

# A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

by *Howard Zinn*

## Chapter 12: THE EMPIRE AND THE PEOPLE

Theodore Roosevelt wrote to a friend in the year 1897: "In strict confidence . . . I should welcome almost any war, for I think this country needs one."

The year of the massacre at Wounded Knee, 1890, it was officially declared by the Bureau of the Census that the internal frontier was closed. The profit system, with its natural tendency for expansion, had already begun to look overseas. The severe depression that began in 1893 strengthened an idea developing within the political and financial elite of the country: that overseas markets for American goods might relieve the problem of underconsumption at home and prevent the economic crises that in the 1890s brought class war.

The ideology of expansion was widespread in the upper circles of military men, politicians, businessmen -- and even among some of the leaders of farmers' movements who thought foreign markets would help them.

Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts wrote in a magazine article:

**In the interests of our commerce . . . we should build the Nicaragua canal, and for the protection of that canal and for the sake of our commercial supremacy in the Pacific we should control the Hawaiian islands and maintain our influence in Samoa . . . and when the Nicaraguan canal is built, the island of Cuba . . . will become a necessity. . . . The great nations are rapidly absorbing for their future expansion and their present defense all the waste places of the earth. . . . As one of the great nations of the world the United States must not fall out of the line of march.**

Several years before his election to the presidency, William McKinley said: "We want a foreign market for our surplus products." Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana in early 1897 declared: "American factories are making more than the American people can use; American soil is producing more than they can consume. Fate has written our policy for us; the trade of the world must and shall be ours." The Department of State explained in 1898:

**It seems to be conceded that every year we shall be confronted with an increasing surplus of manufactured goods for sale in foreign markets if American operatives and artisans are to be kept employed the year around. The enlargement of foreign consumption of the products of our mills and workshops has, therefore, become a serious problem of statesmanship as well as of commerce.**

Roosevelt's talk of expansionism was not just a matter of manliness and heroism; he was conscious of "our trade relations with China." Lodge was aware of the textile interests in Massachusetts that looked to Asian markets. Historian Marilyn Young has

written of the work of the American China Development Company to expand American influence in China for commercial reasons, and of State Department instructions to the American emissary in China to "employ all proper methods for the extension of American interests in China." She says (*The Rhetoric of Empire*) that the talk about markets in China was far greater than the actual amount of dollars involved at the time, but this talk was important in shaping American policy toward Hawaii, the Philippines, and all of Asia.

While it was true that in 1898, 90 percent of American products were sold at home, the 10 percent sold abroad amounted to a billion dollars. Walter Lafeber writes (*The New Empire*): "By 1893, American trade exceeded that of every country in the world except England. Farm products, of course, especially in the key tobacco, cotton, and wheat areas, had long depended heavily on international markets for their prosperity." And in the twenty years up to 1895, new investments by American capitalists overseas reached a billion dollars. In 1885, the steel industry's publication *Age of Steel* wrote that the internal markets were insufficient and the overproduction of industrial products "should be relieved and prevented in the future by increased foreign trade."

Oil became a big export in the 1880s and 1890s: by 1891, the Rockefeller family's Standard Oil Company accounted for 90 percent of American exports of kerosene and controlled 70 percent of the world market. Oil was now second to cotton as the leading product sent overseas.

There were demands for expansion by large commercial farmers, including some of the Populist leaders, as William Appleman Williams has shown in *The Roots of the Modern American Empire*. Populist Congressman Jerry Simpson of Kansas told Congress in 1892 that with a huge agricultural surplus, farmers "must of necessity seek a foreign market." True, he was not calling for aggression or conquest -- but once foreign markets were seen as important to prosperity, expansionist policies, even war, might have wide appeal.

American merchants did not need colonies or wars of conquest if they could just have free access to markets. This idea of an "open door" became the dominant theme of American foreign policy in the twentieth century. William Appleman Williams, in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, says there was "a coalition of businessmen, intellectuals, and politicians who opposed traditional colonialism and advocated instead a policy of an open door through which America's preponderant economic strength would enter and dominate all underdeveloped areas of the world."

However, this preference on the part of some business groups and politicians for what Williams calls the idea of "informal empire," without war, was always subject to change. If peaceful imperialism turned out to be impossible, military action might be needed.

For instance, in late 1897 and early 1898, with China weakened by a recent war with Japan, German military forces occupied the Chinese port of Tsingtao at the mouth of Kiaochow Bay and demanded a naval station there, with rights to railways and coal mines on the nearby peninsula of Shantung. Within the next few months, other European

powers moved in on China, and the partition of China by the major imperialist powers was under way, with the United States left behind.

At this point, the New York *Journal of Commerce*, which had advocated peaceful development of free trade, now urged old-fashioned military colonialism. Julius Pratt, a historian of U.S. expansionism, describes the turnabout:

**This paper, which has been heretofore characterized as pacifist, anti-imperialist, and devoted to the development of commerce in a free-trade world, saw the foundation of its faith crumbling as a result of the threatened partition of China. Declaring that free access to the markets of China, with its 400,000,000 people, would largely solve the problem of the disposal of our surplus manufactures, the *Journal* came out not only for a stern insistence upon complete equality of rights in China but unreservedly also for an isthmian canal, the acquisition of Hawaii, and a material increase in the navy -- three measures which it had hitherto strenuously opposed. Nothing could be more significant than the manner in which this paper was converted in a few weeks. . . .**

