

W. WHITNEY GRISWOLD

**THE FAR EASTERN POLICY
OF THE UNITED STATES**



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The Far Eastern Policy of the United States

BY A. WHITNEY GRISWOLD

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A. WHITNEY GRISWOLD

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The Far Eastern Policy of the United States

I. New Frontiers in Asia

THE year 1898 was a dramatic turning point in American history. To contemporaries of a prophetic turn of mind it was evident that the War with Spain had opened new vistas of national achievement not to be realized in their lifetime. No one expressed this *fin de siècle* mood more poignantly than the sensitive Henry Adams. From England, where he had smelt the battle distastefully from afar—where, aloof from the martial passions of his countrymen, he had beguiled the summer with lawn parties and fine conversation in the company of Ambassador John Hay—Adams wrote his friend William Rockhill in October, 1898, that “the task of converting our old Mississippi-raft of a confederate government into a bran-new [sic] ten-thousand ton, triple-screw, armored, line-of-battle ship, is the work of a hundred years. I do not care to open a chapter that I cannot close, or to assist, or to resist, a movement which concerns only another generation. They are old enough and eager enough to manage their own affairs.”¹ Truly, in 1898, American diplomacy departed from the traditions of one century and assumed the obligations of another.

Had the War with Spain gone no further than the crusade to liberate Cuba the change would not have been so momentous. But it did go further. It was carried beyond those continental boundaries envisioned in Washington’s Farewell Address, beyond the popular conception of the Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny; beyond, even, the seemingly inevitable assertion of American supremacy in the Caribbean, and the long-pending annexation of Hawaii. Amid the clash of arms the Philippine Archipelago became an American colony. These islands, lying some six hundred miles

¹ Adams to Rockhill, October 31, 1898. Rockhill papers.

off the Chinese coast, bore no conceivable relation to American supremacy in the Caribbean, much less to the continental security of the United States. With their annexation the United States emerged from its habitual, self-sufficient abode in the Western Hemisphere and entered the limitless realm of world politics, naval rivalry, and imperial dominion. A step so unprecedented could not have failed to influence the character of American diplomacy in every quarter of the globe, and nowhere more profoundly than in that which included the Philippines.

For a hundred years the United States had conducted its relations with the countries of the Far East according to rules and principles that were mainly the product of nature. The excessive remoteness of Eastern Asia as well as the vast dimensions of that region made for perpetual competition among its Western exploiters. China, the principal object of their interest, was too far away, too huge and too amorphous to be brought under the domination of any single Western power. If Siam and Korea were to a certain extent exceptions to this rule, they were also of minor importance in the political history of the Far East. The insularity of Japan had much the same effect as the bulk of China. The racial and cultural strangeness of the peoples of Eastern Asia combined with the geographical situation of their countries to make that region a remote and dangerous frontier of Western enterprise. But only when native uprisings compelled the Westerners to choose between hanging separately and hanging together was there any real co-operation among them.

Into this competition the United States had been drawn by its traders and missionaries. New England merchantmen had found their way to Chinese ports late in the eighteenth century. In 1853 Commodore Perry, advance agent for American commerce, had introduced Japan to the modern world. Missionaries had not been long in following traders to both countries. Diplomatic rules and precedents conceived in the interests of these two groups had slowly accumulated, to form, in 1898, a well-defined Far Eastern

policy. The United States extended the same diplomatic protection to its citizens in the Far East as it did in every country in the world. Only the protective measures were peculiar to the region. American gunboats patrolled Chinese rivers and coastal waters as a deterrent to anti-foreign outbreaks; and, in common with other Western powers, the United States enjoyed extraterritorial rights in each of the Far Eastern countries.¹ Because their proselytizing made them the most frequent victims of native violence, missionaries were among the principal advocates of these forms of protection. Even so, evidence is not lacking to show that the American Government made use of them with reluctance. There are not a few cases on record in which an American carried the Gospel into hostile native areas against the express warnings of American consular and diplomatic officials.² When the American Legation in Japan was burned the United States participated half-heartedly in the famous allied punitive expedition that bombarded Shimonoseki (1864), accepted its share of the indemnity in bad conscience and ultimately remitted it to Japan.³

The large majority of Americans in Eastern Asia, however, had gone out there to make money rather than to preach the gospel. It was for the means by which their interests were safeguarded that America's Far Eastern policy was chiefly significant. Since the first Oregon fur was bartered in Canton, American business men in the Far East had sought the same equality of opportunity, the same protection against unfair competition as they demanded at home. The Department of State had early adopted the practice

¹ By a series of treaties of 1894 the powers relinquished this right in Japan, but the treaties were not to take effect until 1899.

² For example, the Chiang Pei Ting mission riot, March 15, 1898, and settlement, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1896-1922* (hereafter referred to as *For. Rel.*), 1898, 191-199. The American Minister to China, Mr. Denby, had warned missionaries not to take up property in the vicinity in which the riot occurred. Almost any volume of *Foreign Relations* from 1861-1900 recounts similar episodes.

³ Dennett, Tyler, *Americans in Eastern Asia*, 400-401; Treat, Payson J., *Diplomatic Relations between the United States and Japan*, I, 220-238; II, 174.

of insisting on unqualified most-favored-nation treatment for American commerce in and with each Far Eastern nation. This meant simply that American traders should enjoy rights and privileges equal to those embodied in the most favorable terms granted to any of their competitors. Here again was a universal axiom of American diplomacy. Only the phrase by which it was to become identified in the Far East—the open door policy—made it peculiar to that region. The open door meant, from the very beginning, the open door to equal commercial opportunity *via* the most-favored-nation clause. It first became the rule of America's Far Eastern policy, at the instance of the Chinese themselves, in 1842, when Commodore Kearny negotiated a most-favored-nation agreement with the governor of Canton. The Chinese felt that to grant equal terms to all foreign nations would prevent exclusive exploitation by any one. Two years after the conclusion of Kearny's agreement the American diplomat Caleb Cushing formalized this policy in the Treaty of Whanghia.¹ Thenceforward the open door to equal commercial opportunity was the cardinal principle of America's Far Eastern policy.

The open door was the chief objective of American diplomacy in the Far East in 1898. The chief means to that end was respect for the territorial integrity of the Far Eastern nations and detachment from their politics. Not being able to afford fleets and naval bases in Far Eastern waters, the United States sought to win by propitiation what Europe extorted by force. To be sure, the most-favored-nation clause and the right of extraterritoriality permitted the United States to share and defend the commercial privileges Great Britain and France had had to achieve by the bayonet. But whereas the European nations carved out spheres of influence and territorial concessions on the continent, and would have liked to do the same in Japan, the United States denied itself this type of concession in either country (as in Siam and Korea) and fostered

¹ Dennett, 108 ff.

the progress of both towards autonomy and power.¹ Thus it enjoyed the confidence of each and in each, for a long time, a moral ascendancy over all other nations. It should be noted that up to 1898—indeed to 1900—the American policy of respect for the territorial integrity of the Far Eastern nations had the effect of a purely self-denying ordinance. It did not enjoin on the United States the obligation of defending this territorial integrity from others. The United States was thus able to keep free of serious involvement in the politics of Eastern Asia.

It should be observed, however, that the character of the treaty rights enjoyed by American citizens in China necessarily placed American diplomacy in that country on a different basis from American diplomacy in European countries. In Germany, for example, there was no such irregular competition for special privileges as China's weakness and lack of complete autonomy invited. Foreigners in Germany, Americans among them, were subject to the jurisdiction of German courts. Such claims to political or economic advantages as their governments sought to establish were adjusted according to the sovereign discretion of the German Government. Thus a great deal of the international jockeying and bickering that was the rule in China was eliminated, or confined within formal limits; and, in consequence, the chances of political involvement growing out of the routine diplomatic protection of American nationals in that country were fewer than was the case in China. The principles observed by the United States in extending this protection to its nationals and treaty rights in China were the same as those which governed its relations with other countries. It sought no more than commercial—not political—opportunities equal to those enjoyed by most other governments in China.

¹ Already the established rule of American diplomacy in the Far East, the principle of respect for the territorial integrity of China was expressed in treaty form in the Burlingame Treaty of 1868. Cf. Dennett, 378 ff. American adherence to this principle in Japan was an important factor in that country's rise to power without the alienation of any of its territory. See Treat, *op. cit.*, esp. Vol. II, *passim*.

Nevertheless, in the implementation of these principles it entered into, in spite of itself, political relationships that it eschewed in other parts of the world.

The restriction of Oriental immigration had become an American objective by 1898. Chinese coolies had been imported in considerable numbers to help build the transcontinental railways and to supply the demands of the Pacific coast for cheap labor. With the passing of the labor shortage Congress had suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers for ten years (1882), a restriction renewed for another ten years by a treaty with China in 1894. Similar difficulties with Japan were shortly to follow. Immigration was not a major issue between the United States and the Far Eastern nations in 1898, but restricting it was definitely a principle of American diplomacy.

By 1898, then, the modern Far Eastern policy of the United States had all but crystallized. Its fundamental aim was commercial, not political. Equal commercial opportunity for Americans; no territorial concessions for the United States; a strong Eastern Asia to resist a designing Europe; restriction of Oriental immigration into the United States; peace, amity, trade—these were its objectives. Let us now consider, first, to what extent they entered the calculations of the men who planned and executed the annexation of the Philippines and, second, how they were affected by that annexation.

Manifestly the War with Spain was not undertaken in the interest of America's diplomatic stakes in Eastern Asia. Business groups were for the most part strongly opposed to the war,¹ and it is safe to say that the handful of Americans engaged in commerce with the Far East at first saw no connection between *Cuba Libre* and the open door in China. Neither did the American people as a whole. On the other hand, the imperialist currents so strong in

¹ Cf. Pratt, Julius W., "American Business and the Spanish-American War," *American Historical Review*, XIV, 162-201; same author, *Expansionists of 1898*, Ch. VII.

Europe at the time had begun to be felt in the United States ten years before the sinking of the *Maine*. A protracted dispute with Great Britain and Germany over the partitioning of Samoa, which had begun in the 'seventies, had taken on new importance. So had the possible annexation of Hawaii, contemplated with increasing seriousness since 1854, and now a prominent issue in party politics. "Our nation," proclaimed the New York *Commercial Advertiser* in 1893, "stands on the threshold of a new policy as surely as it did in 1803, when Jefferson annexed Louisiana and the United States realized that it must govern it."¹ From about 1890 until the outbreak of hostilities with Spain similar expressions were not uncommon in the pages of the press and in the halls of Congress.

Not only were such thoughts stirring, but they had found a native prophet. In 1890 Captain Mahan of the United States Navy had published *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, the first of a long series of books that were to earn him the reputation of foremost naval strategist of the world. By the time of the Spanish War he had been lionized by Queen Victoria and the British Cabinet, the Kaiser and Admiral Togo were among his disciples, and he had been thrust into the oracular role expected of such persons by the American public.²

The books of this pedantic sailor did not start the race for naval supremacy and colonial empire or propel the United States into taking part in it. Like most popular oracles, Mahan merely rationalized what he saw already in progress around him. He hastened, rather than molded, the future; he helped prepare the minds of his countrymen for an adventure that many of them already ap-

¹ Pratt, "The 'Large Policy' of 1898," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XIX, 229.

² For estimates of Mahan and his work see Taylor, Charles, *The Life of Admiral Mahan*; Langer, W. H., *The Diplomacy of Imperialism*, II, 418 ff.; Pratt, *Expansionists*; Millis, Walter, *The Future of Sea Power in the Pacific*; Beard, Charles, *The Idea of National Interest and The Open Door at Home*; Dennett, Tyler, "Mahan's 'The Problem of Asia,'" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. XIII, 464-472; and the forthcoming study of Mahan by Capt. W. D. Puleston, U.S.N.

peared to be vaguely anticipating. By preaching the glories of the British navy, naval bases and colonial dominion he whetted American appetites that were suddenly, and unexpectedly, to be satisfied under cover of a humanitarian crusade in Cuba.

"Comparative religion teaches that creeds which reject missionary enterprise are foredoomed to decay," he had written in 1893. "May it not be so with nations? Certainly the glorious record of England is consequent mainly upon the spirit, and traceable to the time, when she launched out into the deep—without formulated policy, it is true, or foreseeing the future to which her star was leading, but obeying the instinct which in the infancy of nations anticipates the more reasoned impulses of experience. Let us, too, learn from her experience. Not all at once did England become the great sea power which she is, but step by step, as opportunity offered, she has moved on to the world-wide pre-eminence now held by English speech, and by institutions sprung from English germs. How much poorer would the world have been, had England heeded the cautious hesitancy that now bids us reject every advance beyond our shores!"¹

A few Americans—and these in high places—were ready to play for larger stakes than *Cuba Libre* or supremacy in the Caribbean when war with Spain broke out in 1898.

Perhaps the two most articulate and influential political leaders of this new imperialism were Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge. Senator Beveridge drummed up popular enthusiasm for their schemes.² Various other individuals had a share in their work. But, although neither was a member of the State Department, nor in any official way connected with the diplomatic service, the foreign affairs of the United States in general, and American diplomacy in the Far East in particular would, for the next fifty years, bear the stamp of these two personalities.

¹ Mahan, *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future*, 50.

² Beveridge, like Mahan, drew his inspiration from Great Britain. "Fate has written our policy for us," he told a Boston audience in April, 1898; "the trade of the world must and shall be ours. And we will get it as our mother [England] has showed us how." Bowers, C., *Beveridge and the Progressive Era*, 69.

Life-long friends, and leaders of the Republican Party for a generation, each freely acknowledged his debt to Mahan. "You probably don't know how much your letter has really helped me clearly to formulate certain things which I had only vaguely in mind," Roosevelt wrote the Captain in March 1898. "I think I have studied your books to pretty good purpose."¹ After the War, when Lodge was preparing some articles on certain of its battles and learned that Mahan was doing the same thing, he wrote the latter that he did not think their efforts were "likely to clash in any way, although I think it highly probable that my general conception may accord with your views, for I venture to hope that I have not studied your teachings upon this subject wholly in vain."² These men were the authors of what Lodge termed the "large policy,"³—a policy that included, among other things, the conquest and annexation of the Philippine Islands.

When Roosevelt first conceived the idea of taking the Philippines is not entirely clear. Until 1898 few Americans had ever heard of the islands. Though Mahan had advocated (in *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future*) the annexation of Hawaii, construction of the Nicaraguan canal, and the acquisition of Caribbean bases, prior to that year, he does not seem to have mentioned the Philippines. The desire for a more spirited competition with Germany, Russia and Great Britain for the markets of the Orient was voiced by Beveridge as early as 1890, but it did not suggest the Philippines to him.⁴ Lodge seems likewise to have followed Roosevelt's lead, as did the rest of the country.⁵

Whoever first thought of it, Roosevelt took the initial action that led to annexation.

¹ Roosevelt to Mahan, March 21, 1898. Taylor, *Life of Admiral Mahan*, 174.

² Lodge to Mahan, Oct. 19, 1898. *Ibid.*, 117.

³ Lodge to Roosevelt, May 24, 1898. Lodge, H. C., *Selections from the Correspondence of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge*, I, 300; Pratt, *The "Large Policy" of 1898*, and *Expansionists*, Ch. IX.

⁴ Bowers, C., *op. cit.*, 57, 67 ff.

⁵ Cf. Lodge, *op. cit.*, I, 299; Pratt, *Expansionists*, 231; Pringle, H. F., *Theodore Roosevelt*, 178.

He had held office as Assistant Secretary of the Navy only a short while before he began to press his views on the administration. His friend Lodge had had to pull wires to get him the appointment. Roosevelt, discouraged by McKinley's faint enthusiasm, had at one time abandoned hope of receiving it, for McKinley had hesitated in suspicion of his jingoism. "I hope he has no preconceived plans which he would wish to drive through the moment he got in," the President-elect said to Lodge. Whereat Lodge reassured him, and added, "I have no right to ask a personal favor of you, but I do ask for Roosevelt as the one personal favor."¹ This had transpired at McKinley's home in Canton soon after the election. Within a year, the new Assistant Secretary had justified McKinley's worst fears. By September, 1897, he was urging both the President and Secretary of the Navy Long to launch a naval attack on the Philippines the instant war broke out.² He continued to agitate this plan all through the fall.³

The White House and Department of State, normally the two executive agents responsible for the formulation of all foreign policy, were too slow and cautious for the Assistant Secretary of the Navy. He proceeded to take matters in his own hands. Roosevelt selected Commodore George Dewey for his instrument, encouraged him to seek political favors, and saw him, as a result, ordered (on the twenty-first of October, 1897) to sail for Nagasaki, Japan, there to assume command of the American Asiatic Squadron.⁴ What happened next is an old story. Tension rapidly developed between Roosevelt and his chief over the conduct of affairs in the Navy Department. On Friday, February 25, exhausted by the strain of trying to stave off the war that his sub-

¹ Lodge, *Selections, etc.*, I, 241-242.

² Pratt, *Expansionists*, 222, note. Millis, Walter, *The Martial Spirit*, 81; Lodge, *op. cit.*, I, 278.

³ Pringle, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 178.

⁴ Millis, *The Martial Spirit*, 86; Olcott, C. S., *The Life of William McKinley*, II, 39.