

## The Origins of the American Empire

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

### Economic Reasons

Industrial expansion during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century convinces some U.S. politicians and businessmen to pay more attention to countries abroad as possible markets for American products. The European market offers real opportunities for trade and exporting. Elsewhere – China, Africa, Latin America – there is only “potential” for gains. In fact, much of this “potential” is overstated – especially the so-called China market. Still, there is widespread hope that opening foreign markets to US goods will restore or preserve economic prosperity. When American factories produce and sell more goods, they hire more workers (or even raise wages), thus stimulating an economic recovery.

This is perhaps a persuasive argument, but it fails to ask some basic questions: Do these foreign nations want the goods the US hopes to export to them? Do the people have the financial resources to afford these goods? Is the market already controlled by some other foreign power that will do all it can to prevent the US from having access to average consumers? Can the US “open” markets when other nations’ imperial systems are based on “closed” markets – the colonizing power has exclusive access to the raw materials and consumers of the colony

(this was the British imperial model, for example)?  
Lacking military leverage, how is the US to convince other nations to “open” their “closed” markets?

Despite these unanswered (and often unasked) questions, the Depression of 1893 gives a sense of urgency – “We must gain foreign markets before the next depression hits.”

Unemployment shot up in 1893 and remained high for the next few years. [See figures on the powerpoint slide.] This panicked many politicians who feared being turned out of office by angry voters. Even though the politicians themselves had little to do with the economic downturn or high unemployment, reality was less important than the voters’ emotional state. The 1893 Depression, then, becomes the catalyst for some to support a more expansionist, aggressive foreign policy that would, supposedly, secure foreign markets for US goods, and therefore revive the economy and create more jobs.

## 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.” [See powerpoint slides of Africa and China.]

The American military – particularly the navy – is relatively weak compared to that of Britain and the other imperial

powers. As early as the 1880s, some geopolitical theorists urged US officials to build a stronger navy in order to compete with the other Great Powers in the geopolitical game for global influence. They made some headway, but most average Americans paid little attention to world affairs and so the political pressure for the US to expand its global influence remained stalled. The 1893 Depression did raise the issue of foreign markets and so it also contributed to the urgency of the geopolitical argument for US expansion.

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.” This meant beefing up US military forces so as to insure protection for American ships that might be carrying US exports to foreign ports. A up-to-date military would also be needed to help open foreign ports that were usually under the exclusive control of some other colonial power (with a well-established navy to guard its position).

## Politics

A political crisis at home is often addressed by focusing voters’ attention on something else. (“If you don’t like what’s being said, change the conversation.”) The Depression of 1893 worried the Democrats (President Cleveland is a Democrat) and so they were not adverse to finding something else to talk about. 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 involving Great Britain making claims for more territory in Venezuela, President Cleveland sees an opportunity to divert public attention from the sputtering economy at home. He denounces the British “interference” in the Western Hemisphere as a violation of the Monroe Doctrine and insists the US must mediate between the British and the Venezuelans.

The Brits ignore Cleveland’s bluster, but, at the same time, they have no interest in a conflict with the US and so they do not “over-react.” They also understand that Cleveland may be provoking a conflict so as to divert US voters’ attention away from bad economic news. By creating a war scare, Cleveland initially succeeds in “changing the conversation,” but, ironically, the war scare sparks uneasiness on Wall Street and produces further economic instability! Quickly, Cleveland walks back his aggressive rhetoric and reaches an accommodation with the Brits, who are annoyed, but not a little amused at the Americans’ antics.

Meanwhile, Germany, too, appears to be eyeing expanding its influence in the American “sphere of influence” and Cleveland looks for further opportunities to show the “strength” of his administration by warning the Germans not to interfere in the Western Hemisphere. Overall, though, Cleveland resists calls from pro-imperialists to expand US influence in places like Hawaii,

East Asia, and the Caribbean. In general, the Republican party, more so than the Democratic party, is pro-imperialism.

## Gender

### GENDERED LANGUAGE EMERGES → late 19<sup>th</sup> Century

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

Unlike their fathers, many of whom were Civil War combat veterans, young American men no longer fight wars or “tame the West.” They have sedentary office jobs and, it is feared, they are “going soft.” To combat this trend, many argue that young boys must be taught to be “men” from an early age. Starting in the 1890s, young children are assigned strict gender roles from birth (“blue” for boys; “pink” for girls) What constitutes “being a man” also changes. Rather than an emphasis on honor, gentlemanliness, statesmanship, and success in business, now virility, athletic and physical prowess, and combativeness denote “true” manhood. This stress on physicality – consciously or not – also insures those who are worried about the decline of manhood that women cannot be “men” or “masculine” (or compete successfully against men) since they are “the weaker sex.”

This eruption of hyper-masculinity should come as no surprise. By the 1890s, women seem to be becoming

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. Often “crises in masculinity” are in fact a response (often a panicked response) to changes in women’s behavior and attitudes.

Many men recapture the sense of aggressive masculinity through the world of fantasy and popular culture – Tarzan novels, body building, lion-taming, college sports (especially violent sports like football). [See powerpoint images.] The trend is so widespread – particularly among the middle class and wealthy – that it becomes the target of satire and joking (note the Puck magazine cover in the powerpoint).

Correspondingly, an aggressive, expansionist foreign policy seems to offer the opportunity to reassert the national manhood. Most men paid little attention to the debates over markets and geopolitics that were going on in elite circles, but if the case for an expansionist foreign policy could be put in more visceral, emotional terms – if support for such policies were equated with demonstrating one’s “manliness” – then the “man on the street” might be more open to being persuaded by such arguments.

## 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.

As it happened, many of the first professional officials in the US foreign service (ambassadors, consuls, etc.) were the sons of missionaries and, as such, were imbued with the missionaries’ “crusading” spirit. They were often supporters of a more aggressive, expansionist foreign policy – not to secure power or markets, but because they believed that the spread of American religious and social values would improve the peoples in the developing, non-industrialized world.

### Overview of Motivations

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 underlies policy and defend that strategy by advancing an argument based on data and research (or so the “realists” claimed – often their “realistic” arguments were based more on hope and misperceptions).

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. But, as was the case in the Venezuela crisis, there could be unintended consequences from “twisting the lion’s tale” – war scares could precipitate further economic uncertainty.

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 idealized vision of themselves and their love of their country. These arguments appeal to emotions, more so than reason. And, as a result, are usually more convincing to most Americans who prefer to “emote” rather than to think. The problem is that occasionally such emotions, once roused, can go beyond the control of the politicians and other elites who aroused them in the first place. The emotions can provoke movements for things the elites might want to suppress or avoid.

This is arguably what happened in 1897-1898 as the US found itself in the middle of a conflict between Cuba and Spain that had been brewing since the 1860s.