

## Despotic At Home and Tyrannical Abroad

Jim Pederson    Dyed-in-the-Wool History    January 28, 2025

This was a quote from Robert E Lee where he described after the war how he envisioned the future of the recreated nationalist state. From the end of the war of 1861, the US was involved in almost constant military action that increasingly spanned the globe. Generally these required relatively small force deployments that could easily be historically overlooked, and generally are, yet they say a great deal about the perceived new American national identity and how other people view the messianic nation, which are frequently very different. The following is a partial account of some of the more notable US military deployments and actions that established firm control of the Western Hemisphere and extended the American presence into the Pacific and Far East.

**Mexico 1860 to 1870:** By 1861 Mexican anti-cleric liberals under Benito Juarez, with American support, had won a long and bloody civil war (referred to as the War of Reform) for the control of Mexico. Juarez was a progressive nationalist, similar to Lincoln, who was closely associated with confiscation of church property and dramatically reducing the role of the Catholic Church in society and culture. Mexican conservatives had sought European help in resisting American influence. Mexican conservative leader Jose Gutierrez in making the case that the U.S. posed a serious threat not just to Latin America but to Europe wrote, *"If the European powers persist in ignoring America's aggressive policy toward her neighbors and allow it to go unchecked, still regarding this growing giant as a child, how will they be able to defend themselves against America's encroachment in the field of industry and commerce? The triumph of America is only possible at the expense of Europe, who will have to pay dearly for her lack of foresight"* (1 p. 305). Napoleon III headed these warnings and in 1862 invaded and defeated the liberal forces and installed Emperor Maximilian, brother of Franz Joseph of Austria-Hungary, as Emperor of Mexico. Britain and Spain were also involved but backed off prior to actually committing troops but the broader plan involved reacquiring territory beyond Mexico. (2)

Maximilian declared a policy of religious toleration, which he thought might cause the Americans to stop supporting Benito Juarez but that didn't work and cost him support of the Mexican populace although it is likely that he was still supported by the majority of the population as opposed to Juarez (1 p. 306). Maximilian tried very hard to win the approval of the Mexican people while also trying to appease his American adversaries and these goals proved to be incompatible which was a key strategic mistake. While the American war was still raging, Republican clubs raised funds for Juarez and referred to him as *"our man in Mexico"* and several Union generals called for the immediate invasion of Mexico. The US congress did pass a unanimous resolution condemning the establishment of the Mexican monarchy but, by that time, the Southern states had seceded.

During the American war, the Confederacy approached Maximilian with a proposal for an alliance in exchange for recognition but Napoleon III was indecisive and Maximilian was still concerned about angering the Union. For the Confederacy, the French were a problematic association as they had openly voiced plans to acquire lands that were part of the Confederacy during the war. A large number of southerners, including many officials and military officers, went south to Mexico after the fall of the

Confederacy but most were interested in civilian life in the Veracruz area and returned when the outcome of the Mexican war became apparent. Confederate General Joseph O. Shelby, after taking a vote amongst his men, offered their services to the conservative Mexican government and further proposed that he could raise 40,000 Confederate veterans to join the fight but again Maximilian was concerned about angering the victorious Union government. Still a number of confederate officers and soldiers did play a role in the final defense of the Mexican monarchy.

With the American war winding to a close the U.S. government was able to refocus on Mexico with Grant sending 50,000 troops to the Texas-Mexican border and 30,000 rifles to the Juarezistas (3 p. 12) . As a result of this “*diplomatic pressure*” Napoleon began to withdraw his troops who couldn’t have contended with the resources and close proximity of the Americans. Maximilian’s army rapidly lost territory until they held only central Mexico and were defeated in 1867. Maximilian was executed on June 19, 1867 (1 p. 307). The Cinco de Mayo holiday celebrates the defeat and withdrawal of the French but this day is more of a celebration in the U.S. than in Mexico where there is more of an understanding of the history of these events.

**Ecuador:** Jose Garcia Moreno was the most successful of the Catholic rulers of Latin America. Born in 1821 to an aristocratic family in Quito, he studied theology in the university there. In 1849 he went to Europe to see the effects of the failed revolutions and made a 2<sup>nd</sup> trip from 1854 to 56 which shaped his views on the dangers of liberalism and secularism. Under his rule, church and state were linked but he specifically gave up the state’s right or ability to appoint bishops, inherited from Spain, intentionally giving the church independence from the state in that sense. Profession of Catholicism, however, was a requirement to run for office or vote. (1 p. 308)

Under Moreno’s rule slavery was abolished while providing compensation for the owners. The army was reformed, with officers being sent to Prussia to study, and illiterate recruits taught basic skills. Hospitals opened in all the major towns, railroads and national highways were built, telegraphs extended, and the postal and water systems improved. City streets were paved, and local bandits suppressed. Garcia Moreno reformed the universities, established two polytechnic and agricultural colleges and a military school, and increased the number of primary schools to 500 from 200. The number of students in them grew from 8,000 to 32,000. To staff the enormously expanded health-care and educational facilities, foreign religions were brought in. Voting rights were also expanded. (1 pp. 308-09)

When he was elected for a third term in 1875, he wrote to Pope Pius IX anticipating that he might be killed and, in fact, he was assassinated shortly thereafter. The U.S. and the American ambassador specifically were considered to be behind the planning of the assassination. Moreno was the most successful of the New World Catholic Monarchs establishing that such a system could develop a functional and prosperous state that wasn’t doomed to endless poverty. (1 p. 309)

**Hawaii:** The Kingdom of Hawaii was established in 1795 under King Kamehameha who united all the Hawaiian Islands under his rule. The kingdom would last until 1893 when Queen Lili’uokalani was overthrown by a combination of immigrants from the US, American commercial interests, and the threat

of the US military. From 1854, around the end of the reign of King Kamehameha, the Kingdom of Hawaii was a constitutional democracy structured similar to Great Britain. (4 p. 52)

New England missionaries from Boston first arrived in Hawaii on March 30 of 1820. Shocked by their tropical attire, one missionary had this to say, *"The appearance of destitution, degradation, and barbarism, among the chattering, and almost naked savages ... was appalling. Some of our number, with gushing tears, turned away from the spectacle. Others with firmer nerve continued their gaze, but were ready to exclaim, 'Can these be human beings!'"* In a recurring pattern, the New England missionaries immediately questioned the humanity of those different from themselves and made clear that their intent wasn't to simply spread Christianity but their particular variant of it which was entirely tied to their culture and perceived cultural superiority. (4 pp. 53-54)

By the time the New Englander's arrived, Hawaii actually wasn't such a backwards place and was moving forward. By 1838, the year Queen Lili'uokalani was born, the Kingdom of Hawaii was a Christian nation, with a written language, a government patterned after the great monarchs of Europe and Asia, and was in most respects a modern nation. The Kingdom received ambassadors from Asia, Europe, and America. The kingdom was, however, starting to fall prey to its own prosperity, with the rapid growth of agriculture, and mass immigration. The stoop labor came from Japan and China. The capital investments came from Americans and Europeans along with a large number of white settlers who were the owners and overseers of large plantations. From this emerged a political movement to dispose of the monarch and merge with the United States. (4 pp. 55-56)

In 1887, the Missionary Party, which was chiefly composed of descendants of New England missionaries who were at this time generally secularized, in association with The Hawaiian League, a secret revolutionary society formed in 1887 by individuals associated with the missionary party, was formed to bring about annexation of Hawaii to the United States. In July of 1887 a coalition of the Hawaiian League, the Honolulu Rifles, which were the military arm of the Hawaiian League, and the Reform Party of the Hawaiian Kingdom, forced King Kalakua to dismiss his cabinet and accept what came to be known as the Bayonet Constitution. Sanford Dole, who was a descendent of the New England missionary community and uncle of James Dole who established the Dole Pineapple Company, was a leader of this group. The policy of the new cabinet was distinctively American seeking to make Hawaii an American dependency or territory. The Bayonet Constitution also imposed income and wealth requirements to be eligible to vote for the House of Nobles, consolidating power among the elite (white) residents of the island. (4 pp. 56-57)

Queen Lili'uokalani, who would attempt to re-establish an independent Hawaiian Kingdom, noted the sharp distinction between the American or Yankee culture and that of the Hawaiian: *"... the habits and prejudices of New England Puritanism were not well adapted to the genius of a tropical people, nor capable of being thoroughly engrafted upon them.... Although settled among us, and drawing their wealth from our resources, they were alien to us in their customs and ideas, respecting government, and desired above all things the extension of their power ... and to secure their own personal benefit."* She further noted, *"no obligations, by honor, or by oath of allegiance, should an opportunity arise for seizing our country."* (4 pp. 57-59)

On January 14, 1893, the Queen informed her cabinet, which was made up of non-Hawaiians, of her intention to repeal and replace the Bayonet Constitution returning sovereignty of the Kingdom of Hawaii to the people of Hawaii. Annexation leader Lorrin A. Thurston went to American diplomatic minister John L. Stevens, who was also a radical advocate of annexation, for help. Ambassador Stevens came to Hawaii in 1889 and was also intent on American annexation. On January 12, 1893, a “no confidence” vote was passed by the Hawaiian Legislature leading to the resignation of the pro-annexation cabinet. The next day the Queen appointed a new cabinet. The Missionary Party immediately took action. (5 p. 123)

Captain G. C. Wiltse of the USS Boston, stationed in Pearl Harbor, was told to land United States troops under the pretext of “protecting American lives,” with a written request from John L. Stevens, American Diplomatic Minister. 162 Marines and bluejackets were deployed and quartered in a building alongside Aliiolana Hale, the Hawaiian government building, near the Royal Palace giving a very clear message to the Queen’s government (4 p. 60). Note how the justification of protecting American lives and interests has been used repeatedly throughout American post-antebellum history. The Committee of Safety then denounced the Queen stating that *“responsible government was impossible under the monarchy.”* She was removed from power and the committee then proclaimed itself to be the government of the Republic of Hawaii. This provisional government was to hold power until a union with the United States could be achieved. The new government did not have the support of the majority of the people of Hawaii, but it did have the support of the planter/business class and the United States military (4 pp. 60-61). Queen Lili’uokalani described this chain of events as follows: *“overawed by the United States to the extent that they can neither ... throw off the usurpers, nor obtain assistance from other friendly states, the people of the Islands have no voice in determining their future but are virtually relegated to the condition of the aborigines of the American continent.”* She wrote a book explaining the situation to any American who would listen in which she said in part:

*“Oh, honest Americans, as Christians hear me for my down-trodden people! Their form of government is as dear to them as yours is precious to you. Quite as warmly as you love your country, so they love theirs. With all your goodly possessions, covering a territory so immense that there yet remain parts unexplored, possessing islands that, although near at hand, had to be neutral ground in time of war, do not covet the little vineyard of Naboth’s, so far from your shores, lest the punishment of Ahab fall upon you, if not in your day, in that of your children, for “be not deceived, God is not mocked....” (1 pp. 310-11)*

When the treaty was submitted, President Grover Cleveland opposed the actions taken by Stevens. Cleveland was a Democrat from New Jersey who was not a Union veteran and was not associated with Yankee culture. President Cleveland stated: *“By an act of war, committed with the participation of a diplomatic representative of the United States and without authority of Congress, the Government of a feeble but friendly and confiding people has been overthrown.”* When William McKinley, a Republican from Ohio and a Union Army veteran, became president, the treaty was again put forward. Enough democrats opposed the treaty, however, to deny the two thirds majority needed for passage. Senator Joseph Lane of Oregon issued this prophetic warning: *“A province of an empire ... is held by the oppressor as an integral part of his dominions. The yoke once fastened on the neck of the subject, is*

*expected, to be worn with patience and entire submission to the tyrant's will. This is the theory of despotism."* (4 pp. 63-64)

**The Spanish American War and Cuba:** By the late 1800's Spain had lost almost all of its foreign possessions with only Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines, and Micronesia remaining. Through most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, civil wars continued between the Carlists, who fought for the restoration of the Catholic monarchy, and the Cristinos who were the liberals in the context of the time (1 p. 311). Masonic lodges were common and created a network for anti-Catholic politics. The anti-clerical insurgency in Cuba, aided by the United States and expatriates, had fought the Spanish for decades and the Spanish military was confined to defensive positions around cities (4 p. 97). In the cemetery at Key West there are buried a number of 19th Century Cuban revolutionaries; all their stones bear the Masonic square and compass. (1 p. 311)

There were strong economic factors that drove this conflict. By the 1890's over 50% of Cuba's trade was with the U.S. and the ongoing war was damaging commerce. The situation had been taking shape for a while going back to the McKinley administration when Theodore Roosevelt was Assistant Secretary of the Navy. Throughout the rebellion in Cuba the US had tried to follow a policy of moderation seeking a middle ground between the two sides that didn't exist. The Secretary of State Richard Olney concluded that Spain could not win and the economic problems that the war was causing required a complete policy reversal where the US would back the rebels (6). Others followed suit and the Rothschild financial dynasty that had been long time financiers of Spain withdrew their support and issued bonds for the rebels (6). The Cuba problem had gotten national attention and American journalists were in competition for headlines and sales. Promoting U.S. intervention in Cuba attracted readers and this frequently involved promoting somewhat dubious claims of Spanish atrocities. (4 p. 97). The Spanish again looked to Europe for help in defending against the Americans but again didn't get it. When the U.S.S. Maine blew up in Havana Harbor on February 15, 1898, this was the spark needed to ignite a brief and decisive war with Spain. It is unclear what really happened but it is unlikely that the Spanish had anything to do with this. Regardless, the media presented it as an unprovoked attack and war was declared although President McKinley refused to sign the declaration (1 pp. 312-12). The remaining territories, with the exception of the Philippines, also rapidly came under U.S. control and efforts began to break down and reshape the cultures.

These events did lead to a good deal of public debate on the morality of U.S. actions and the establishment of the expanding American empire. Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana was a leading intellectual apologist for US imperialism. He was a Republican who later joined Teddy Roosevelt and the Progressive Party. He said this regarding the Spanish war reflecting the prevailing Puritan worldview of the day amongst the American political class:

*"We will not abandon our opportunity in the Orient. We will not renounce our part in the mission of our race, trustee, under God, of the civilization of the world." We were to move forward with "thanksgiving to Almighty God that He has marked us as His chosen people, henceforth to lead in the regeneration of the world" (1 p. 314)*

*"It is elemental. It is racial. God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No! He has made us the master organizers of the world to establish a system where chaos reigns. He has given us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth." (1 p. 314)*

*"This is God's way of developing the world. And all continental Europe feels that the war is against itself and that is why they are all against us, and Rome more than all because when the prestige of Spain and Italy will have passed away, and when the pivot of the world's political action will no longer be confined within the limits of the continent; then the nonsense of trying to govern the universal Church from a purely European standpoint—and according to exclusively Spanish and Italian methods, will be glaringly evident even to a child." (1 p. 314)*

As his political career wound down he became a historical writer and seemed to repudiate his support for the expansion of government power he had previously advocated saying in a speech late in his life, America would be better off as a country and Americans happier and more prosperous as a people *"if half of our Government boards, bureaus and commissions were abolished, hundreds of thousands of our Government officials, agents and employees were discharged and two-thirds of our Government regulations, restrictions and inhibitions were removed"* (7). He wrote a four volume biography of Lincoln published after his death that attempted to debunk some of the saint-like mythology that had developed around him.

**The Philippines:** While the Spanish American War in 1898 gave the US control of the Caribbean, the real prize was the Spanish held Philippines that would provide a base of operations in the Far East. Teddy Roosevelt directed Admiral Dewey to move against the Philippines as soon as the "splendid little war", as it was sometimes referred to, was declared. Republican Senator from Indiana Beveridge (cited previously) described this opportunity for expanded commerce by saying, *"The Philippines are ours forever ... and just beyond the Philippines are China's illimitable markets.... The Pacific Ocean is ours."* (4 p. 91)

Philippine insurgents had been fighting the Spanish and controlled most of the territory except for Manila and a few cities. American involvement was initially seen as a positive from their perspective but it soon became clear that one colonial master was simply being replaced by another. The resulting war took over 200,000 Philippine lives and caused widespread devastation on the population. (4 p. 91)

The American military, in response to an ambush, carried out orders to kill every male ten years or older in the district where the ambush occurred. Commanding General Smith told Major Walker, *"to make Samar a howling wilderness"*. Walker later testified that General Smith's orders were: *"I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn: the more you kill and burn, the better you will please me ... all persons killed who were capable of bearing arms and in actual hostilities against the United States ... an age limit, designate the limit as ten years of age. ... kill and burn and make Samar a howling wilderness ... everybody was killed capable of bearing arms ... over ten years of age, as the Samar boys of that age were equally as dangerous as their elders."* (4 p. 91)

Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) from Missouri said of the American action in the Philippines, *"We have robbed a trusting friend of his land and his liberty; we have invited clean young men to shoulder a discredited musket and do bandit's work under a flag which bandits have been accustomed to fear, not to follow; we have debauched America's honor and blackened her face before the world."* After WWII the Philippines were granted independence so long as the US was allowed to retain military bases and maintained special provisions for American businesses. (4 pp. 93-94)

**China:** The first encounter the Chinese had with western military power was the Opium Wars of 1839 – 42 when the Chinese attempted to stop the British from providing opium to the Chinese drug markets which they brought from modern India in violation of Chinese law. The Chinese demand that this trade be stopped which led to war with the British which ended very badly for the Chinese and its poorly equipped military. This began what the Chinese referred to as the "Century of Humiliation". In the following years China fell under seven imperial powers. (4 pp. 33-34)

In the late 1890s, defenders of Chinese sovereignty established the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists, which came to be known in the West as the Boxers. By 1900, the ruling Qing Dynasty allied itself with the Boxers, and a war to expel foreigners broke out. The US joined in the fray, sending troops from the newly conquered Philippines. The Commander of the United States was an Ohio native and Union Veteran, General Adna R. Chaffee. The United States sent a battalion of Marines, two battalions from the Fourteenth U. S. Army Infantry and the Sixth Cavalry, and one battery from the Fifth Artillery totaling about 3000 men. It was during the Boxer Rebellion that Lieutenant Smedley D. Butler, author of *War is a Racket*, won special attention for his personal bravery. (4 pp. 34-37)

With their defeat, the government of China was forced to sign the Treaty of Boxer Protocol which required China to destroy forts protecting Beijing, numerous Chinese officials involved in the rebellion were to be executed, foreign powers were to be allowed to station troops in Beijing, China was not allowed to modernize its military, and China was required to pay foreign governments involved in putting down the rebellion \$330,000,000. Foreign courts were to have final jurisdiction over foreigners. China effectively ceased to be an independent political entity and ultimately this was a contributing factor to WWII and the Cold War. (4 pp. 34-35)

In looking at these examples, there are some patterns. Several cases were targeted at European Catholic monarchies, most notably Spain. It could be assumed that we were aiding "*freedom fighters*" but it shouldn't automatically be concluded that the Catholic governments were unpopular with the overall populace or that the liberal factions had broad popular backing. The U.S. actively worked to bring about regime change throughout Latin America in particular and, considering the strong anti-Catholic sentiments amongst the American political class as well as within progressive evangelicalism, religion should be considered a factor along with specific economic motivations. The cultural, economic, and spiritual role of the church in these Catholic societies were incompatible with the idea of the modern nation state. In one, the state existed under the church which also provided a somewhat loose cultural framework for society where nationalism was naturally constrained. In the other, the state was the earthly representative of God and the source of the common culture that was intended to supersede the ethno-religious cultures from which it was built.

Protestant missionaries also moved in with and sometimes slightly before the military and economic interests and the vast majority of protestant missionaries from America in the late 1800's would have been from Northern progressive churches. The northern missionaries brought with them a form of American Nationalistic Millennialists Christianity that was highly cultural but the core message, apart from the biases of those spreading it, was generally successful. What typically developed was an adaptation of core Christian beliefs that was integrated with the local culture as opposed to creating cultural Yankees in faraway lands. In some areas, such as China, the missionaries became associated with a foreign occupying power which resulted in some instances of violence directed towards missionaries and restrictions on operations.

In 1800 about 1% of Protestant Christians lived in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. By 1900 the number had grown to 10% and by 2015 it reached 67% and still growing. All these areas were foreign mission fields that were reached predominantly by American missionaries (8). The decades leading up to the Great War were the Golden Age for American Protestant missions. By 1900 there were app. ninety missionary organizations operating out of the United States which established thousands of overseas churches, colleges, schools, hospitals, and publishers. These efforts were supported by prominent American supporters like Jon D. Rockefeller as well as a vast number of churches and individual small regular contributors. (9 pp. 79-72)

Looking at these events from a distance, there is a tendency to justify them based on economic progress which may have in time extended some benefits indirectly to the losers. Even looking at the topic in an entirely amoral sense, however, the distribution of the costs and benefits of empire raise some serious questions. When the military is used as a policy tool, its costs are borne by all of society while the economic benefits are concentrated on a very few with the vast majority of the population receiving no benefit at all. Speaking strictly as an economic investment, private benefits are paid for with public costs benefiting the politically connected who, in turn, become sponsors for political decision makers. In British politics, this was the argument for "little Britain" and "splendid isolationism" which never won the day from advocates of empire. Ultimately though, believing that war and threats of war can become amoral simply by looking away is fundamentally flawed logic in that practices projected outward will eventually be turned inward. To quote author and former University of California professor, Chalmers Johnson, who was a reformed cold warrior, *"Either give up your empire, or live under it... A nation can be one or the other, a democracy or an imperialist, but it can't be both. If it sticks to imperialism, it will, like the old Roman Republic on which so much of our system was modeled, lose its democracy to a domestic dictatorship"*. (10) (11)

In 1936 Marine Corp General Smedley Butler wrote a short book titled *"War is a Racket"* that has been an anti-war classic amongst libertarians and the anti-war left (if such a thing still exists). His career started in the Spanish American war and the Philippines and he became very well-known after WWI. He started out fueled by idealism and optimism but came to see his role as government funded muscle at the service of U.S. economic interests. Here are some of his observations addressing the distribution of the cost and benefits of US adventurism during this period:

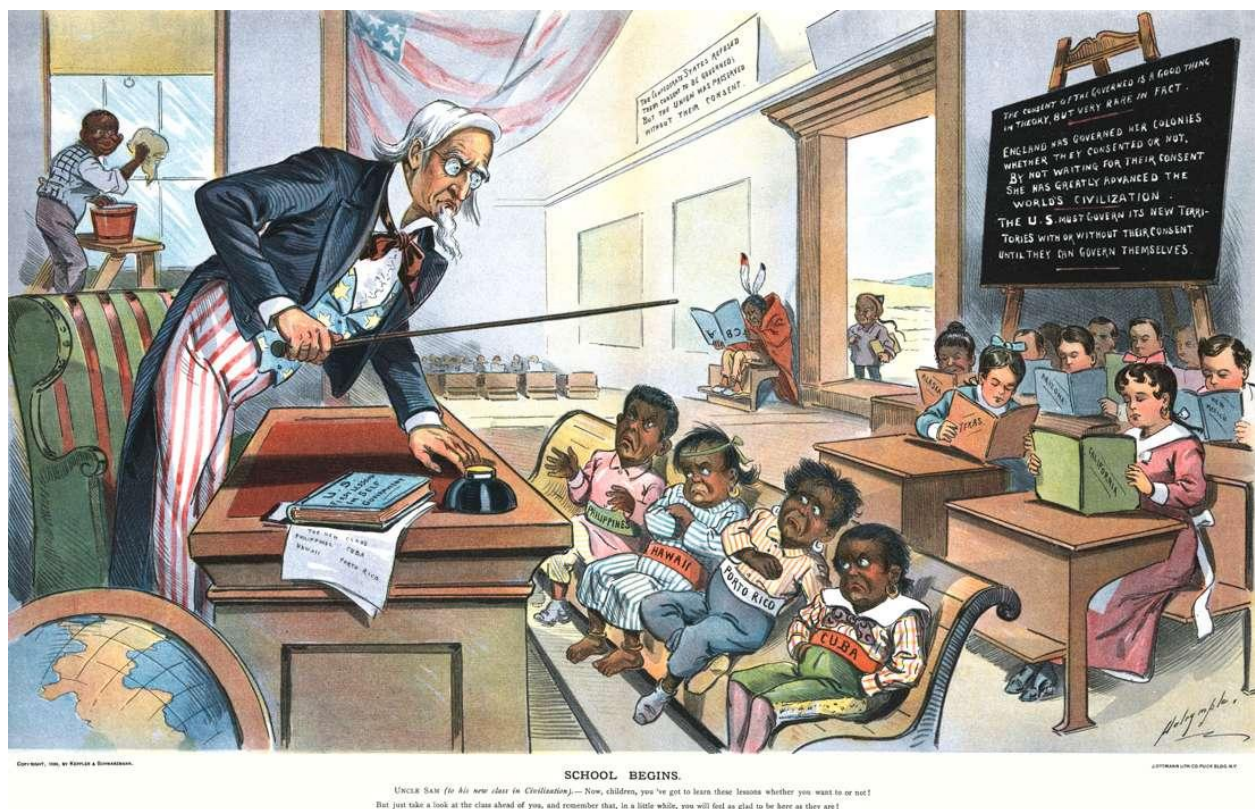


*"A racket is best described, I believe, as something that is not what it seems to the majority of people. Only a small inside group knows what it is about. It is conducted for the benefit of the very few at the expense of the very many" (12 p. ch. 1)*

*"In the World War a mere handful garnered the profits of the conflict. At least 21,000 new millionaires and billionaires were made in the United States during the World War." (12 p. ch. 1)*

*"Until 1898 we didn't own a bit of territory outside the mainland of North America. At that time our national debt was a little more than \$1,000M. Then we became "internationally minded". We forgot or shunted aside the advice of the Father of our Country. We forgot Washington's warning about "entangling alliances". We went to war. We acquired outside territory. At the end of the World War period, as a direct result of our fiddling in international affairs, our national debt had jumped to over \$25,000M" (12 p. ch. 1)*

*"What does it profit the men who are killed? What does it profit the men who are maimed? What does it profit their mothers and sisters, their wives and their sweethearts? What does it profit their children?" (12 p. ch. 1)*



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