The Origins of the American Empire

I. Timing of an expansionist foreign policy – Why now?

Economic Reasons

Industrial expansion convinces some U.S. politicians and businessmen to pay more attention to countries abroad as possible markets for American products. The European market offers tangible gains. Elsewhere, there is only “potential” for gains. Much of this “potential” is overstated – especially the so-called China market.

The Depression of 1893 gives a sense of urgency – “We must gain foreign markets before the next depression hits.”

Geopolitics

The other Great Powers – France, England, Germany, Japan, and Russia – appear to be expanding their influence into the non-industrialized world and the Americans fear they are being “shut out.”

Some argue: “Even if we haven’t yet secured markets to exploit, we need to expand our influence in the developing world before other nations get ahead of us.”

Politics
Domestic Politics: Anti-British rhetoric ("Twisting the lion’s tail") always plays well with voters – particularly Irish immigrants who vote in large numbers in key states.

When a crisis in Venezuela erupts, President Cleveland sees an opportunity to divert public attention from the sputtering economy at home. He insists the US must mediate between the British and the Venezuelans.

Gender

GENDERED LANGUAGE EMERGES → late 19th Century

-- Broader crisis of masculinity brought on by the closing of the frontier and urbanization and industrialization

Men no longer “tame the West” or fight wars, they have sedentary office jobs and are “going soft.” Young boys must be taught to be “men” from an early age.

Women seem more assertive – they are playing more of a public role and the issue of women’s suffrage is gaining more attention. This worries some men.

Many men recapture the sense of masculinity through the world of fantasy and popular culture – Tarzan novels, body building, lion-taming, college sports (especially violent sports like football).

Correspondingly, an aggressive, expansionist foreign policy seems to offer the opportunity to reassert the
national manhood.

Religion

Often discounted by historians who tend to be secular, religion did play a major role in motivating an expansionist foreign policy.

Many white American Protestants believed it was their duty to “civilize” and “Christianize” the developing world. This argument often fused with racism – it was the “white man’s burden” to civilize the “darker” (or “lesser”) races. Doing so not only made one a better Christian, it made the world a better (and more peaceful) place. Or so they thought.

The first two motivations – economics and geopolitics – are based on calculating the national interests. They are referred to as “realist” since they rely on thought rather than emotion. They lay out a long term strategy that underlie policy and defend that strategy by advancing an argument based on data and research.

Politics is more of a short-term motivation. Occasionally, political leaders need a distraction to save their own political fortunes. For some politicians in the 1890s, foreign expansion became just such a distraction.

The last two motivations – gender and religion – are less concerned with national interests (financial or otherwise) and more concerned with American culture and the
American character. Often these arguments appeal to people’s patriotism and love of their country. They draw on emotions, moreso than reason. And, as a result, are usually more convincing to most Americans who prefer to “emote” than to think.