An Overview of American Imperialism

Imperialism is when a stronger country takes over a smaller, weaker country. That doesn’t sound very nice. What if the smaller, weaker country doesn’t want to be taken over? Is the stronger country a bully only concerned about itself? Or, could it be that this is a symbiotic relationship benefiting both sides? America’s involvement as an imperialist nation will shed some light on this.

After the Civil War, the United States welcomed more people, inventions, businesses, and technology than it had ever experienced. America knew it must be doing some things right – and it was time to share its knowledge while improving and protecting itself. Since not everyone could come to the US, Americans could take what made their country great – democracy and Christianity – to the world. Imperialism offered any country a chance to make more money with access to raw materials and new markets. Controlling territory in another part of the world could keep strong countries strong by discouraging enemies with a global military presence. Spreading some American ideals, democracy and Christianity mainly, across the globe would help everyone.

In the early 1800s Christian missionaries ventured to the Kingdom of Hawaii in the Pacific Ocean. All the sugar in Hawaii encouraged some of these missionaries’ descendants to start very profitable sugar plantations that led huge influence and power in the Hawaiian economy. All of that changed in 1891 when Princess Liliuokalani (lee-LEE-oo-oh-kah-LAH-nee) became Queen. Liliuokalani wanted Hawaiians to regain control of their island so she rejected a treaty that would give the US special economic privileges and a naval base and inspired a revolt against the planters. With influential and profitable Americans unhappy and feeling threatened, the US Marines arrived to overthrow Queen Liliuokalani and set up a new American and planter approved government. Now that Americans controlled the Kingdom of Hawaii with a naval base & refueling station at the best Hawaiian port, Pearl Harbor, for commercial and military ships, the US headed to Asia.

On an island in the Atlantic, Spain was experiencing the negative side of being the strong imperialist country. Cubans wanted independence and began another revolution. In response Spain sent General Valeriano “the Butcher” Weyler to put the rebellion down and send a strong message. Weyler forced Cubans to relocate from their homes into camps where thousands died of starvation and disease. Americans became concerned when they read about this. Business leaders were especially interested since they couldn’t trade with Cuba if there was war. Knowing that wars sell papers, the World and New York Journal newspapers sent reporters to get the inside scoop. The stories in these papers attracted readers with the news – often exaggerated – of Spanish cruelty. One reporter sent news to his boss that “[E]verything is quiet. There is no trouble here…. I wish to return.” His boss wired the response of “Please remain. You furnish the pictures, I’ll furnish the war.” It worked.

This sensational writing, called yellow journalism, stirred so much emotion in the American public that President McKinley sent a message to Spain demanding they stop harsh treatment of Cubans. When things didn’t improve, he sent the USS Maine to Havana to protect US citizens. It was the last trip the Maine would make. A month later the ship suddenly exploded in the middle of the night and sank in Havana’s harbor. Although no one knows what caused the explosion (most historians believe it was an accident like a spark in the coal bunker), Americans blamed Spain. Headlines of “Remember the Maine!” and stories with words and images reflecting the newspapers’ bias that the US should declare war on Spain. President McKinley’s request that Spain grant Cuba its independence and leave was ignored, so the Spanish-American War began.

America shone in the “splendid little war” with Spain. Commodore George Dewey dominated fighting in the Philippines and helped rebels take control of their island. In Cuba, future president Theodore Roosevelt gained fame with New York’s Rough Riders victory on San Juan Hill. Spain suffered its third and final loss in Puerto Rico. As a result former Spanish colonies Cuba, Puerto Rico, the island of Guam,
and the Philippines became “free”. Although Filipinos thought fighting with the Americans would earn their independence, the US made their country (the Philippines) an American colony; which led to a rebellion against the US. The Platt Amendment showed that America did not believe Cuba was ready to be fully independent either. The Amendment gave the US the right to intervene in Cuban affairs anytime there was a threat to “life, property, and individual liberty”. Cuba also had to allow a naval base at Guantánamo Bay. In Puerto Rico the US set up a government and appointed top officials making it an American territory.

Not all Americans agreed with John Hay’s “splendid little war” comment and America basically taking over Spain’s colonies. Several well-known Americans including businessman Andrew Carnegie, reformer Jane Addams, and writer Mark Twain formed the Anti-Imperialist league believing that Americans should not deny other people the right to govern themselves. The League’s platform stated “We hold that the policy known as imperialism is hostile to liberty…. We regret that it has become necessary in the land of Washington and Lincoln to reaffirm that all men, of whatever race or color, are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Since Americans weren’t united on imperialism, the US moved further across the Pacific to Asia.

America gained control of Hawaii and the Philippines, but wanted more. Indiana senator Albert Beveridge summarized America’s intent in the Pacific: “The Philippines are ours forever. And just beyond the Philippines are China’s [unlimited] markets. We will not retreat from either…. The power that rules the Pacific is the power that rules the world.” Americans saw a chance to sell to Asian markets, use Asian resources, and (once again) extend democracy and culture. The problem was other countries saw the same things, especially in China. Russia, Germany, Britain, France, and Japan had already established spheres of influence where they claimed special rights and economic privileges. In response, America created the Open Door Policy stating that no country should dominate trade with China, giving everyone equal access. Most other countries agreed, but some Chinese did not. A rebellion by the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists, the “Boxers”, against the “foreign devils” who were receiving special privileges, had an attitude of cultural superiority, and disrespecting Chinese traditions ended when the powerful imperialist countries teamed up against them. America now had influence in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Presence in both Oceans gave America benefits and challenges. To get from one ocean to the other American ships had to travel around South America, which was a long and expensive trip. If a canal could be built creating a shortcut connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, America would be in better shape. Panama offered a prime spot if it could be freed from Colombia’s control. The US sent its navy to support a successful revolution against Columbia. The new country allowed the US to build the Panama Canal making travel faster and cheaper for American ships between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

The Panama Canal was another step onto Latin America for the US. America’s growing economy raised interest in Latin America’s cheap food and raw materials like bananas, coffee, and copper. American businesses could sell these for higher profits back home in the US. Businesses also bought land to farm and mine. With so much money on the line, America wanted to make sure Latin American countries were stable and free from European influence. President Teddy Roosevelt took the biggest steps with his foreign policy of “speak softly, but carry a big stick”. His Roosevelt Corollary basically made sure Europe knew there was no room for them near the US – or its friends - any longer. If there were any issues in Latin America, the US would be the “policeman” to respond and do whatever was needed. Americans viewed the US as a good police officer by maintaining peace and preventing disorder in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, & Mexico. However, Latin Americans saw the US as an imperial power only concerned with its own interest. Unfortunately, this is still how America is viewed throughout the world today.

American imperialism brought positives and negatives not only to our country but several others throughout the world.