

Looking Back Through the Open Door: An Essay on the Spanish-American War

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The United States developed into a large, powerful nation during the nineteenth century. The frontier of the west played an important role in this development—free land and open spaces provided a “safety valve” for all those Americans whose search for “opportunity” had been frustrated back east. The great waves of immigration began in the nineteenth century too, leading to an increase in population and to the growth of great cities. A process of industrialization and urbanization. In 1790 American farmers accounted for around 70% of the population of the United States; by 1890 that percentage had decreased to about 30%. It was an era of telephones and incandescent light bulbs, electricity and modern improvements—a changing way of life.

On July 12, 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner read his famous essay before the American Historical Association’s meeting in Chicago. Turner’s thesis was straightforward: “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development” (Turner 1). Turner envisioned the frontier as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization”(3); it was on the frontier that the pioneers had to revert to primitive social conditions, which, in Turner’s view, strengthened democratic institutions, as well as American individualism. “The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life”(2).

The economic power of the United States came from the abundance of free land beyond its western border, and Turner had come to Chicago to announce the closing of the frontier. The distinctive features of the American character had been forged on the frontier, affirmed Turner, and now the frontier was gone, “and with its going [had] closed the first period of American history” (Turner 38). A new phase of American history had begun. “Without the economic energy created by expanding the frontier, he warned, America’s political and social institutions would stagnate. If one adhered to this way of thinking, America must expand or die”(Musicant 1).

Many Americans at the time of the Spanish-American war looked back, albeit nostalgically, to “a simpler time”; Thomas Jefferson’s American dream of an agrarian republic was rapidly fading into myth as the rise of big business and labor unions led to conflict and a glaringly unequal distribution of wealth. It was the era of the Robber Barons and the great corporations, when titans of business and finance such as Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Morgan, wielded incredible power and exerted incredible influence. The common man felt doomed in a system so manipulated by big business élites and the politicians in Washington, who, in the minds of many Americans, seemed out of touch with the harsh social and economic realities that threatened mainstream America. New markets—and economic expansion overseas—came to be seen as the antidote to the ills of democratic capitalism. And the Open Door policy, formulated by United States diplomat John Hay at the time of the Spanish-American War, signaled a new departure in the foreign policy of the United States. The Open Door was an attempt to assure equal access to the markets of the world.

Up to this point in the American narrative, the United States had not been a major player on the world stage. It attempted to maintain hegemony in its hemisphere, citing the Monroe doctrine. Meanwhile, outside the United States, the colonial powers were staking their claims to the rest of the world in what Joseph Conrad referred to as “the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration.” The British Empire still held sway then, though France and Germany, Russia and Japan, all played the game of empire as best they could. With the closing of the frontier Americans began to look outward, and to envision the undeveloped parts of the world, especially China and Latin America, metaphorically as new frontiers for economic expansion. As Senator Beveridge declaimed in April, 1897: “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.”

So the United States had new markets on its mind, but the chief motive for the war with Spain “was a sense of outrage at [Spanish] imperialism” (Tindall 593), which was symbolized by General Weyler, also known as *el carnicero*, and his policy of *reconcentracion*. “The fate of the *reconcentrados* gave currency to allegations of Spanish illegality and immorality. Many suffered and died in Weyler’s camps. Some estimates indicated that by 1898 over four hundred thousand Cubans—about a fourth of the population—had perished as a result of reconcentration. The correct figure, however, was closer to one hundred thousand, but this total was itself astronomical—certainly sufficient to trouble many a conscience in the United States” (Trask 9). The Spanish failure to control the *insurrectos* led to repressive cruelty and civil war. “Spain’s ruthless suppression of the revolt... outraged the American people, who feared that they were passively allowing the same kind of large-scale atrocities to take place just off their shores that the Europeans had allowed the Turks to commit on the helpless Armenians just a few years before” (Traxel 8).

Irresponsible journalism, most often associated with Hearst and Pulitzer, fomented this public indignation, consistently painting the *insurrectos* as the underdog and victim, often ignoring atrocities and acts of violence committed by the Cuban freedom-fighters, while giving sensational coverage to equivalent acts committed by the Spanish. The so-called "yellow journalists" did not cause the outbreak of war, but they did capture the public imagination, inciting righteous indignation that surely affected the increasingly tense political climate. The media, like the United States, was a young power, on the rise.

It is ironic, of course, that the Americans did not see any similarity between Weyler's reconcentration policy and the system of Indian reservations in the United States. The American people supported Cuban independence. And American business supported stability in the region, something the Spanish had been unable to assure: "Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, Cubans had repeatedly revolted against Spanish rule, only to be ruthlessly put down. All the while American investments in Cuba, mainly in sugar and mining, were steadily rising. The United States in fact traded more with Cuba than Spain did. Their growing economic interest in their island neighbor made more and more Americans sympathetic to the ideal of Cuban independence" (Tindall 593).

On February 9, 1898, Hearst's *New York Journal* published the famous purloined letter of Spanish minister Dupuy de Lôme, a letter that contained disparaging remarks about President McKinley. De Lôme was forced to resign, and America was outraged once more. Less than a week later, the explosion and sinking of the *Maine*, an American battleship, in the Havana harbor on the night of February 15th led to "war fever" in the United States. At least two hundred sixty Americans died when the *Maine* went down. There has never been any conclusive proof as to who or what was responsible for the sinking of the *Maine*; nonetheless, at the time, many Americans blamed the Spaniards, and "after the *Maine* went down the fate of Cuba dominated the public consciousness" (Trask 474). The American people were outraged, and war was "in the air"; and American foreign policy was moving ominously in the direction of the Open Door:

American leaders went to war with Spain as part of, and as the consequence of, a general outlook which externalized the opportunity and the responsibility for America's domestic welfare; broadly in terms of vigorous overseas economic expansion into Latin America and Asia; and specifically in terms of Spain's inability to pacify Cuba by means (and within time limits) acceptable to the United States, and the separate but nevertheless related necessity of acting in Asia to prevent the exclusion of American interests from China. (Williams 45)

Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" was published in 1899 as the debate over annexation of the Philippines polarized the United States.

The poem is an idealistic paean to colonialism, imagining the "scramble for loot" as missionary work, moral uplift, as the duty and responsibility of the "White Man"; the colonial "game" was being played for the benefit of the natives—disinterested altruism would light up the "heathen darkness" that threatened the world outside Europe and the United States. For many Americans, this sense of mission harkened back to the Manifest destiny of the 1830's and 40's, when many Americans believed that it was their God-given right to expand and fill the continent. Manifest destiny helped to justify the theft of ancestral lands and the extermination of the Native American peoples; its spirit was rekindled by the events of 1898.

In February, 1901 the *North American Review* published a caustic satire by Mark Twain, entitled "To the Person Sitting in Darkness." Twain's satire ridicules the hypocrisy behind the ethos of the "White Man's Burden," which imagines imperialism not as exploitation but as a bestowal of the "gifts of civilization." Twain saw the Philippines as the betrayal of American ideals, something he refers to, in that time of European colonialism, as "playing the European game." Ostensibly, the United States went to war with Spain in order to secure the self-determination of the Cuban people, though in hindsight we can see that this ideal never overcame the economic motivation of the Open Door. Twain writes, quite satirically, that "[e]xtending the Blessings of Civilization to our Brother who Sits in Darkness has been a good trade and has paid well. . . . There is more money in it, more territory, more sovereignty, and other kinds of emolument, than there is in any other game that is played. But Christendom has been playing it badly of late years. . . ." At a time when the White Man's Burden, and the Open Door, and powerful media propaganda, had given Americans reason to believe that expansion overseas was something to celebrate and be proud of, Mark Twain cut to the heart of the matter, which was, as he phrased it, "the Philippine temptation":

It was strong; it was too strong, and he made that bad mistake; he played the European game, the Chamberlain game. It was a pity; it was a great pity, that error; that one grievous error, that irrevocable error. For it was the very place and time to play the American game again. And at no cost. Rich winnings to be gathered in, too; rich and permanent; indestructible; a fortune transmissible forever to the children of the flag. Not land, not money, not dominion—no, something worth many times more than that dross: our share, the spectacle of a nation long harassed and persecuted slaves set free through our influence; our posterity's share, the golden memory of that fair deed. The game was in our hands. If it had been played according to American rules, Dewey would have sailed away from Manila as soon as he had destroyed the Spanish fleet—after putting up a sign on shore guaranteeing foreign property and life against damage by the Filipinos, and warning the Powers that interference with the emancipated patriots would be regarded as an act unfriendly to the United States. (Twain)

I suppose it is a good thing that Mark Twain did not live to see how the game played out in Cuba; when he wrote "To the Person Sitting in Darkness," Cuban independence seemed to be a reality; and, to Twain, the annexation of the Philippines was a mistake, and a glaring example of American duplicity.

The more we examine the mistake, the more clearly we perceive that it is going to be bad for the Business. The Person Sitting in Darkness is almost sure to say: "There is something curious about this—curious and unaccountable. There must be two Americas: one that sets the captive free, and one that takes a once-captive's new freedom away from him, and picks a quarrel with him with nothing to found it on; then kills him to get his land." (Twain 8)

When the Filipinos stood up and claimed the freedom for which they had fought long and hard, invoking the democratic principles of Thomas Jefferson, the United States military came in to play cowboys and Indians. Great violence was used in the war against Filipino independence—euphemistically labeled the Philippine Insurrection in most American textbooks—and heinous atrocities and massacres were committed, on both sides. McKinley took the Philippines because he didn't know what else to do—he rationalized the dilemma by affirming his intention to "Christianize" the supposedly heathen Filipinos. This is, of course, quite ironic, as the Spanish had brought Christianity to the Philippines long before McKinley offered this lame justification. Mark Twain's satire paints the situation in quite different terms: "And as for a flag for the Philippines, it is easily managed. We can have a special one—our States do it; we can have just our usual flag, with the white stripes painted black and the stars replaced by the skull and cross-bones" (Twain 12). President McKinley talked like a man who had taken the "high road"; but it was American racism, along with the economic motivations, that was sent out across the Pacific; a racism honed razor-sharp on the American frontier.

Economic imperialism, or the Open Door, was supposed to obviate the need for war. It didn't. It was also supposed to raise the "undeveloped" world's standard of living through the purchase of American products, and through increased trade and commerce with American business. And, of course, the Open Door was supposed to spread democracy, though America's support of the Philippine dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, who retired to Hawaii after looting the wealth of his nation, points up the dissonance between democratic ideals and the economic realities of "the game," as does America's history of support for fascist regimes in Latin America, and its suppression of democratic movements that posed a threat to "business as usual."

Another profoundly disturbing aspect of the Open Door policy that emerged out of the Spanish-American war is the degree to which élites have been able to affect the foreign policy of the United States. One contemporary example is Ronald Reagan's arrogant abuses of power, and subversion of the Constitution and the

democratic process, in his secret military operations in Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador during the 1980's. This penchant for decision-making by small groups of élites within the government can be traced back to the Spanish-American war.

One of the most unnerving features was the extensive élitism that had become ingrained in the policy-making process. The assault on Cuba was conceived, planned, and implemented by a small group of men in the executive department. They opened no general dialogue with members of Congress (even in private conversation), and expended great effort and exerted great pressure to avoid any public discussion or debate.

That degree of élitism, which goes far beyond the delegation of power and authority required to execute public policy, began to develop under President William McKinley. The decision to acquire all the Philippines at the end of the war against Spain was made by a small group of insiders; and military intervention in China was initiated by executive order. President Theodore Roosevelt dramatized the continuing concentration of power in the executive department with these arrogant remarks about his intervention to control the Panama canal route: "The vital work . . . was done by me without the aid or advice of anyone . . . and without the knowledge of anyone. I took the Canal Zone." (Williams 6)

Looking back through the Open Door, we see a history of élite decision-making—plans hatched in relative secrecy, or at least without appropriate public discussion and debate. From Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb, to the Korean "military action"; from Kennedy's decision to allow the Bay of Pigs fiasco to run its course; through the varied shams and deceptions of the Vietnam war, to Richard Nixon's secret bombing of Laos and Cambodia, to Reagan and Bush, Iran-Contra, military moves against Libya, Panama, and Grenada, right on down to President Clinton's secret decision to unleash a barrage of Tomahawk cruise missiles aimed at allegedly terrorist targets in Afghanistan and Sudan.

Here in our current fin de siècle, the United States finds itself in the role of lone superpower, leader of the free world, self-professed champion of democracy. This has been "the American Century," dark side and all, and, as Mark Twain predicted, the game has been tremendously profitable, though perhaps at tremendous cost, and certainly without the idealistic successes envisioned by the adherents of the "White Man's Burden." One hundred years ago the United States defeated Spain in war, then took its first baby steps through the Open Door. The United States entered—and changed—the game that was already being played by the Colonial powers. At that time the world was seen as abundant, fecund, ripe for harvest. China was the coveted treasure—immense markets that would satisfy the demands, and assure the survival, of an expanding capitalist machine.

Some things change, but America's resilient pursuit of economic markets

has stayed the same. But gone is that sense of abundance and opportunity that drove the economic imperialists at the beginning of the twentieth century. We are told that we now live in a world of limited natural resources. Looking back through the Open Door, we find a history marked by idealistic rhetoric and economic imperative. The Open Door continues to dominate American foreign policy, as President Clinton made clear recently in an interview with Garry Wills, when he stated that "[w]e should use this opportunity to put America at the center of all the emerging trade networks of the world, both for our national security, our global position and our economic growth" (Wills 26). Politicians and patriots still treat us to the missionary rhetoric of democratic idealism; the world still appears to be as chaotic—and violent—as ever; and, of course, the game goes on.

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