

Imperial America American Foreign Policy Since 1898

Lloyd C. Gardner



THE HARBRACE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

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Rutgers University

Under the General Editorship of

John Morton Blum, Yale University



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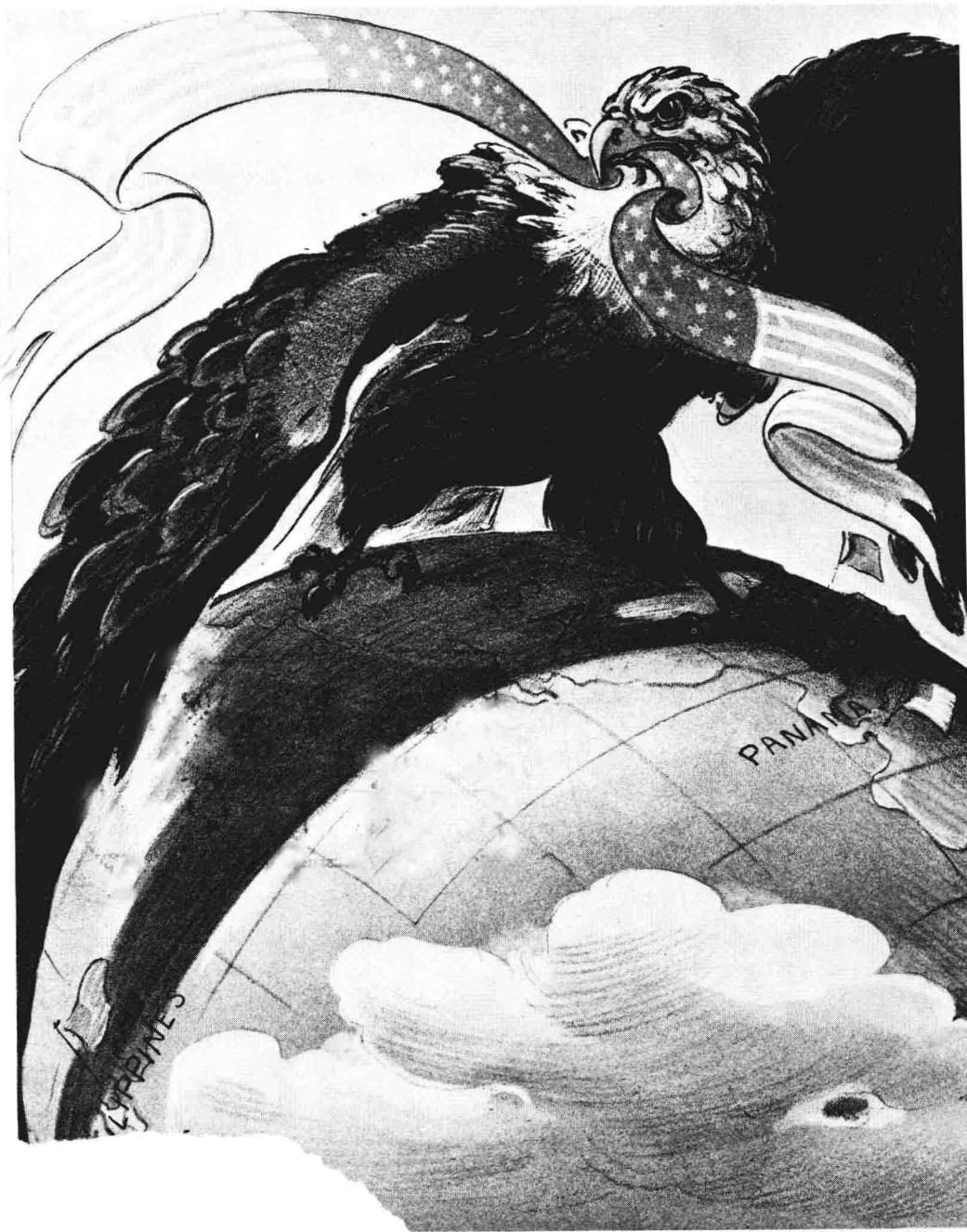
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Preface

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

T. S. Eliot
"Burnt Norton"

Historians do debate the might-have-beens, sometimes with their protagonists and sometimes with each other. And if they are considering as controversial a subject as "Imperial America," the temptation to indulge in a running argument with the past becomes all but irresistible. What is more important to a reader, however, is the historian's endeavor to draw distinctions and make connections. The most difficult of these concern relationships between description and analysis, explanation and justification, and exposition and interpretation.

The historian resolves these often subtle tensions by reference to specific materials and with the aid of a general framework. But the reader is by no means obliged to accept the result as the final word on any subject. Indeed, if the dialogue between historian and reader fails to encourage serious debate, both will lose.

This book focuses on the relationship between policymakers, their ideas, and their institutions. My premise is that history is not

a summary of statistical findings, however useful those may be as tools. Perceptions of reality may depend as much on a special (even mythical) view of the past as on current facts. It is the policymaker's task to seek some rational integration of the two that will do violence to neither and keep society intact. Thus a nation's leaders may decide a given issue purely in terms of ideology, but their decision must be explainable in terms of practical advantage. For good or ill, this process helps to shape what is possible in the future.

People interact with the past continuously; they are affected by it; and their perceptions of it change. This could hardly be otherwise. History is taught in schools to make that interaction socially useful. Revolutionary societies are usually the most adamant about imposing limits on what is taught about the past. The old order's history is often not only unsuitable to the present, but a dangerous counterrevolutionary weapon. Teaching about the American Revolution has not been an exception, but the liberal-democratic society that evolved from that revolution has managed better than its rivals to keep open the possibility of coming to terms with its past, a not unimportant accomplishment.

Finally, this book is concerned with American leaders' perceptions of this nation's international role in the twentieth century, the origins of their views, and the way they have grappled with domestic social and political imperatives in an effort to make sense out of the world and to preserve what they believe to be essential institutions. In one sense, it is about the quest to make the world safe for democracy, but it is also about international competition and rivalry.

I am indebted to several friends and scholars who read the manuscript and pointed out where I was more than usually cryptic or just plain wrong. John Morton Blum of Yale University, the General Editor of this series, Diane Shaver Clemens of the University of California at Berkeley, George C. Herring of the University of Kentucky, Walter LaFeber of Cornell University, and Joan Hoff Wilson of Sacramento State College read the original draft and made perceptive comments, most of which I have tried to incorporate into the final version. I would also like to thank William J. Wisneski

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LLOYD C. GARDNER

To my students at Rutgers

Contents

Preface v

1 The Paradox of American Imperialism 1

Notes 22

Bibliography 22

2 America Goes Abroad: 1898–1908 23

 The Education of a Confirmed Protectionist 24

 The Decision to Intervene 26

 The First American Protectorate 31

 The Great China Dream 33

 The *Deus ex Machina* that Failed 40

 The Manchurian Meeting Place 45

 Canal Zone Diplomacy 47

Notes 53

Bibliography 54

3 Progressivism, War, and Revolution: 1909–1919 57

 The First Imperative 58

 Troubled Waters in *Mare Nostrum* 63

Defining the Just and the Unjust	65
Mexico Has No Government	67
The China Consortiums	74
To Make the World Safe for Democracy	82

<i>Notes</i>	89
<i>Bibliography</i>	90

4 Splendid Isolation, American Style: 1919–1931 93

A Difficult Decision	95
The Bolshevik Threat to Liberal Democracy	100
<i>Deutschland Über Alles</i>	108
Mexico and South	111
China in Peril	113

<i>Notes</i>	120
<i>Bibliography</i>	121

5 Capitalism in Crisis: 1931–1941 123

Worlds in Collision	124
Inside Intranationalism: Cordell Hull's Fight for Multinationalism	128
The Illusion of Neutrality	132
What Makes Good Neighbors?	135
Showdown in the Far East	142
Dr. Win-the-War	150
And the War Came	152

<i>Notes</i>	155
<i>Bibliography</i>	156

6 From Pearl Harbor to Panmunjon: 1941–1951 157

Ambiguity and the Big Three	159
Lend-Lease Diplomacy	167
Lend-Lease and Containment	174
The Truman Doctrines	178
Reparations and the Origins of the Cold War in Europe and Asia	186
The Agent Thesis and American Cold War Policy Korea	194

Notes 203

Bibliography 205

7 The Collective Security Empire: 1951–1961 207

Liberation	210
Moral Rearmament	213
SEATO Succeeds Colonialism	220
The Old World	229
The Inheritance	236
Just Around the Mulberry Bush	240

Notes 242

Bibliography 243

8 America and the World Revolution: 1961–1976 245

Cuban Countdown	246
The New Legions	253
Two Weeks in October	257

Search and Destroy	265
The Disenchanted	269
2001: A Nixon Odyssey	273
Back to Beginnings	278

<i>Notes</i>	287
--------------	-----

<i>Bibliography</i>	288
---------------------	-----

Picture Credits	289
-----------------	-----

Index	291
-------	-----

The Paradox of American Imperialism 1

For more than three hundred years Americans have participated in the construction of an empire, drawn benefits from it, and sought to extend its influence. Yet until Vietnam, a majority of Americans still understood *imperialism* to mean something Europeans did to other people centuries ago. Confronted by critics of the war, the nation's leaders denied the accusation that the United States had become an empire. This country—as it had always been—was antiempire. The only issue in Southeast Asia was the survival of freedom. Our willingness to stay the course in Vietnam could well determine the outcome of the long struggle between two opposed ways of life—and thus the future of humankind.



As the war dragged on, the number of critics grew larger, and charges that Cold War rhetoric masked an ugly imperial reality grew louder. Eventually, the public debate became unintelligible. This was unfortunate, not only because of the harm being done by the war but also because an opportunity for serious inquiry into the origins of America's position in the world was being missed. Was there a connection between the Founding Fathers' vision of an "Empire of Liberty" and the "Free World" rhetoric of Cold War presidents? This was not the only question to be asked, or perhaps even the most important, but it was a good place to begin.

Near the end of the long war in Vietnam, the official answer to critics developed along a new line: Suppose one agrees that Vietnam was a mistake—even an unmitigated disaster, as Secretary of State Henry Kissinger would say once American involvement came to an end. What follows? A retreat into isolationism



1 and 2 Disenchantment with the war in Vietnam produced some second thoughts about symbols and substance.

would compound the original error and might well topple the collective-security system so carefully put together since the Second World War. Despite what had happened in Vietnam, indeed *because* of what had happened there, it was essential to sustain (or restore) American credibility. Even in a post-Cold War era, world stability would depend on American leadership. And we would scarcely enhance that leadership by debating ourselves into a new quagmire of self-doubt and recrimination in what could only be an ultimately futile effort to discover the lessons of Vietnam.

Not everyone was satisfied with this warning. To many, it was not easy to shrug off Vietnam as a mistake. Surely the presidents who had listened to arguments for intervention were not fools, nor conspirators concerned only with presenting the American people with another glorious military triumph. They acted from the conviction that the United States did have a real interest in preventing

a communist takeover in Southeast Asia. To others, the admonition against reexamining the origins of American involvement seemed self-serving, an excuse for the continuation of similar policies elsewhere.

For the dissatisfied, textbooks were not much help. Their approach was outdated, and their focus remained fixed on the battle against isolationism. Imperialism took up only a few pages—a brief episode about an unwanted and unexpected burden in the Philippines. If anything, that small dose of colonialism had immunized Americans against the disease of European imperialism. Moreover, the record of the United States in granting independence to Cuba and in fulfilling a pledge to give the Philippines its independence when it was ready contrasted so sharply with European practice that there was really no question of an American imperialism worthy of discussion.

While it was plain that by tradition and by practice America was anticolonial, it was not so certain that textbook versions of diplomatic history that equated imperialism and colonialism supplied an adequate explanation of American expansion. In an effort to explain what was unique about American expansion, John McDermott, a political theorist and Vietnam expert, settled on the phrase “welfare imperialism.”¹ All great powers, he began, have sought to influence the diplomacy of other states, but some go on to seek a guiding influence *within* the other states. Those that succeed are the true empires. Of these, America has become the largest and most powerful in the modern world. But empires are started for different reasons.

Markets and raw materials, McDermott continued, had not been motivating factors in the establishment of America’s empire. First created as a byproduct of the postwar alliance system, the American empire was sustained, and then expanded, through foreign aid programs. “[O]ur empire is ostensibly committed to the value of national independence for others, as well as humane and orderly development and social reconstruction.”

What went wrong? McDermott wrote:

We have tried to use our governmental bureaucracy as an instrument of social progress, trying to establish a welfare empire there as we