

Chapter 6

Three Theories Explaining Imperialism

Imperialism is a term used to describe a situation in which one country controls another. The stronger nation is usually industrial and Western (meaning European, U.S. and Canada). The country being subjugated is generally a non-industrial and non-white country such as Cuba, India, or Indonesia. In the 18th century, the word mercantilism was used to describe what is now called imperialism, and it was the American colonies that were dominated by England until they fought for their independence.

Beginning in the 1870's, Western nations began another round of imperialistic expansion. Africa was more or less divided up and taken over by England, France, Belgium, and Germany. France strengthened its hold on Indochina (Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos); and France, Germany, Russia, England, and Japan obtained 'spheres of influence' for themselves in China and Korea. Late to the game, the United States entered the scramble for non-industrial countries by obtaining the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico; the right to build a canal through Panama and a base in Cuba; as well as the right to intervene in other Caribbean countries. There was hardly a spot on the map not contested or already ruled by some western nation.

Theories of Imperialism

The age of imperialistic expansion had more or less ended by World War II. Since that time, almost all of the nations that once were colonies have become free and independent countries. But this is not to say that the resentment against industrialized, imperialist powers has completely ended. Nor has their influence over the countries they once ruled. Unfortunately, everyone is to some extent a prisoner of the past. This is all the more reason for Americans to look at the relatively small part their country played in this Age of Imperialism and to try to learn why it acted the way it did.

Read the three explanations for imperialism, *humanitarian idealism*, *defense*, and *economic exploitation*, which appear in this chapter: As you read, think whether any one offers a good explanation for the US's actions described in previous chapters.

Idealism and Humanitarian Motives

One of the major reasons for Western nations such as the United States to engage in colonial wars has been provided by organized religion. The church has often sent missionaries into undeveloped countries to convert and help the people. An example of an argument on the basis of religion and humanity is presented here in the words of Reverend Robert E. Spear. Spear spoke for a genuinely non-materialistic argument for U.S. expansion. Many religious and good-hearted individuals agreed with him.

In pressing out over the world, the Western nations are discharging a great duty. When the world is unused by its owners and is needed by the good of all, the civilized nations but obey a law which controls them and ought to control them when they attempt to introduce improvement. The tropics must be developed, and such development can only take place under the influence of the white man. We are governed by a larger issue than any question of commercial policy or in national selfishness. The tropics in such circumstances can only be governed as a trust for civilization and with a full sense of what such trust involves. The civilized nations have a right to

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go back to the mere forms of procedure of non-civilized lands and secure the rights denied in those lands. Indeed, it is their duty to do so.

Defense as Motive

According to Samuel Flagg Bemis, the U.S. was not really an imperialistic power. But the U.S. was forced to take some seemingly imperialistic acts to protect its security in the Western Hemisphere from powers that would use any excuse such as debt collection to establish bases or coaling stations• in Latin America.

The Latin American policy of the United States has reflected constantly the vital necessities of national security of the Continental Republic, next to the security of the entire New World, against intervention by the imperialistic powers of the Old World. It was, if you will, an imperialism against imperialism. It did not last long and it was not really bad.

American leaders realized that it was necessary that in order to defend the continental homeland a large navy was necessary and that it must be able to fight in either ocean. It was also evident that to use the navy in either ocean there would have to be an Isthmian canal to pass it back and forth.

When all is said and done, this explains the war with Spain, to secure control of the Caribbean approaches of the future canal. This, as well as the protection they afforded for naval communications to operations in the Philippines, was also reason to annex the Hawaiian Islands. [Acquired in 1898]

The interventions of the United States in the Caribbean and in Central America was to foster their political and economic stability so there would be no justification, or pretext, for European intervention in such a vitally strategic area of the world.

Economics as a Motive

The economic theory of imperialism was introduced by J.A. Hobson, a socialist economist. In his influential book written at the beginning of the 20th century, Hobson argued that capitalist societies produce an excess of goods and capital because they underpay their workers. To find outlets for these surpluses, capitalist powers sought undeveloped nations where they could sell their goods and invest their money, and obtain raw materials for their factories. In order to make sure these countries protected their property and repaid their loans, bankers and business men put pressure on their own governments to intervene in the affairs of the undeveloped countries. According to Hobson, imperialism was not in the economic interests of the imperial power, but bankers and businessmen won the support of their countrymen by appealing to idealism and patriotism of the people in their country.

Whereas pride, prestige, aggressiveness, and humanitarian claims to a civilizing mission, figure in imperial expansion, the most important motive was the demand for markets and profitable investment, by the exporting and financial classes within each imperialistic country. The reasons

• The importance of these coaling stations was that modern ships of the early 20th century had a limited range before they needed refueling. Without coaling stations, they could not operate in the Caribbean, anywhere near the Panama Canal, or in the Pacific between Hawaii and the western terminal of the Panama Canal.

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for looking outward to find markets for nation's products and profits is that factory owners underpay their workers who therefore do not have the money to buy what they have produced. Capitalists therefore must find outlets for surplus products and profits earned due to their exploitive labor policies. The people in a capitalistic country are seduced into supporting imperialistic expansion by appeals to their patriotism, humanitarian impulses and aggressive nature. These appeals, however, are merely cloaks to shield the real reason for such ventures from the public eye.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Define the term "imperialism", and explain why you think it applies to US actions studied in this unit.
2. Explain each theory of imperialism.
3. Which theory do you think best explains the actions of the US studied in this unit? Find facts to support your position: