.

⁵² For a take on the ideology behind anti-imperialism, see Robert L. Beisner, *Twelve Against Empire: The Anti-Imperialists, 1898–1900* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1968).

⁵³ For a comprehensive look at the intersection of race, immigration, and empire, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

⁵⁴ Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*: 234.

⁵⁵ *Congressional Record*, House, 55th Cong., 2nd sess. (11 June 1898): 5787.



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[About this object \(/Collection/Detail/30172\)](#)

When the United States annexed Hawaii, Congress considered the racial demographics of the islands. Representative [James Beauchamp \(Champ\) Clark \(/People/Detail/11000\)](#) of Missouri denounced the idea of eventual Hawaiian statehood, arguing that Congress would be unable to incorporate such a large foreign population into the country.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 5789.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 5790.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 5792. For a similar Clark quote, see "House Scene Recalls Champ Clark's Vision," 28 February 1908, *Detroit Free Press*: 2.

⁵⁹ *Congressional Record*, Senate, 56th Cong., 1st sess. (9 January 1900): 705, 708; Peter W. Stanley, *A Nation in the Making: The Philippines and the United States, 1899–1921* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974): 164.

⁶⁰ *Congressional Record*, Senate, 56th Cong., 1st sess. (9 January 1900): 711.

⁶¹ Karnow, *In Our Image*: 173–174.

⁶² Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*: 261.

Office of the Historian: history@mail.house.gov (<mailto:history@mail.house.gov>)

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