

## Two Perspectives on American Imperialism from the 1890s

*Excerpts from The Conquest of the United States by Spain, William Graham Sumner*

Spain was the first, for a long time the greatest, of the modern imperialistic states. The United States, by its historical origin, its traditions, and its principles, is the chief representative of the revolt and reaction against that kind of a state. I intend to show that, by the line of action now proposed to us, which we call expansion and imperialism, we are throwing away some of the most important elements of the American symbol and are adopting some of the most important elements of the Spanish symbol. We have beaten Spain in a military conflict, but we are submitting to be conquered by her on the field of ideas and policies.....

[Spain] had as much self-government as any country in Europe at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The union of the smaller states into one big one gave an impulse to her national feeling and national development. The discovery of America put into her hands the control of immense territories. National pride and ambition were stimulated. Then came the struggle with France for world-dominion, which resulted in absolute monarchy and bankruptcy for Spain. She lost self-government and saw her resources spent on interests which were foreign to her, but she could talk about an empire on which the sun never set and boast of her colonies, her gold-mines, her fleets and armies and debts. She had glory and pride, mixed, of course, with defeat and disaster, such as must be experienced by any nation on that course of policy; and she grew weaker in her industry and commerce and poorer in the status of the population all the time. She has never been able to recover real self-government yet....

The [Spanish] king spent the revenues in extending the imperial system in Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands [wars to conquer parts of these countries], so that the revenues really became a new cause of corruption and decay. The only people who were well off, in the midst of the increasing distress, were the ecclesiastics and nobles, who were protected by entails and charters [i.e., legal provisions that allowed them to avoid taxation], which, in their turn, were a new cause of restriction and destruction to the industries of the country....

A great many people talk about the revenue which we are to get from these possessions. If we attempt to get any revenues from them we shall repeat the conduct of England towards her colonies against which they revolted. England claimed that it was reasonable that the colonies should pay their share of imperial expenses which were incurred for the benefit of all. I have never been able to see why that was not a fair demand. As you know, the colonies spurned it with indignation, on the ground that the taxation, being at the discretion of a foreign power, might be made unjust.... The revolt was made on the principle of no taxation, not on the size of the tax. The colonists would not pay a penny. Since that is so, we cannot get a penny of revenue from the dependencies, even for their fair share of imperial expenditures, without burning up all our histories, revising all the great principles of our heroic period, repudiating our great men of that

period, and going over to the Spanish doctrine of taxing dependencies at the discretion of the governing State.

....Our modern protectionists have always told us that the object of their policy is to secure the home market.... In order to have trade with another community the first condition is that we must produce what they want and they must produce what we want. That is the economic condition. The second condition is that there must be peace and security and freedom from arbitrary obstacles interposed by government. This is the political condition. If these conditions are fulfilled, there will be trade, no matter whether the two communities are in one body politic or not. If these conditions are not fulfilled, there will be no trade, no matter what flag floats. If we want more trade we can get it any day by a reciprocity treaty with Canada, and it will be larger and more profitable than that of all the Spanish possessions. It will cost us nothing to get it. Yet while we were fighting for Puerto Rico and Manila, and spending three or four hundred millions to get them, negotiations with Canada failed through the narrow-mindedness and bigotry which we brought to the negotiation.<sup>1</sup> Conquest can do nothing for trade except to remove the political obstacles which the conquered could not, or would not, remove. From this it follows that the only justification for territorial extension is the extension of free and enlightened policies in regard to commerce....

### Excerpts from the writing of Alfred Mahan

#### **The world is getting more violent, not less**

Since 1884 [writing in 1896] Great Britain, France, and Germany have each acquired colonial possessions, varying in extent from one million to two and a half million square miles,--chiefly in Africa. This means, as is generally understood, not merely the acquisition of so much new territory, but the perpetuation of national rivalries and suspicions, maintaining in full vigor, in this age, the traditions of past animosities. It means uncertainties about boundaries--that most fruitful source of disputes when running through unexplored wildernesses--jealousy of influence over native occupants of the soil, fear of encroachment, unperceived till too late, and so a constant, if silent, strife to insure national preponderance in these newly opened regions. The colonial expansion of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is being resumed under our eyes, bringing with it the same train of ambitions and feelings that were exhibited then....<sup>2</sup>

*By way of comparison, the territory of the 50 United States is some 3.8 million square miles.*

<sup>1</sup> The McKinley Tariff of 1890 raised tariffs against foreign goods to a very high average of 48%. Canada at the same time, entered a low-tariff agreement with the British Empire.

<sup>2</sup> From *Preparedness for Naval War*.

### **The US is, militarily speaking, an island**

The United States is to all intents an insular power, like Great Britain. We have but two land frontiers, Canada and Mexico. The latter is hopelessly inferior to us in all the elements of military strength. As regards Canada, Great Britain.... certainly would regret to devote to the invasion of a nation of seventy millions the small disposable force which she maintains in excess of the constant requirements of her colonial interests. We are, it may be repeated, an insular power, dependent therefore upon a navy.... Yet the force of men in the navy is smaller, by more than half, than that in the army.<sup>3</sup>

### **Impact of the upcoming Central American canal**

In case of war, the United States will... be impotent, as against any of the great maritime powers, to control the Central American canal. Militarily speaking, and having reference to European complications only, the piercing of the Isthmus is nothing but a disaster to the United States, in the present state of her military and naval preparation.<sup>4</sup>

### **The strategic importance of Hawaii**

Upon one particular, however, too much stress cannot be laid,... and that is the immense disadvantage to us of any maritime enemy having a coaling-station well within twenty-five hundred miles, as this is, of every point of our coast-line from Puget Sound to Mexico. Were there many others available, we might find it difficult to exclude from all. There is, however, but the one. Shut out from the Sandwich Islands (the older name for Hawaii) as a coal base, an enemy is thrown back for supplies of fuel to distances of thirty-five hundred or four thousand miles,--or between seven thousand and eight thousand, going and coming,--an impediment to sustained maritime operations well-nigh prohibitive.... It is rarely that so important a factor in the attack or defence of a coast-line--of a sea frontier--is concentrated in a single position...."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> From *Preparedness for Naval War*.

<sup>4</sup> From *The United States Looking Outward*.

<sup>5</sup> From *The United States Looking Outward*.