American Imperialism: Crash Course US History #28

Crash Course: U.S. History
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??Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course U.S. History, and today we're gonna to talk about a subject near and dear to my white male heart: Imperialism. So here at Crash Course we occasionally try to point out that the U.S., much as we hate to admit it, is actually part of a larger world.

[Past John] Mr. Green, Mr. Green! You mean like Alaska?

No, Me-From-the-Past, for reasons that you will understand after your trip there for your senior year of college, I do not acknowledge the existence of Canada's tail. No, I'm referring to all the green parts of not America, and the period in the nineteenth century when we thought maybe we could make all those green parts like America, but you know, without rights and stuff.

[Intro]

So the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a period of expansion and colonization in Asia and Africa, mostly by European powers. As you'll know if you watched Crash Course World History, imperialism has a long, long history pretty much everywhere, so this round of empire building is sometimes called, rather confusingly, "New Imperialism." Because the U.S. acquired territory beyond its continental boundaries in this period, it's relatively easy to fit American history into this world history paradigm. But there's also an argument that the United States has always been an empire.

From very early on, the European settlers who became Americans were intent on pushing westward and conquering territory. The obvious victims of this expansion-slash-imperialism were the Native Americans, but we can also include the Mexicans who lost their sovereignty after 1848. And if that doesn't sound like an empire to you, allow me to draw your attention to the Russian empire.

Russians were taking control of territory in Central Asia and Siberia and either absorbing or displacing the native people who lived there, which was the exact same thing that we were doing. The empires of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were different because they were colonial in their own special way. Like Europeans and Americans would rule other places, but they wouldn't settle them and more or less completely displace the native people there. Well, except for you Australian New Zealand.

American historians used to try to excuse America's acquisitions of a territorial empire as something of an embarrassing mistake, but that's misleading because one of the primary causes of the phenomenon of American Imperialism was economics; we needed places to sell our amazing new products. And at the time, China actually had all of the customers because apparently it was opposite day.

It's also not an accident that the U.S. began pursuing imperialism in earnest during the 1890s, as this was, in many ways, the decade of crisis in America. The influx of immigrants and the crowded cities added to anxiety and concern over America's future. And then, to cap it all off in 1893, a panic caused by the failure of a British bank led the U.S. into a horrible economic depression. A great depression, but not *the* Great Depression. It did however, feature 15,000 business failures and 17% unemployment, so take that 2008!

According to American diplomatic historian, George Herring, imperialism was "just what the doctor ordered" to help America get out of its depression depression. Other historians, notably Kristin Hoganson, imply that America embarked on imperial adventures partly so that American men could prove to themselves how manly they were. You know, by joining the Navy and setting sail for distant waters.

In 1890, Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan published *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* and argued that to be a great power, like Great Britain, the U.S. needed to control the seas and dominate international commerce. Tied into this push to become a maritime power was the obsession with building a canal through Central America and eventually the U.S. decided that it should be built in Panama because, you know, how else are we gonna get malaria? In order to protect this canal we would need a man, a plan, a canal, Panama. Sorry, I just wanted to get the palindrome in there somewhere. No, we would actually need much more than a man and a plan. We would need ships, and in order to have a functioning two-ocean navy, we would need colonies. Why? Because the steamships at the time were powered by coal, and in order to refuel, they needed coal depots. I mean, I suppose we could have rented harbor space, but why rent when you can conquer?

Also nationalism and the accompanying pride in one's country was a worldwide phenomenon to which the U.S. was not immune. I mean, it's no accident that the 1890s saw Americans begin to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and celebrate Flag Day. And what better way to instill national pride than by flying the stars and stripes over...Guam.

So pre-Civil War attempts to expand beyond what we now know as the Continental United States included our efforts to annex Canada, which were sadly unsuccessful, and also filibustering, which before it meant a senator talking until he or she had to stop to pee, was a thing where we tried to take over Central America to spread slavery.

But the idea of taking Cuba persisted into the late nineteenth century because it is close and also beautiful. The Grant administration wanted to annex it and the Dominican Republic, but Congress demurred. But we did succeed in purchasing Canada's tail. You can see how I feel about that. To be fair, the discovery of gold in the Yukon made Seward's icebox seem like less of a Seward's Folly, and it did provide cooling stations in the Pacific. But we could have had rum and Caribbean beaches. Aghhh, Stan all this talk about how much I hate Alaska has me overheated; I gotta take off my shirt. Aghhh, my life. It's so hard to take off a shirt dramatically! I'm angry!

Anyway coal stations in the Pacific were important because in 1854 we opened Japan to American trade by sending a flotilla of threatening black ships under Matthew Perry. No Stan, not that Matthew Perry. You know better!

By far America's best piece of imperial business before 1898 was Hawaii. Like, I like oil and gold as much as the next guy, but Hawaii has pineapples and also sugar, which were grown on American owned plantations by Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and native workers. Treaties between the U.S. and Hawaiian governments exempted the sugar from tariffs, and America had also established a naval base at Pearl Harbor, which seemed like a really good idea...then. We eventually annexed Hawaii in 1898, and this meant it could eventually become a state, which it did in 1959, two years before Barack Obama was born in Kenya. And this leads us nicely to the high tide of American Imperialism: The Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War.

The war started out because native Cubans were revolting against Spain, which was holding on to Cuba for dear life as the remnant of a once great empire. The Cuban's fight for independence was brutal. 95,000 Cubans died from disease and malnutrition after Spanish General Valeriano Weyler herded Cubans into concentration camps. For this, Weyler was called "butcher" in the American "yellow press," which sold a lot of newspapers on the backs of stories about his atrocities. And at last we come to President William McKinley, who responded cautiously with a

demand that Spain get out of Cuba or face war. Now Spain knew that it couldn't win a war with the U.S., but as George Herring put it, "they preferred the honor of war to the ignominy of surrender." Let that be a lesson to you: always choose ignominy!

Oh it's time for the Mystery Document? The rules here are simple. I guess the author of the Mystery Document; I'm either right or I get shocked. Alright, let's see what we got today.

With such a conflict waged for years in an island so near us and with which our people have such trade and business relations; when the lives and the liberty of our own citizens are in constant danger and their property destroyed and themselves ruined; where our trading vessels are liable to seizure and are seized at our very doorstep by warships of a foreign nation, the expeditions of filibustering that we are powerless to prevent altogether - all these and others that I need not mention, with the resulting strained relations, are a constant menace to our peace, and compel us to keep on a semi-war footing with a nation with which we are at peace.

Thank you Stan. This is obviously President William McKinley's war message to Congress. You can tell it's a war message because it includes the word "peace" more than the word "war." By the way, it's commonly thought that President McKinley asked Congress for a declaration of war; he didn't. He let Congress take the lead. That's the only time that's ever happened in all of American history, which would be more impressive if we had declared war more than five times.

So the document shows us, that at least according to McKinley, we officially went to war for American peace of mind and to end economic uncertainty.

It was not to gain territory; at least not in Cuba. How do we know? Because Congress also passed the Teller Amendment, which forswore any U.S. annexation of Cuba. Perhaps because representatives of the U.S. sugar industry, like Colorado senator, Henry Teller, feared competition from sugar produced in an American Cuba. Or maybe not, but probably so.

Also not the cause of the war was the sinking of the USS Maine. The battleship which had been in Havana's harbor to protect American interest, sank after an explosion on February 15th, 1898, killing 266 sailors. Now most historians chalk up the sinking to an internal explosion and not to Spanish sabotage. But that didn't stop Americans from blaming the Spanish with their memorable meme: "Remember the Maine; to Hell with Spain."

Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The actual war was one of the most successful in U.S. history, especially if you measure success by brevity and relative paucity of deaths. Secretary of State, John Hay, called it "a splendid little war," and in many ways it was. Fighting lasted about four months and fewer than 400 American's were killed in combat. Although 5,000 died of, wait for it, disease. Disease always ruining everything.

There weren't a ton of battles, but those that happened got an inordinate amount of press coverage; like the July attack on San Juan Hill at the Cuban city of Santiago led by future president Theodore Roosevelt. While it was a successful battle, the real significance is that it furthered Roosevelt's career. He returned a hero, promptly became governor of New York, and by 1900 was McKinley's Vice President. Which was a good job to have because McKinley would eventually be assassinated.

A more important battle was that of Manila Bay, in which Commodore George Dewey destroyed a tiny Spanish fleet and took the Philippines. This battle took place in May of 1898, well before the attack on Cuba, which strongly suggests that a war that was supposedly about supporting Cuban independence was really about something else. And what was that something else? Oh, right, a territorial empire.

As a result of the war, the U.S. got a bunch of new territories; notably the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. We also used the war as an opportunity to annex Hawaii to protect our ships that would be steaming toward the Philippines. We didn't annex Cuba, but we didn't let it become completely independent either. The Platt amendment in the Cuban Constitution authorized American military intervention whenever it saw fit, and gave us a permanent lease for a naval base at Guantanamo Bay.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So Cuba and Puerto Rico were gateways to Latin American markets. Puerto Rico was particularly useful as a naval station. Hawaii, Guam, and especially the Philippines, opened up access to China. American presence in China was bolstered by our contribution of about 3,000 troops to the multinational force that helped put down the Boxer Rebellion in 1900.

But in the Philippines, where Americans had initially been welcome, opinions soon changed after it became clear that Americans were there to stay and exercise control. Emilio Aguinaldo, leader of the Filipino rebellion against Spain, quickly turned against the U.S. because his real goal was independence, and it appeared the U.S. would not provide it. The resulting Philippine War lasted 4 years, from 1899 to 1903, and 4,200 Americans were killed as well as over 100,000 Filipinos. The Americans committed atrocities, including putting Filipinos in concentration camps, torturing prisoners, rape and executing civilians. And much of this was racially motivated and news of these atrocities helped to spur anti-imperialist sentiment at home, with Mark Twain being one of the most outspoken critics.

Now there was some investment in modernization in the Philippines in railroads, schools, and public health, but the interests of the local people were usually subordinated to those of the wealthy. So, American Imperialism, in short, looked like most other imperialisms.

So Constitution nerds will remember that the U.S. Constitution has no provision for colonies, only territory that will eventually be incorporated as states. Congress attempted to deal with this issue by passing the Foraker Act in 1900. This law declared that Puerto Rico would be an insular territory, its inhabitants would be citizens of Puerto Rico, not the United States, and there would be no path to statehood. But this wasn't terribly constitutional. Congress did extend U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917. Now, it's a Commonwealth, with its own government that has no voice in the U.S. Congress or presidential elections and no control over its own defense or environmental policy. The Philippians were treated similarly to Puerto Rico in a series of cases between 1901 and 1904, collectively called the Insular Cases.

But Hawaii was treated differently, because it had a sizable population of American settlers who happened to be white. Ergo, it became a traditional territory, with a path to statehood, because white people. And also pineapples.

Now lets briefly talk about anti-imperialism. There were lots of people who objected to imperialism on racial grounds, arguing that it might lead to like, diversity. But there were also non-racist anti-imperialists who argued that empire itself, with its political domination of conquered people, was incompatible with democracy. Which to be fair, it is. The Democratic Party, which had supported intervention in Cuba in 1900, opposed the Philippine War and its platform. Some Progressives opposed imperialism too, because

they believe that America should focus on its domestic problems.

Yet, those who supported imperialism were just as forceful. Among the most vocal was Indiana Senator Albert Beveridge, who argued that imperialism was benevolent and would bring a new day of freedom.

But make no mistake, underneath it all, imperialism was all about trade. According to Beveridge, America's commerce "must be with Asia. The Pacific is our ocean...where shall we turn for consumers of our surplus? Geography answers the question. China is out natural customer." In the end, imperialism was really driven by economic necessity. In 1902, Brooks Adams predicted in his book *The New Empire* that the U.S. would soon, quote, "outweigh any single empire, if not all empires combined." Within twenty years America would be the world's leading economic power. We didn't have the most overseas territory, but ultimately that didn't matter.

Now, the reasons for imperialism, above all the quest for markets for American goods, would persist long after imperialism became recognized as antithetical to freedom and democracy. And we would continue to struggle to reconcile our imperialistic urges with our ideals about democracy until...now.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko. The associate producer is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher, Raoul Meyer, Rosianna Rojas, and myself. And our graphics team is Thought Cafe.

Every week there's a new caption for the Libertage. You can suggest captions in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians.

Thanks for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.

This is the part where Stan gets nervous, like is he gonna go this way, or this way, this way -- I'm going this way!