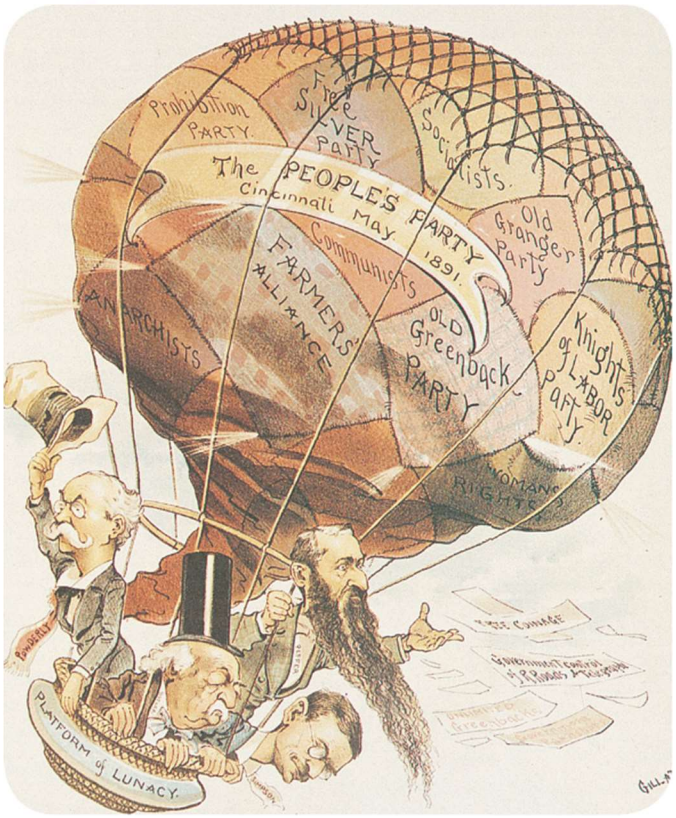
19 FROM CRISIS TO EMPIRE



"A PARTY OF PATCHES," *JUDGE* MAGAZINE, JUNE 6, 1891 **This political cartoon suggests the contempt and fear with which many easterners, in particular, viewed the emergence of the People's Party in 1891.**

LOOKING AHEAD

1. What were the major social and economic problems that beset the United States in the late nineteenth century, and how did the two major political parties respond to these problems?
2. What was Populism, what were its goals, and to what degree were these goals achieved?
3. How did the United States become an imperial power?

SETTING THE STAGE

THE UNITED STATES APPROACHED THE end of the nineteenth century as a fundamentally different nation from what it had been at the beginning of the Civil War. With rapid change came cascading social and political problems–problems that the weak and conservative governments of the time showed little inclination or ability to address.

A catastrophic depression began in 1893, rapidly intensified, and created devastating hardship for millions of Americans. Farmers, particularly hard hit by the depression, responded by creating an agrarian political movement known as Populism. American workers, facing massive unemployment, staged large and occasionally violent strikes. Not since the Civil War had American politics been so polarized and impassioned. The presidential election of 1896 pitted the agrarian hero William Jennings Bryan against the solid, conservative William McKinley. Supported by the mighty Republican Party and many eastern groups that looked with suspicion and unease at the agricultural demands coming from the West, McKinley won an easy victory.

Although McKinley did little in his first term in office to resolve the problems and grievances of the time, the economy revived nevertheless. Having largely ignored the depression, however, McKinley took a great interest in another great national cause: the plight of Cuba in its war with Spain. In the spring of 1898, the United States declared war on Spain and entered the conflict in Cuba–a brief but bloody war that ended with an American victory four months later. The conflict had begun as a way to support Cuban independence from the Spanish. But a group of fervent and influential imperialists worked to convert the war into an occasion for acquiring overseas possessions. Despite a powerful anti-imperialist movement, the acquisition of the former Spanish colonies proceeded–only to draw Americans into yet another imperial war, this one in the Philippines, where the Americans, not the Spanish, were the targets of local enmity.

I. THE POLITICS OF EQUILIBRIUM

ELECTORAL STABILITY

The most striking feature of late-nineteenth-century politics was the remarkable stability of the party system. From the end of Reconstruction until the late 1890s, the electorate was divided almost precisely evenly between the Republicans and the Democrats. Sixteen states were solidly and consistently Republican, and fourteen states (most in the South) were solidly and consistently Democratic. Only five states (most importantly New York and Ohio) were usually in doubt, and their voters generally decided the results of national elections. The Republican Party captured the presidency in all but two of the elections of the era, but in the five presidential elections beginning in 1876, the average popular-vote margin separating the Democratic and Republican candidates was 1.5 percent. The congressional balance was similarly stable, with the Republicans generally controlling the Senate and the Democrats generally controlling the House.

HIGH TURNOUT

As striking as the balance between the parties was the intensity of public loyalty to them. In most of the country, Americans viewed their party affiliations with a passion and enthusiasm that is difficult for later generations to understand. Voter turnout in presidential elections between 1860 and 1900 averaged over 78 percent of all eligible voters (as compared with only about 50 percent in most recent elections). Even in nonpresidential years, from 60 to 80 percent of the voters turned out to cast ballots for congressional and local candidates. Large groups of potential voters were disenfranchised in these years: women in most states; almost all blacks and many poor whites in the South. But for adult white males, there were few franchise restrictions.

What explains this extraordinary loyalty to the two political parties? It was not, certainly, that the parties took distinct positions on important public issues. They did so rarely. Party loyalties reflected other factors. Region was perhaps the most important. To white southerners, loyalty to the Democratic Party was a matter of unquestioned faith. It was the vehicle by which they had triumphed over Reconstruction and preserved white supremacy. To many northerners, white and black, Republican loyalties were equally intense. To them, the party of Lincoln remained a bulwark against slavery and treason.

Religious and ethnic differences also shaped party loyalties. The Democratic Party attracted most of the Catholic voters, recent immigrants, and poorer workers–groups that often overlapped. The Republican Party appealed to northern Protestants, citizens of old stock, and much of the middle class–groups that also had considerable overlap. Among the few substantive issues on which the parties took clearly different stands were matters connected with immigrants. Republicans tended to support measures restricting immigration and to favor temperance legislation, which many of them believed would help discipline immigrant communities. Catholics and immigrants viewed such proposals as assaults on them and their cultures and opposed them; the Democratic Party followed their lead.

CULTURAL BASIS OF PARTY IDENTIFICATION

Party identification, then, was usually more a reflection of cultural inclinations than a calculation of economic interest. Individuals might affiliate with a party because their parents had done so, or because it was the party of their region, their church, or their ethnic group.

A. THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

One reason the two parties managed to avoid substantive issues was that the federal government (and, to some degree, state and local governments as well) did relatively little. The government in Washington was responsible for delivering the mail, maintaining a military, conducting foreign policy, and collecting tariffs and taxes. It had few other responsibilities and few institutions with which it could have undertaken additional responsibilities even if it had chosen to do so.

There were significant exceptions. The federal government had been supporting the economic development of the nation for decades. In the late nineteenth century, that mostly meant giving tremendous subsidies to railroads, usually in the form of grants of federal land, to encourage them to extend their lines deeper into the nation. And as President Cleveland's intervention in the Pullman strike suggests, the government was also not averse to using its military and police power to protect capitalists from challenges from their workers.

CIVIL WAR PENSION SYSTEM

In addition, the federal government administered a system of annual pensions for Union Civil War veterans who had retired from work and for their widows. At its peak, this pension system was making payments to a majority of the male citizens (black and white) of the North and to many women as well. Some reformers hoped to make the system permanent and universal. But their efforts failed, in part because the Civil War pension system was awash in party patronage and corruption. Other reformers–believers in “good government”–saw elimination of the pension system as a way to fight graft, corruption, and party rule. When the Civil War generation died out, the pension system died with it. In most other respects, however, the United States in the late nineteenth century was a society without a modern, -national government. The most powerful institutions were the two political parties (and the bosses and machines that dominated them) and the federal courts.

B. PRESIDENTS AND PATRONAGE

The power of party bosses had an important effect on the power of the presidency. The office had great symbolic importance, but its occupants were unable to do very much except distribute government appointments. A new president and his tiny staff had to make almost 100,000 appointments (most of them in the post office, the only really large government agency); and even in that function, presidents had limited latitude, since they had to avoid offending the various factions within their own parties.

PRESIDENT CHESTER A. ARTHUR
Although originally a Stalwart and a follower of Roscoe Conkling, upon becoming president on the assassination of James A. Garfield, Chester A. Arthur attempted to reform the spoils system. The Pendleton Act, passed by Congress in 1883, required that some civil service jobs be filled by competitive examinations rather than patronage.
(The Library of Congress (LC-DIG-ppmsca-28490))

STALWARTS AND HALF-BREEDS

Sometimes that proved impossible, as the presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes (1877–1881) demonstrated. By the end of his term, two groups–the Stalwarts, led by Roscoe Conkling of New York, and the Half-Breeds, captained by James G. Blaine of Maine–were competing for control of the Republican Party. Rhetorically, the Stalwarts favored traditional, professional machine politics, while the Half-Breeds favored reform. In fact, both groups were mainly interested in a larger share of the patronage pie. Hayes tried to satisfy both and ended up satisfying neither.

The battle over patronage overshadowed all else during Hayes's unhappy presidency. His one important substantive initiative–an effort to create a civil service system–attracted no support from either party. And his early announcement that he would not seek reelection only weakened him further. (His popularity in Washington was not enhanced by the decision of his wife, a temperance advocate widely known as “Lemonade Lucy,” to ban alcoholic beverages from the White House.) Hayes's presidency was a study in frustration.

The Republicans managed to retain the presidency in 1880 in part because they agreed on a ticket that included a Stalwart and a Half-Breed. They nominated James A. Garfield, a veteran congressman from Ohio and a Half-Breed, for president and Chester A. Arthur of New York, a Stalwart, for vice president. The Democrats nominated General Winfield Scott Hancock, a minor Civil War commander with no national following. Benefiting from the end of the recession of 1879, Garfield won a decisive electoral victory, although his popular-vote margin was very thin. The Republicans also captured both houses of Congress.

GARFIELD ASSASSINATED

Garfield began his presidency by trying to defy the Stalwarts in his appointments and by showing support for civil service reform. He soon found himself embroiled in an ugly public quarrel with Conkling and the Stalwarts. It was never resolved. On July 2, 1881, only four months after his inauguration, Garfield was shot twice while standing in the Washington railroad station by an apparently deranged gunman (and unsuccessful office seeker) who shouted, “I am a Stalwart and Arthur is president now!” Garfield lingered for nearly three months but finally died, a victim as much of inept medical treatment as of the wounds themselves.

PENDLETON ACT

Chester A. Arthur, who succeeded Garfield, had spent a political lifetime as a devoted, skilled, and open spoilsman and a close ally of Roscoe Conkling. But on becoming president, he tried–like Hayes and Garfield before him–to follow an independent course and even to promote reform, aware that the Garfield assassination had discredited the traditional spoils system. To the dismay of the Stalwarts, Arthur kept most of Garfield's appointees in office and supported civil service reform. In 1883, Congress passed the first national civil service measure, the Pendleton Act, which required that some federal jobs be filled by competitive written examinations rather than by patronage. Relatively few offices fell under civil service at first, but its reach extended steadily.

C. CLEVELAND, HARRISON, AND THE TARIFF

In the unsavory election of 1884, the Republican candidate for president was Senator James G. Blaine of Maine–known to his admirers as the “Plumed Knight” but to many others as a symbol of seamy party politics. A group of disgruntled “liberal Republicans,” known by their critics as the “mugwumps,” announced they would bolt the party and support an honest Democrat. Rising to the bait, the Democrats nominated Grover Cleveland, the reform governor of New York. He differed from Blaine on no substantive issues but had acquired a reputation as an enemy of corruption.

ELECTION OF 1884

In a campaign filled with personal invective, what may have decided the election was the last-minute introduction of a religious controversy. Shortly before the election, a delegation of Protestant ministers called on Blaine in New York City; their spokesman, Dr. Samuel Burchard, referred to the Democrats as the party of “rum, Romanism, and rebellion.” Blaine was slow to repudiate Burchard's indiscretion, and Democrats quickly spread the news that Blaine had tolerated a slander on the Catholic Church. Cleveland's narrow victory was probably a result of an unusually heavy Catholic vote for the Democrats in New York. Cleveland won 219 electoral votes to Blaine's 182; his popular margin was only 23,000.

Grover Cleveland was respected, if not often liked, for his stern and righteous opposition to politicians, grafters, pressure groups, and Tammany Hall. He had become famous as the “veto governor,” as an official who was not afraid to say no. He was the embodiment of an era in which few Americans believed the federal government could, or should, do very much. Cleveland had always doubted the wisdom of protective tariffs. The existing high rates, he believed, were responsible for the annual surplus in federal revenues, which was tempting Congress to pass “reckless” and “extravagant” legislation, which he frequently vetoed. In December 1887, therefore, he asked Congress to reduce the tariff rates. Democrats in the House approved a tariff reduction, but Senate Republicans defiantly passed a bill of their own actually raising the rates. The resulting deadlock made the tariff an issue in the election of 1888.

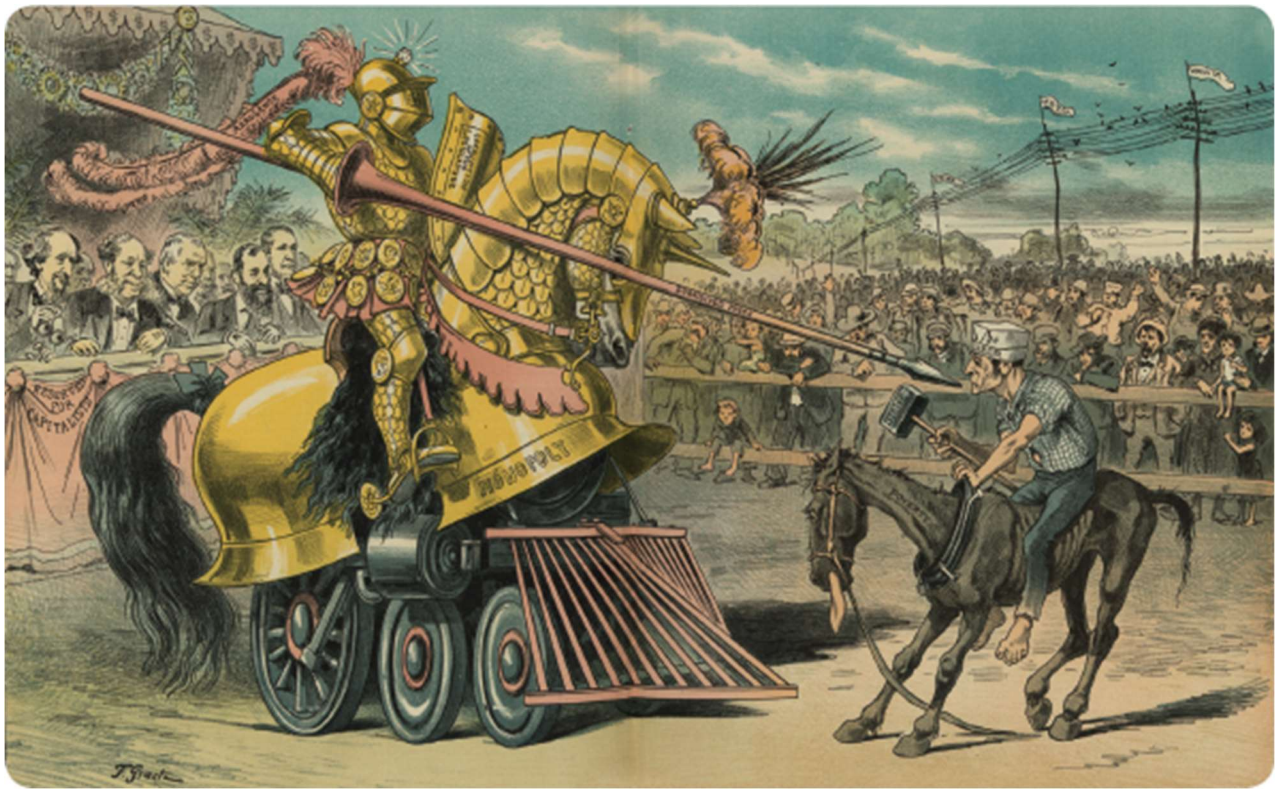
The Democrats renominated Cleveland and supported tariff reductions. The Republicans settled on former senator Benjamin Harrison of Indiana, who was obscure but respectable (the grandson of President William Henry Harrison); he endorsed high tariffs. The campaign was the first since the Civil War to involve a clear question of economic difference between the parties. It was also one of the most corrupt (and closest) elections in American history. Harrison won an electoral majority of 233 to 168, but Cleveland's popular vote exceeded Harrison's by 100,000.

D. NEW PUBLIC ISSUES

Benjamin Harrison's record as president was little more substantial than that of his grandfather, who had died a month after taking office. Harrison had few visible convictions, and he made no effort to influence Congress. And yet during Harrison's passive administration, public opinion was beginning to force the government to confront some of the pressing social and economic issues of the day. Most notably, sentiment was rising in favor of legislation to curb the power of trusts.

SHERMAN ANTITRUST ACT

By the mid-1880s, fifteen western and southern states had adopted laws prohibiting combinations that restrained competition. But corporations found it easy to escape limitations by incorporating in states, such as New Jersey and Delaware, that offered them special privileges. If antitrust legislation was to be effective, its supporters believed, it would have to come from the national government. Responding to growing popular demands, both houses of Congress passed the Sherman Antitrust Act in July 1890, almost without dissent. Most members of Congress saw the act as a symbolic measure, one that would help deflect public criticism but was not likely to have any real effect on corporate power. For over a decade after its passage, the Sherman Act–indifferently enforced and steadily weakened by the courts–had almost no impact. As of 1901, the Justice Department had instituted many antitrust suits against labor unions, but only fourteen against business combinations; there had been few convictions.



LABOR AND MONOPOLY **This 1883 cartoon appeared in *Puck,* a magazine popular for its satirical treatment of American politics. It expresses a common sentiment of the Populists and many others: that ordinary men and women (portrayed here by the pathetic figure of "labor" and by the grim members of the audience) were almost hopelessly overmatched by the power of corporate monopolies. The knight's shield, labeled "corruption of the legislature," and his spear, labeled "subsidized press," make clear that–in the view of the cartoonist at least–corporations had many allies in their effort to oppress workers.**
(The Library of Congress (LC-DIG-ppmsca-2412))

McKinley Tariff

The Republicans were more interested, however, in the issue they believed had won them the 1888 election: the tariff. Representative William McKinley of Ohio and Senator Nelson W. Aldrich of Rhode Island drafted the highest protective measure ever proposed to Congress. Known as the McKinley Tariff, it became law in October 1890. But Republican leaders apparently misinterpreted public sentiment. The party suffered a stunning reversal in the 1890 congressional election. The Republicans' substantial Senate majority was slashed to 8; in the House, the party retained only 88 of the 323 seats. McKinley himself was among those who went down in defeat. Nor were the Republicans able to recover in the course of the next two years. In the presidential election of 1892, Benjamin Harrison once again supported protection; Grover Cleveland, renominated by the Democrats, once again opposed it. A new third party, the People's Party, with James B. Weaver as its candidate, advocated substantial economic reform. Cleveland won 277 electoral votes to Harrison's 145 and had a popular margin of 380,000. Weaver ran far behind. For the first time since 1878, the Democrats won a majority of both houses of Congress.

The policies of Cleveland's second term were much like those of his first–devoted to minimal government and hostile to active efforts to deal with social or economic problems. Again, he supported a tariff reduction, which the House approved but the Senate weakened. Cleveland denounced the result but allowed it to become law as the Wilson-Gorman Tariff. It included only very modest reductions.

But public pressure was growing in the 1880s for other reforms, among them regulation of the railroads. Farm organizations in the Midwest (most notably the Grangers) had persuaded several state legislatures to pass regulatory legislation in the early 1870s. But in 1886, the Supreme Court–in *Wabash, St. Louis, and Pacific Railway Co. v. Illinois,* known as the *Wabash* case–ruled one of the Granger Laws in Illinois unconstitutional. According to the Court, the law was an attempt to control interstate commerce and thus infringed on the exclusive power of Congress. Later, the federal courts limited the powers of the states to regulate commerce even within their own boundaries.

Interstate Commerce Act

Effective railroad regulation, it was now clear, could come only from the federal government. Congress responded to public pressure in 1887 with the Interstate Commerce Act, which banned discrimination in rates between long and short hauls, required that railroads publish their rate schedules and file them with the government, and declared that all interstate rail rates must be "reasonable and just"–although the act did not define what that meant. A five-person agency, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), was to administer the act. But it had to rely on the courts to enforce its rulings. For almost twenty years after its passage, the Interstate Commerce Act–which was, like the Sherman Act, haphazardly enforced and narrowly interpreted by the courts–had little practical effect.

SHACKLED BY THE TARIFF

This 1894 cartoon by the political satirist Louis Dalrymple portrays an unhappy Uncle Sam bound hand and foot by the McKinley Tariff and by what tariff opponents considered a closely related evil–monopoly. Members of the Senate are portrayed as tools of the various industries and special interests protected by the tariff. The caption, "A Senate for Revenue Only," is a parody of the antitariff rallying cry, "A tariff for revenue only," meaning that duties should be designed only to raise money for the government, not to stop imports of particular goods to protect domestic industries. A particularly provocative element of the cartoon is the image of two African American legislators promoting another controversial issue: "free silver".

II. THE AGRARIAN REVOLT

No group watched the performance of the federal government in the 1880s with more dismay than American farmers. Suffering from a long economic decline, afflicted with a painful sense of obsolescence, rural Americans were keenly aware of the problems of the modern economy and particularly eager for government assistance in dealing with them. The result of their frustrations was the emergence of one of the most powerful movements of political protest in American history: what became known as Populism.

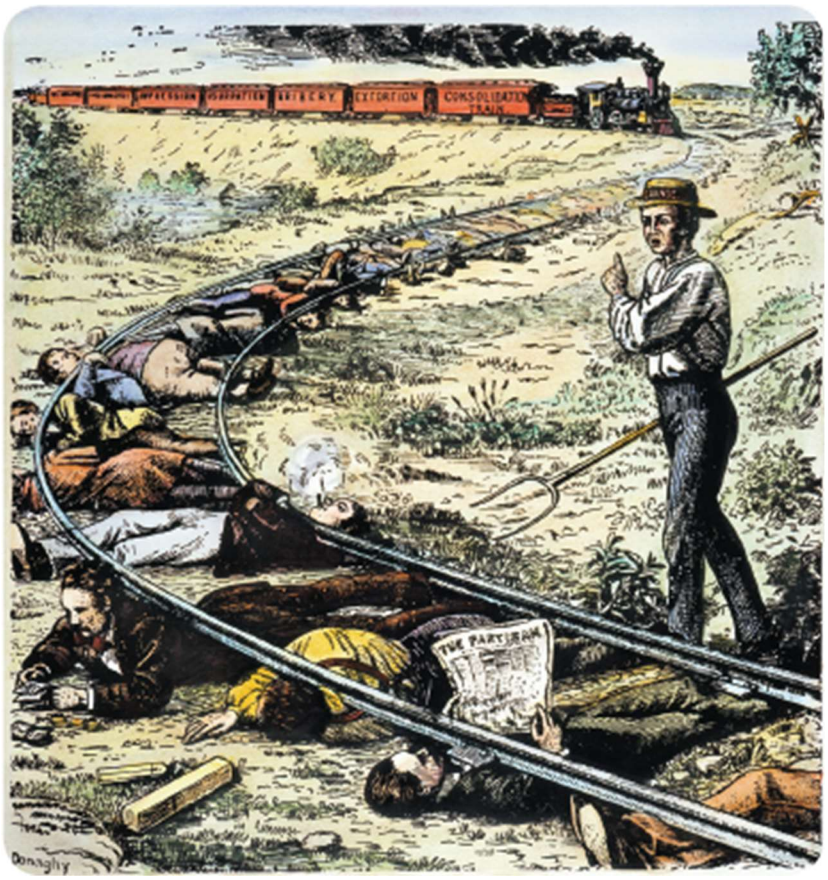
A. THE GRANGERS

According to popular myth, American farmers were the most individualistic of citizens. In reality, however, farmers had been making efforts to organize for many decades. The first major farm organization appeared in the 1860s: the Grange.

ORIGINS

The Grange had its origins shortly after the Civil War in a tour through the South by a minor Agriculture Department official, Oliver H. Kelley. Kelley was appalled by what he considered the isolation and drabness of rural life. In 1867 he left the government and, with other department employees, founded the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, to which he devoted years of labor as secretary and from which emerged a network of local organizations. At first, the Grangers defined their purposes modestly. They attempted to bring farmers together to learn new scientific agricultural techniques–to keep farming "in step with the music of the age." The Grangers also hoped to create a feeling of community, to relieve the loneliness of rural life.

The Grangers grew slowly for a time. But when the depression of 1873 caused a major decline in farm prices, membership rapidly increased. By 1875, the Grange claimed more than 800,000 members and 20,000 local lodges; it had chapters in almost every state but was strongest in the great staple-producing regions of the South and the Midwest.



"THE GRANGE AWAKENING THE SLEEPERS" **This 1873 cartoon illustrates the way the Grange embraced many of the same concerns that the Farmers' Alliances and their People's Party later expressed. A farmer is attempting to arouse passive citizens (lying in place of the "sleepers," or cross ties on railroad tracks), who are about to be crushed by a train. The cars bear the names of the costs of the railroads' domination of the agrarian economy.**

A POPULIST GATHERING **Populism was a response to real economic and political grievances. But like most political movements of its time, it was also important as a cultural experience. For farmers in sparsely settled regions in particular, it provided an antidote to isolation and loneliness. This gathering of Populist farmers in Dickinson County, Kansas, shows how the political purposes of the movement were tightly bound up with its social purposes.**

ECONOMIC GRIEVANCES

As membership grew, the lodges in the Midwest began to focus less on the social benefits of organization and more on the economic possibilities. They attempted to organize marketing cooperatives to allow farmers to circumvent the hated “middlemen” (people who managed the sale of farmers' crops, taking a large cut of the profits for themselves). And they urged cooperative political action to curb monopolistic practices by railroads and warehouses.
The Grangers set up cooperative stores, creameries, elevators, warehouses, insurance companies, and factories that produced machines, stoves, and other items. More than 400 enterprises were in operation at the height of the movement, and some of them forged lucrative relationships with existing businesses. One corporation emerged specifically to meet the needs of the Grangers: the first mail-order business, Montgomery Ward and Company, founded in 1872, which helped farmers escape from overpriced local stores. Eventually, however, most of the Grange enterprises failed, both because of the inexperience of their operators and because of the opposition of the middlemen they were challenging.

POLITICAL PROGRAM

The Grangers also worked to elect state legislators pledged to their program. Usually they operated through the existing parties, although occasionally they ran candidates under such independent party labels as “Antimonopoly” and “Reform.” At their peak, they managed to gain control of the legislatures in most of the midwestern states. Their purpose was to subject the railroads to government controls. The Granger laws of the early 1870s imposed strict regulations on railroad rates and practices.
But the new regulations were soon destroyed by the courts. That defeat, combined with the political inexperience of many Grange leaders and, above all, the temporary return of agricultural prosperity in the late 1870s, produced a dramatic decline in the power of the association. Some of the Granger cooperatives survived as effective economic vehicles for many years, but the movement as a whole dwindled rapidly. By 1880, its membership had shrunk to 100,000.

B. THE FARMERS' ALLIANCES

The successor to the Grange as the leading vehicle of agrarian protest began to emerge even before the Granger movement had faded. As early as 1875, farmers in parts of the South (most notably in Texas) were banding together in so-called Farmers' Alliances. By 1880, the Southern Alliance had more than 4 million members; and a comparable Northwestern Alliance was taking root in the plains states and the Midwest and developing ties with its southern counterpart.
Like the Granges, the Alliances were principally concerned with local problems. They formed cooperatives and other marketing mechanisms. They established stores, banks, processing plants, and other facilities for their members–to free them from the hated “furnishing merchants” who kept so many farmers in debt. Some Alliance leaders, however, also saw the movement as an effort to build a society in which economic competition might give way to cooperation. They argued for a sense of mutual, neighborly responsibility that would enable farmers to resist oppressive outside forces. Alliance lecturers traveled throughout rural areas attacking the concentration of power in great corporations and financial institutions and promoting cooperation as an alternative economic system.

(© Corbis)

MARY E. LEASE
The fiery Populist orator Mary E. Lease was a fixture on the Alliance lecture circuit in the 1890s. She made some 160 speeches in 1890 alone. Her critics called her the “Kansas Pythoness,” but she was popular among populist farmers with her denunciations of banks, railroads, and “middlemen,” and her famous advice to “raise less corn and more hell.”

MARY LEASE

From the beginning, women were full voting members in most local Alliances. Many held offices and served as lecturers. A few, most notably Mary E. Lease, went on to become fiery Populist orators. (Lease was famous for urging farmers to “raise less corn and more hell.”) Others emphasized issues of particular concern to women, especially - temperance. Like their urban counterparts, agrarian women argued that sobriety was a key to stability in rural society. Alliances (and the Populist Party they eventually created) advocated extending the vote to women in many areas of the country.

BEARING THE CROSS OF GOLD
The cartoonist Grant Hamilton created this image of William Jennings Bryan shortly after he made his famous "Cross of Gold" speech at the Democratic National Convention, which led to his nomination for president. The cartoon highlights two of the most powerful images in Bryan's speech–a "crown of thorns" and a "cross of gold," both biblical references and both designed to represent the oppression that the gold standard imposed on working people.
(© The Granger Collection, New York)

Although the Alliances quickly became far more widespread than the Granges had ever been, they suffered from similar problems. Their cooperatives did not always work well, partly because the market forces operating against them were sometimes too strong to be overcome, partly because the cooperatives themselves were often mismanaged. These economic frustrations helped push the movement into a new phase at the end of the 1880s: the creation of a national political organization.

In 1889, the Southern and Northwestern Alliances, despite continuing differences between them, agreed to a loose merger. The next year the Alliances held a national convention at Ocala, Florida, and issued the so-called Ocala Demands, which were, in effect, a party platform. In the 1890 off-year elections, candidates supported by the Alliances won partial or complete control of the legislatures in twelve states. They also won six governorships, three seats in the U.S. Senate, and approximately fifty in the U.S. House of Representatives. Many of the successful Alliance candidates were Democrats who had benefited–often passively–from Alliance endorsements. But dissident farmers drew enough encouragement from the results to contemplate further political action, including forming a party of their own.

BIRTH OF THE PEOPLE'S PARTY

Sentiment for a third party was strongest among the members of the Northwestern Alliance. But several southern leaders supported the idea as well–among them Tom Watson of Georgia, the only southern congressman elected in 1890 openly to identify with the Alliance, and Leonidas L. Polk of North Carolina, perhaps the ablest mind in the movement. Alliance leaders discussed plans for a third party at meetings in Cincinnati in May 1891 and St. Louis in February 1892. Then, in July 1892, 1,300 exultant delegates poured into Omaha, Nebraska, to proclaim the creation of the new party, approve an official set of principles, and nominate candidates for the presidency and vice presidency. The new organization's official name was the People's Party, but its members were more commonly known as Populists.

The election of 1892 (which restored Grover Cleveland to the presidency) demonstrated the potential power of the new movement. The Populist presidential candidate was James B. Weaver of Iowa, a former Greenbacker who received the nomination after the death of Leonidas Polk, the early favorite. Weaver polled more than 1 million votes, 8.5 percent of the total, and carried six mountain and plains states for 22 electoral votes. Nearly 1,500 Populist candidates won election to seats in state legislatures. The party elected three governors, five senators, and ten congressmen. It could also claim the support of many Republicans and Democrats in Congress who had been elected by appealing to populist sentiment.

C. The Populist Constituency

The Populists dreamed of creating a broad political coalition. But populism always appealed principally to farmers, particularly to small farmers with little long-range economic security–people whose operations were minimally mechanized, if at all, who relied on one crop, and who had access only to limited credit. In the Midwest, the Populists were usually family farmers struggling to hold on to their land (or to get it back). In the South, there were many modest landowners too, but in addition there were significant numbers of sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Whatever their differences, however, most Populists had at least one thing in common: they were engaged in a type of farming that was becoming less viable in the face of new, mechanized, diversified, and consolidated commercial agriculture.

Populists tended to be not only economically but also culturally marginal. The movement appealed above all to geographically isolated farmers who felt cut off from the mainstream of national life and resented their isolation. Populism gave such people an outlet for their grievances; it also provided them with a social experience, a sense of belonging to a community that they had previously lacked.

The Populists were also notable for the groups they failed to attract. There were energetic efforts to include labor within the coalition. Representatives of the Knights of Labor attended early organizational meetings; the new party added a labor plank to its platform–calling for shorter hours for workers and restrictions on immigration, and denouncing the use of private detective agencies as strikebreakers in labor disputes. On the whole, however, Populism never attracted significant labor support, in part because the economic interests of labor and the interests of farmers were often at odds.

"Free Silver"

One exception was the Rocky Mountain states, where the Populists did have some significant success in attracting miners to their cause. They did so partly because local Populist leaders endorsed a demand for "free silver," the idea of permitting silver to become, along with gold, the basis of the currency so as to expand the money supply. In Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, and other areas of the Far West, silver mining was an important activity, and the People's Party enjoyed substantial, if temporary, success there.

"Colored Alliances"

In the South, white Populists struggled with the question of whether to accept African Americans into the party. Their numbers and poverty made black farmers possibly valuable allies. There was an important black component to the -movement–a network of "Colored Alliances" that by 1890 had more than one and a quarter million members. But most white Populists were willing to accept the assistance of African Americans only as long as it was clear that whites would remain indisputably in control. When southern conservatives began to attack the Populists for undermining white supremacy, the interracial character of the movement quickly faded.

Most of the Populist leaders were members of the rural middle class: professional people, editors and lawyers, or longtime politicians and agitators. Many active Populists were women. Some Populist leaders were somber, serious theoreticians; others were semihysterical rabble-rousers. In the South, in particular, Populism produced the first generation of what was to become a distinctive and enduring political breed–the "southern demagogue." Tom Watson in Georgia, Jeff Davis in Arkansas, and others attracted widespread popular support by arousing the resentment of poor southerners against the entrenched planter aristocracy.

D. Populist Ideas

Populist Platform

The reform program of the Populists was spelled out first in the Ocala Demands of 1890 and then, even more clearly, in the Omaha platform of 1892. It proposed a system of "subtreasuries," which would replace and strengthen the cooperatives of Grangers and Alliances that had been experimenting for years. The government would establish a network of warehouses, where farmers could deposit their crops. Using those crops as collateral, growers could then borrow money from the government at low rates of interest and wait for the price of their goods to go up before selling them. In addition, the Populists called for the abolition of national banks, the end of absentee ownership of land, the direct election of U.S. senators (which would weaken the power of conservative state legislatures), and other devices to improve the ability of the people to influence the political process. They called as well for regulation and (after 1892) government ownership of railroads, telephones, and telegraphs. And they demanded a system of government-operated postal savings banks, a graduated income tax, and the inflation of the currency. Eventually, the party as a whole embraced the demand of its western members for the remonetization of silver.

Some Populists were openly anti-Semitic, pointing to the Jews as leaders of the obscure financial forces attempting to enslave them. Others were anti-intellectual, anti-eastern, and anti-urban. A few of the leading Populists gave an impression of personal failure, brilliant instability, and brooding communion with mystic forces. Ignatius Donnelly, for example, wrote one book locating the lost isle of Atlantis, another claiming that Bacon had written Shakespeare's plays, and still another–*Caesar's Column* (1891)–presenting a deranged vision of bloody revolution and the creation of a populist utopia. Tom Watson, once a champion of interracial harmony, ended his career baiting blacks and Jews.

Populism's Ideological Challenge

Yet the occasional bigotry of some Populists should not dominate the image of Populism as a whole, which was a serious effort to find solutions to real problems. Populists emphatically rejected the laissez-faire orthodoxies of their time, including the idea that the rights of ownership are absolute. They raised one of the most overt and powerful challenges of the era to the direction in which American industrial capitalism was moving.

THE CHATAUQUAS

EDUCATION and oratory were part of American life in the nineteenth century. Starting in 1826, lyceums were among the first public organizations to provide adults with both. Participants met in libraries, vacant schools, and elsewhere. Organizers estimated that 13,000 people attended public lectures. An even-larger movement to provide instructional lectures and speeches arose during the 1880s and 1890s from the Populist movement. Men and women flocked by the hundreds or even thousands to hear speeches and discussions provided by itinerant speakers.

The most famous of these lectures were the Chautauquas, founded in the summer of 1874 by two enterprising men from the Chautauqua Lakes area in western New York State. Within a few years, the Chautauqua Assembly had expanded to include lectures on literary, scientific, theological, and practical subjects and was attracting ever-larger audiences for one- or two-week "schools." In 1883, the New York State legislature granted the Assemblies a charter and gave them the name "The Chautauqua University."

So successful (and profitable) were the Chautauqua Assemblies that scores of towns and villages began establishing lecture series of their own–"Little Chautauquas"–throughout the Midwest. At the peak of this movement, a Chicago promoter organized traveling programs to tour rural areas across the United States–visiting more than 8,000 different communities within a single year.

LEFT: CHAUTAUQUA ASSEMBLY This Chautauqua meeting occurred in Clarinda, Iowa. It was one of hundreds of such meetings during the 1880s and 1890s that met the need of thousands of people across the country for knowledge and learning.
(The Library of Congress (LC-USZ62-24372A))
RIGHT: BRYAN AT CHAUTAUQUA William Jennings Bryan, the most famous orator of the early twentieth century, was a fixture at Chautauqua meetings, not only at the original Chautauqua in New York but also at the traveling and tented Chautauquas that spread across the country. Here he is shown speaking in Madison, Wisconsin.
(The Library of Congress (LC-USZC4-4646))

From 1904 through the mid-1920s, these "traveling Chautauquas" attracted enormous crowds and generated great excitement almost everywhere they went. On the day of a Chautauqua lecture, roads were sometimes clogged for miles in every direction with buggies and, later, automobiles transporting farm families dressed in their best clothes, carrying picnic baskets, straining excitedly to see the tents, posters, and crowds.

Chautauqua speakers were drawn from many walks of life, but they included some of the greatest figures of the age: William Jennings Bryan, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Booker T. Washington, Eugene V. Debs, and many others. The Chautauquas themselves also made some speakers rich and famous. The Philadelphia minister Russell Conwell, for example, made a great name (and a great fortune) with his famous "Acres of Diamonds" lectures, which he delivered thousands of times over the course of several decades, preaching a simple and attractive message: "Get rich … for money is power and power ought to be in the hands of good people." Conwell's sermon was characteristic of one kind of popular Chautauqua event–lectures that stressed self-improvement. Other such lectures stressed religion and health. The Chautauqua circuit was one of the best ways for a speaker to reach large numbers of people, which is one reason why so many progressive leaders and feminist reformers eagerly joined in. It was, for a time, one of the most powerful forms of communication in the nation.

The traveling Chautauquas declined during the 1920s and almost vanished in the 1930s–victims of radio, movies, and the automobile; the spread of public education to rural areas; and the reckless overexpansion of ambitious organizers. But the original Chautauqua Assembly in upstate New York survived, although in much-diminished form. It exists today as a resort that continues to offer lectures and other educational events to a large and dedicated - clientele.

UNDERSTAND, ANALYZE, AND EVALUATE

1. During a time when they faced so many economic problems, why would farmers have found the Chautauquas so appealing?
2. Why would so many prominent public figures have participated in the Chautauquas?
3. Can you think of any parallels today to the Chautauqua movement of the early twentieth century?

III. THE CRISIS OF THE 1890s

The agrarian protest was only one of many indications of the national political crisis emerging in the 1890s. There was a severe depression, widespread labor unrest and violence, and the continuing failure of either major party to respond to the growing distress. The rigid conservatism of Grover Cleveland, who took office for the second time just at the moment the economy collapsed, meant that the federal government did little to alleviate the crisis. Out of this growing sense of urgency came some of the most heated political battles in American history, culminating in the dramatic campaign of 1896, on which, many Americans came to believe, the future of the nation was hanging.

A. THE PANIC OF 1893

The Panic of 1893 precipitated the most severe depression the nation had yet experienced. It began in March 1893, when the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, unable to meet payments on loans, declared bankruptcy. Two months later, the National Cordage Company failed as well. Together, the two corporate failures triggered a collapse of the stock market. And since many of the major New York banks were heavy investors in the stock market, a wave of bank failures soon began. That caused a contraction of credit, which meant that many of the new, aggressive, and loan-dependent businesses soon went bankrupt.

OVEREXPANSION AND WEAK DEMAND

There were other, longer-range causes of the financial collapse. Depressed prices in agriculture since 1887 had weakened the purchasing power of farmers, the largest group in the population. Depression conditions in Europe caused a loss of American markets abroad and a withdrawal by foreign investors of gold invested in the United States. Railroads and other major industries had expanded too rapidly, well beyond market demand. The depression reflected the degree to which the American economy was now interconnected, the degree to which failures in one area affected all other areas. And the depression showed how dependent the economy was on the health of the railroads, which remained the nation's most powerful corporate and financial institutions. When the railroads suffered, as they did beginning in 1893, everything suffered. Once the panic began, its effects spread with startling speed. Within six months, more than 8,000 businesses, 156 railroads, and 400 banks failed. Already low agricultural prices tumbled further. Up to 1 million workers, 20 percent of the labor force, lost their jobs–the highest level of unemployment in American history to that point. The depression was unprecedented not only in its severity but also in its persistence. Although there was some improvement beginning in 1895, prosperity did not fully return until 1901.

"COXEY'S ARMY"

The suffering the depression caused naturally produced social unrest, especially among the enormous numbers of unemployed workers. In 1894, Jacob S. Coxey, an Ohio businessman and Populist, began advocating a massive public works program to create jobs for the unemployed and an inflation of the currency. When it became clear that his proposals were making no progress in Congress, Coxey announced that he would "send a petition to Washington with boots on"–a march of the unemployed to the capital to present their demands to the government. "Coxey's Army," as it was known, numbered only about 500 when it reached Washington, D.C., after having marched on foot from Masillon, Ohio. Armed police barred them from the Capitol and arrested Coxey. He and his followers were herded into camps because their presence supposedly endangered public health. Congress took no action on their demands. To many middle-class Americans, the labor turmoil of the time–the Homestead and Pullman strikes, for example, was a sign of a dangerous instability, even perhaps a revolution. Labor radicalism–some of it real, more of it imagined by the frightened middle class–heightened the general sense of crisis among the public.

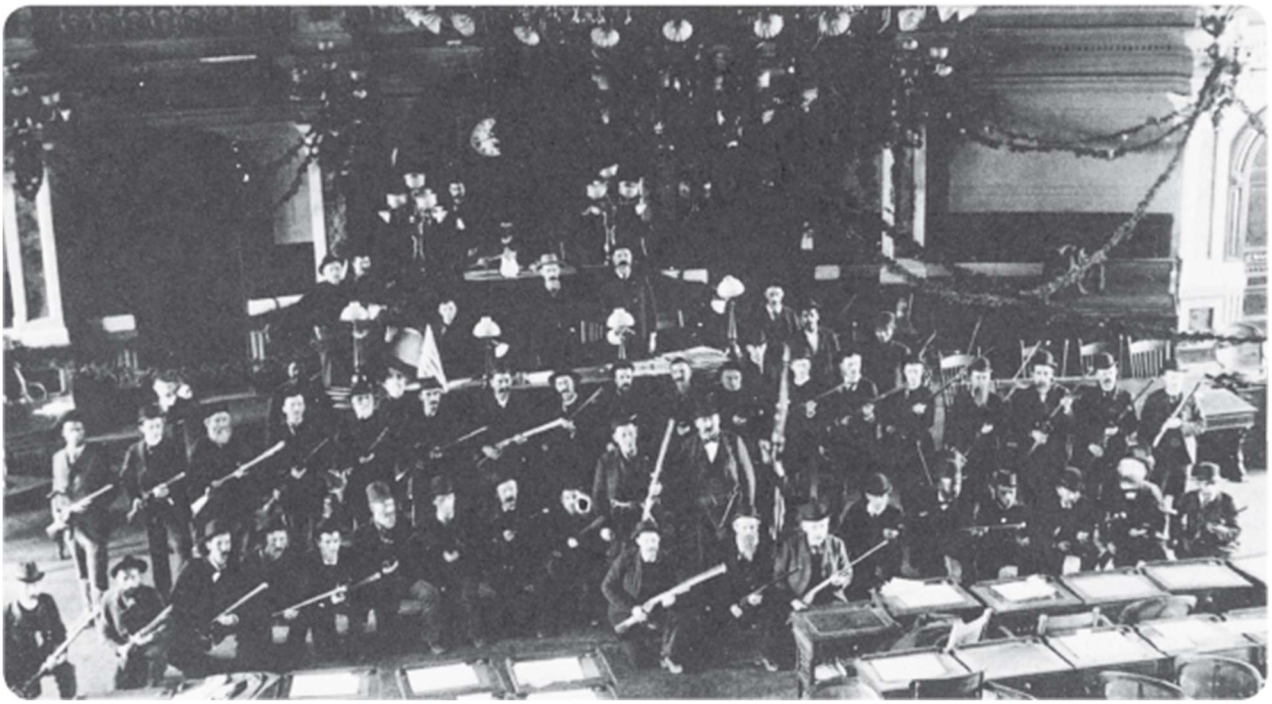
B. THE SILVER QUESTION

The financial panic weakened the government's monetary system. President Cleveland believed that the instability of the currency was the primary cause of the depression. The "money question," therefore, became the basis for some of the most dramatic political conflicts of the era. At the heart of the complicated debate was the question of what would form the basis of the dollar. Today, the value of the dollar rests on little more than public confidence in the government. But in the nineteenth century, many people believed that currency was worthless if there was not something concrete behind it–precious metal (specie), which holders of paper money could collect if they presented their currency to a bank or to the Treasury. During most of its existence as a nation, the United States had recognized two metals–gold and silver–as a basis for the dollar, a situation known as "bimetallism." In the 1870s, however, that had changed. The official ratio of the value of silver to the value of gold for purposes of creating currency (the "mint ratio") was 16 to 1: sixteen ounces of silver equaled one ounce of gold. But the actual commercial value of silver (the "market ratio") was much higher than that. Owners of silver could get more by selling it for manufacture into jewelry and other objects than they could by taking it to the mint for conversion to coins. So they stopped taking it to the mint, and the mint stopped coining silver. In 1873, Congress passed a law that seemed simply to recognize the existing situation by officially discontinuing silver coinage. Few people objected at the time. But in the course of the 1870s, the market value of silver fell well below the official mint ratio of 16 to 1. (Sixteen ounces of silver, in other words, were now worth less, not more, than one ounce of gold.) Silver became attractive for coinage again. In discontinuing silver coinage, Congress had eliminated a potential method of expanding the currency (and had eliminated a potential market for silver miners). Before long, many Americans concluded that a conspiracy of big bankers had been responsible for the "demonetization" of silver and referred to the law as the "Crime of '73."

"CRIME OF '73"

Two groups of Americans were especially determined to undo the "Crime of '73." One consisted of the silver-mine owners, now understandably eager to have the government take their surplus silver and pay them much more than the market price. The other group consisted of discontented farmers, who wanted an increase in the quantity of money–an inflation of the currency–as a means of raising the prices of farm products and easing payment of the farmers' debts. The inflationists demanded that the government return at once to "free silver"–that is, to the "free and unlimited coinage of silver" at the old ratio of 16 to 1. But by the time the depression began in 1893, Congress had made no more than a token response to their demands.

At the same time, the nation's gold reserves were steadily dropping. President Cleveland believed that the chief cause of the weakening gold reserves was the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890 (a sop to silver miners), which had required the government to purchase (but not to coin) silver and to pay for it in gold. Early in his second administration, therefore, a special session responded to Cleveland's request and repealed the Sherman Act–although only after a bitter and divisive battle that helped create a permanent split in the Democratic Party. The president's gold policy had aligned the southern and western Democrats in a solid alliance against him and his eastern followers.



TAKING ARMS AGAINST THE POPULISTS Kansas was a Populist stronghold in the 1890s, but the new party faced powerful challenges. In 1893, state Republicans disputed an election that the Populists believed had given them control of the legislature. When the Populists occupied the statehouse, Republicans armed themselves, drove out the Populists, and seized control of the state government. Republican members of the legislature pose here with their weapons in a photograph perhaps intended as a warning to any Populists inclined to challenge them.

SYMBOLIC IMPORTANCE OF THE CURRENCY QUESTION

By now, both sides had invested the currency question with great symbolic and emotional importance. Indeed, the issue aroused passions rarely seen in American politics, culminating in the tumultuous presidential election of 1896. Supporters of the gold standard considered its survival essential to the honor and stability of the nation. Supporters of free silver considered the gold standard an instrument of tyranny. "Free silver" became to them a symbol of liberation. Silver would be a "people's money," as opposed to gold, the money of oppression and exploitation. It would eliminate the indebtedness of farmers and of whole regions of the country. A graphic illustration of the popularity of the silver issue was the enormous success of William H. Harvey's *Coin's Financial School,* published in 1894, which became one of the great best-sellers of its age. The fictional Professor Coin ran an imaginary school specializing in finance, and the book consisted of his lectures and his dialogues with his students. The professor's brilliant discourses left even his most vehement opponents dazzled as he persuaded his listeners, with simple logic, of the almost miraculous restorative qualities of free silver: "It means the reopening of closed factories, the relighting of fires in darkened furnaces; it means hope instead of despair; comfort in place of suffering; life instead of death."

DEBATING THE PAST

POPULISM

THE scholarly debates over Populism have tended to reflect a larger debate among historians on populist politics. Some historians viewed the Populists with suspicion and hostility. Others have viewed Populism approvingly. To them, the Populists have appeared as essentially admirable, democratic activists.

This latter view shaped the first, and for many years the only, general history of Populism: John D. Hicks's *The Populist Revolt* (1931). Hicks described Populists as people reacting rationally and progressively to economic misfortune. They were proposing reforms that would limit the power of the new financial titans and restore a measure of control to the farmers. Populism was, he wrote, "the last phase of a long and perhaps a losing struggle–the struggle to save agricultural America from the devouring jaws of industrial America." A losing struggle, perhaps, but not a vain one; for many of the reforms the Populists advocated, Hicks implied, became the basis of later progressive legislation.

An alternative to this generally approving view of Populism appeared in the early 1950s when some scholars, recalling the European fascism of World War II and wary about contemporary communism, took a more hostile view of mass popular politics. A leading proponent of this harsh new view was Richard Hofstadter. In *The Age of Reform* (1955), Hofstadter conceded that Populism embraced some progressive ideas and advocated some sensible reforms, but he concentrated primarily on exposing both the "soft" and the "dark" sides of the movement. Populism was "soft," Hofstadter claimed, because it rested on a nostalgic and unrealistic myth, because it romanticized the nation's agrarian past and refused to confront the realities of modern life. It was "dark," he argued, because it was permeated with bigotry and ignorance. Populists, he claimed, revealed anti-Semitic tendencies, and they displayed animosity toward intellectuals, easterners, and urbanites as well.

Challenges to Hofstadter's thesis arose almost immediately. Norman Pollack argued in a 1962 study, *The Populist Response to Industrial America,* that the agrarian revolt had rested not on nostalgic, romantic concepts but, rather, on a sophisticated, farsighted, and even radical vision of reform–one that recognized the realities of an industrial economy, but that sought to make that economy more equitable and democratic by challenging many of the premises of capitalism. Walter T. K. Nugent, in *Tolerant Populists* (1963), argued that the Populists in Kansas were far from bigoted, that they not only tolerated but welcomed Jews and other minorities into their party, and that they offered a practical, sensible program. Lawrence Goodwyn, in *Democratic Promise* (1976), argued similarly that the Populists advocated an intelligent, and above all a democratic, alternative to the inequities of modern capitalism.

Historians were debating not only the question of what Populism meant. They were also arguing over who the Populists were. Hicks, Hofstadter, and Goodwyn disagreed on many things, but they shared a general view of the Populists as victims of economic distress–usually one-crop farmers in marginal agricultural regions victimized by drought and debt. Other scholars, however, suggested that the problem of identifying the Populists is more complex. Sheldon Hackney, in *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama* (1969), argued that the Populists were not only economically troubled but also socially rootless, "only tenuously connected to society by economic function, by personal relationships, by stable community membership, by political participation, or by psychological identification with the South's distinctive myths." Peter Argersinger, Stanley Parsons, James Turner, and others have similarly suggested that Populists were characterized by a form of social and even geographic isolation. Steven Hahn's 1983 study, *The Roots of Southern Populism,* identified poor white farmers in the "upcountry" as the core of Populist activity in Georgia; and Hahn argued that Populists were reacting not simply to the psychic distress of being "left behind," but also to a real economic threat to their way of life–to the encroachments of a new commercial order of which they had never been a part.

Another debate concerns the legacy of Populism. In *Roots of Reform* (1999), Elizabeth Sanders contends that Populism did not die as a movement after the 1896 election. On the contrary, she argues, the Populists succeeded in dominating much of the Democratic Party in the following decades and turning it into a vehicle for advancing the interests of farmers and the broader reform causes for which Populists had fought. Michael Kazin, in *The Populist Persuasion* (1994), argues that a Populist tradition has survived throughout much of American history, influencing movements as disparate as those led by Huey Long in the 1930s, the New Left and George Wallace in the 1960s, Ross Perot in the 1990s, and the Tea Party movement in the aftermath of the 2008 economic collapse. Other historians, however, maintain that the term *populism* has been used (and misused) so widely as to have become virtually meaningless, that it really applies only to the agrarian insurgents of the 1890s.

UNDERSTAND, ANALYZE, AND EVALUATE

1. What have been historians' principal interpretations of Populism?
2. Why has the issue of Populism generated such debate among historians?
3. Where can you find evidence of the Populist legacy in politics today?

IV. “A CROSS OF GOLD”

Most Populists did not pay much attention to the silver issue at first. But as the party developed strength, the money question became more important to its leaders. The Populists desperately needed funds to finance their campaigns. Silver-mine owners were willing to provide assistance but insisted on an elevation of the currency plank. The Populists also needed to form alliances with other political groups. The “money question” seemed a way to win the support of many people not engaged in farming but nevertheless starved for currency.

A. THE EMERGENCE OF BRYAN

WILLIAM MCKINLEY

As the election of 1896 approached, Republicans, watching the failure of the Democrats to deal effectively with the depression, were confident of success. Party leaders, led by the Ohio boss Marcus A. Hanna, settled on Governor William McKinley of Ohio, who had as a member of Congress authored the 1890 tariff act, as the party's presidential candidate. The Republican platform opposed the free coinage of silver except by agreement with the leading commercial nations (which everyone realized was unlikely). Thirty-four delegates from the mountain and plains states walked out of the convention in protest and joined the Democratic Party.

The Democratic National Convention of 1896 was the scene of unusual drama. Southern and western delegates, eager to neutralize the challenge of the People's Party, were determined to seize control of the party from conservative easterners and incorporate some Populist demands–among them free silver–into the Democratic platform. They wanted as well to nominate a pro-silver presidential candidate.

“CROSS OF GOLD” SPEECH

Defenders of the gold standard seemed to dominate the debate, until the final speech. Then William Jennings Bryan, a handsome, thirty-six-year-old congressman from Nebraska already well known as an effective orator, mounted the podium to address the convention. His great voice echoed through the hall as he defended “free silver” in what became one of the most famous political speeches in American history. The closing passage sent his audience into something close to a frenzy: “Having behind us the producing masses of this nation and the world, supported by the commercial interests, the laboring interests and the toilers everywhere, we will answer their demand for a gold standard by saying to them: ‘You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.’” It became known as the “Cross of Gold” speech.

In the aftermath of Bryan's powerful speech, the convention voted to adopt a pro-silver platform. And the following day, Bryan (as he had eagerly and not entirely secretly hoped) was nominated for president on the fifth ballot. He was, and remains, the youngest person ever nominated for president by a major party. Republican and conservative Democrats attacked Bryan as a dangerous demagogue. But his many admirers hailed him as the Great Commoner. He was a potent symbol of rural, Protestant, middle-class America.

“FUSION”

The choice of Bryan and the nature of the Democratic platform created a quandary for the Populists. They had expected both major parties to adopt conservative programs and nominate conservative candidates, leaving the Populists to represent the growing forces of protest. But now the Democrats had stolen much of their thunder. The Populists faced the choice of naming their own candidate and splitting the protest vote or endorsing Bryan and losing their identity as a party. By now, the Populists had embraced the free-silver cause, but most Populists still believed that other issues were more important. Many argued that “fusion” with the Democrats–who had endorsed free silver but ignored most of the other Populist demands–would destroy their party. But the majority concluded that there was no viable alternative. Amid considerable acrimony, the convention voted to support Bryan.

B. THE CONSERVATIVE VICTORY

The campaign of 1896 produced desperation among conservatives. The business and financial community, frightened beyond reason at the prospect of a Bryan victory, contributed lavishly to the Republican campaign, which may have spent as much as $7 million, as compared to the Democrats' $300,000. From his home at Canton, Ohio, McKinley hewed to the tradition by which candidates for president did not actively campaign for the office. He conducted a dignified “front-porch” campaign by receiving pilgrimages of the Republican faithful, organized and paid for by Hanna.

BIRTH OF MODERN CAMPAIGNING

Bryan showed no such restraint. He became the first presidential candidate in American history to stump every section of the country systematically, to appear in villages and hamlets, indeed the first to say frankly to the voters that he wanted to be president. He traveled 18,000 miles and addressed an estimated 5 million people. But Bryan may have done himself more harm than good. By violating a long-standing tradition of presidential candidates' remaining aloof from their own campaigns (the tradition by which they “stood” for office rather than “running” for it), Bryan helped establish the modern form of presidential politics. But he also antagonized many voters, who considered his campaign undignified.

On election day, McKinley polled 271 electoral votes to Bryan's 176 and received 51.1 percent of the popular vote to Bryan's 47.7. Bryan carried the areas of the South and West where miners or struggling staple farmers predominated. The Democratic program, like that of the Populists, had been too narrow to win a national election.

END OF THE PEOPLE'S PARTY

For the Populists and their allies, the election results were a disaster. They had gambled everything on their “fusion” with the Democratic Party and lost. Within months of the election, the People's Party began to dissolve. Never again would American farmers unite so militantly to demand economic reform.

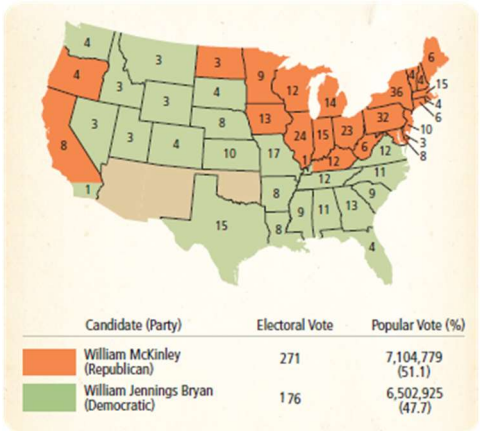
BRYAN WHISTLE-STOPPING
By long-established tradition, candidates for the presidency did not actively campaign after receiving their party's nomination. Nineteenth-century Americans considered public “stumping” to be undignified and inappropriate for a future president. But in 1896, William Jennings Bryan–a young candidate little known outside his own region, a man without broad support even among the leaders of his own party–decided that he had no choice but to go directly to the public for support. He traveled widely and incessantly in the months before the election, appearing before hundreds of crowds and hundreds of thousands of people.
(The Library of Congress (LC-USZC2-6259))

C. MCKINLEY AND RECOVERY

The administration of William McKinley, which began in the aftermath of turmoil, saw a return to relative calm. One reason was the exhaustion of dissent. By 1897, when McKinley took office, the labor unrest that had so frightened many middle-class Americans and so excited working-class people had subsided. With the simultaneous decline of agrarian protest, the greatest destabilizing forces in the nation's politics were–temporarily at least–in retreat. Another reason was the shrewd character of the McKinley administration itself, committed as it was to reassuring stability. Most important, however, was the gradual easing of the economic crisis, a development that undercut many of those who were agitating for change.

CURRENCY ACT

McKinley and his allies committed themselves fully to only one issue, one on which they knew virtually all Republicans agreed: the need for higher tariff rates. Within weeks of his inauguration, the administration won approval of the Dingley Tariff, raising duties to the highest point in American history. The administration dealt more gingerly with the explosive silver question (an issue that McKinley himself had never considered very important in any case). McKinley sent a commission to Europe to explore the possibility of a silver agreement with Great Britain and France. As he and everyone else anticipated, the effort produced no agreement. The Republicans then enacted the Currency, or Gold Standard, Act of 1900, which confirmed the nation's commitment to the gold standard by assigning a specific gold value to the dollar and requiring all currency issued by the United States to hew to that value.



ELECTION OF 1896
The results of the presidential election of 1896 are, as this map shows, striking for the regional differentiation they reveal. William McKinley won the election by a comfortable but not enormous margin, but his victory was not broad-based. He carried all the states of the Northeast and the industrial Midwest, along with California and Oregon, but virtually nothing else. Bryan carried the entire South and almost all of the agrarian West.

- ***What campaign issues in 1896 help account for the regional character of the results?***

And so the “battle of the standards” ended in victory for the forces of conservatism. Economic developments at the time seemed to vindicate the Republicans. Prosperity began to return in 1898. Foreign crop failures sent farm prices surging upward, and American business entered another cycle of expansion. Prosperity and the gold standard, it seemed, were closely allied.

But while the free-silver movement had failed, it had raised an important question for the American economy. In the -quarter-century before 1900, the countries of the Western world had experienced a spectacular growth in productive -facilities and population. Yet the supply of money had not kept pace with economic progress, because the supply was tied to gold and the amount of gold had remained practically constant. Had it not been for a dramatic increase in the gold supply in the late 1890s (a result of new techniques for extracting gold from low-content ores and the discovery of huge new gold deposits in Alaska, South Africa, and Australia), Populist predictions of financial disaster might in fact have proved correct. In 1898, two and a half times as much gold was produced as in 1890, and the currency supply was soon inflated far beyond anything Bryan and the free-silver forces had anticipated.

By then, however, Bryan–like many other Americans–was becoming engaged with another major issue: a growing United States presence in world affairs and the possibility of America becoming an imperialist nation.

V. STIRRINGS OF IMPERIALISM

For over two decades after the Civil War, the United States expanded hardly at all. By the 1890s, however, some Americans were ready–indeed, eager–to resume the course of Manifest Destiny that had inspired their ancestors to wrest an empire from Mexico in the expansionist 1840s.

IMPERIALISM AT HIGH TIDE: 1900 The United States became a formal imperial power in 1898, when it acquired colonies in the aftermath of the Spanish American War. But the U.S. was a decided latecomer to imperialism. During the nineteenth century, European nations dramatically expanded the reach of their empires, moving in particular into Africa and Asia. Although the British remained the world's largest imperial power by a significant margin, vast areas of the globe came under the control of other European colonizers, as this map shows.

How did the United States and the European imperial nations justify their acquisition of empire?

A. THE NEW MANIFEST DESTINY

Several developments helped shift American attention to lands across the seas. The experience of subjugating the Indian tribes had established a precedent for exerting colonial control over dependent peoples. The concept of the "closing of the frontier," widely heralded by Frederick Jackson Turner and many others in the 1890s, produced fears that natural resources would soon dwindle and that alternative sources must be found abroad. The depression of the 1890s encouraged some businessmen to look overseas for new markets. The bitter social protests of the time–the Populist movement, the free-silver crusade, the bloody labor disputes–led some politicians to urge a more aggressive foreign policy as an outlet for frustrations that would otherwise destabilize domestic life.

INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF TRADE

Foreign trade became increasingly important to the American economy in the late nineteenth century. The nation's exports had totaled about $392 million in 1870; by 1890, the figure was $857 million; and by 1900, $1.4 billion. Many Americans began to consider the possibility of acquiring colonies that might expand such markets further. Americans were well aware of the imperialist fever that was raging through Europe and leading the major powers to partition most of Africa among themselves and to turn eager eyes on the Far East and the feeble Chinese Empire. Some Americans feared that their nation would soon be left out, that no territory would remain to be acquired. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, a leading imperialist, warned that the United States "must not fall out of the line of march." The same distortion of Darwinism that industrialists and others had long been applying to domestic economic affairs in the form of Social Darwinism was now applied to world affairs. Many writers and public figures contended that nations or "races," like biological species, struggled constantly for existence and that only the fittest could survive. For strong nations to dominate weak ones was, therefore, in accordance with the laws of nature. The popular writer John Fiske predicted in an 1885 article in *Harper's Magazine* that the English-speaking peoples would eventually control every land that was not already the seat of an "established civilization." The experience of white Americans in subjugating the native population of their own continent, Fiske argued, was "destined to go on" in other parts of the world.

INTELLECTUAL JUSTIFICATIONS FOR IMPERIALISM

John W. Burgess, founder of Columbia University's School of Political Science, gave a stamp of scholarly approval to imperialism. In his 1890 study: *Political Science and Comparative Law,* he flatly stated that the Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic nations possessed the highest political talents. It was their duty, therefore, to uplift less fortunate peoples, even to force superior institutions on them if necessary. “There is,” he wrote, “no human right to the status of barbarism.”

ALFRED THAYER MAHAN

The ablest and most effective apostle of imperialism was Alfred Thayer Mahan, a captain and later admiral in the U.S. Navy. Mahan's thesis, presented in *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890) and other works, was simple: countries with sea power were the great nations of history; the greatness of the United States, bounded by two oceans, would rest on its naval strength. The prerequisites for sea power were a productive domestic economy, foreign commerce, a strong merchant marine, a navy to defend trade routes–and colonies, which would provide raw materials and markets and could serve as naval bases. Mahan advocated that the United States construct a canal across the isthmus of Central America to join the oceans, acquire defensive bases on both sides of the canal in the Caribbean and the Pacific, and take possession of Hawaii and other Pacific islands.
Mahan feared the United States did not have a large enough navy to play the great role he envisioned. But during the 1870s and 1880s, the government launched a shipbuilding program that by 1898 had moved the United States to fifth place among the world's naval powers, and by 1900 to third.

B. HEMISPHERIC HEGEMONY

James G. Blaine, who served as secretary of state in two Republican administrations in the 1880s, led early efforts to expand American influence into Latin America, where, he believed, the United States must look for markets for its surplus goods. In October 1889, Blaine helped organize the first Pan-American Congress, which attracted delegates from nineteen nations. The delegates agreed to create the Pan-American Union, a weak international organization located in Washington, D.C., that served as a clearinghouse of information to the member nations. But they rejected Blaine's more substantive proposals: for an inter-American customs union and arbitration procedures for hemispheric disputes.

HAWAIIAN SUGARCANE PLANTATION

The sugarcane plantations of nineteenth-century Hawaii (like the sugar plantations of Barbados in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) required a vast labor force that the island's native population could not provide. The mostly American owners of the plantations imported more than 300,000 Asian workers from China, Japan, and Korea to work in the fields between 1850 and 1920. The work was arduous, as the words of a song by Japanese sugar workers suggests: “Hawaii, Hawaii, But when I came what I saw was Hell. The boss was Satan, The lunas [overseers] his helpers.””

VENEZUELAN DISPUTE

The Cleveland administration took a similarly active interest in Latin America. In 1895, it supported Venezuela in a dispute with Great Britain. When the British ignored American demands that the matter be submitted to arbitration, Secretary of State Richard Olney charged that Britain was violating the Monroe Doctrine. Cleveland then created a special commission to settle the dispute: if Britain resisted the commission's decision, he insisted, the United States should be willing to go to war to enforce it. As war talk raged throughout the country, the British government prudently agreed to arbitration.

C. HAWAII AND SAMOA

The islands of Hawaii in the mid-Pacific had been an important way station for American ships in the China trade since the early nineteenth century. By the 1880s, officers of the expanding American navy were looking covetously at Pearl Harbor on the island of Oahu as a possible permanent base for U.S. ships. Pressure for an increased American presence in Hawaii was emerging from another source as well: the growing number of Americans who had settled on the islands and who had gradually come to dominate their economic and political life.

SELF-SUFFICIENT SOCIETIES

In doing so, the Americans had been wresting authority away from the leaders of an ancient civilization. Settled by Polynesian people beginning in about 1500 BCE, Hawaii had developed an agricultural and fishing society in which different islands (and different communities on the same islands), each with its own chieftain, lived more or less self-sufficiently. When the first Americans arrived in Hawaii in the 1790s on merchant ships from New England, there were perhaps a half-million people living there. Battles among rival communities were frequent, as ambitious chieftains tried to consolidate power over their neighbors. In 1810, after a series of such battles, King Kamehameha I established his dominance, welcomed American traders, and helped them develop a thriving trade between Hawaii and China, from which the natives profited along with the merchants. But Americans soon wanted more than trade. Missionaries began settling there in the early nineteenth century; and in the 1830s, William Hooper, a Boston trader, became the first of many Americans to buy land and establish a sugar plantation on the islands.

The arrival of these merchants, missionaries, and planters was devastating to traditional Hawaiian society. The newcomers inadvertently brought infectious diseases to which the Hawaiians, like the American Indians before them, were tragically vulnerable. By the mid-nineteenth century, more than half the native population had died. By 1900, disease had more than halved the population again. But the Americans brought other incursions as well. Missionaries worked to undermine native religion. Other white settlers introduced liquor, firearms, and a commercial economy, all of which eroded the traditional character of Hawaiian society. By the 1840s, American planters had spread throughout the islands; and an American settler, G. P. Judd, had become prime minister of Hawaii under King Kamehameha III, who had agreed to establish a constitutional monarchy. Judd governed Hawaii for over a decade.

In 1887, the United States negotiated a treaty with Hawaii that permitted it to open a naval base at Pearl Harbor. By then, growing sugar for export to America had become the basis of the Hawaiian economy–as a result of an 1875 agreement allowing Hawaiian sugar to enter the United States duty-free. The American-dominated sugar plantation system not only displaced native Hawaiians from their lands but also sought to build a workforce with Asian immigrants, whom the Americans considered more reliable and more docile than the natives. Indeed, finding adequate labor and keeping it under control were the principal concerns of many planters. Some planters deliberately sought to create a mixed-race workforce (Chinese, Japanese, native Hawaiians, Filipinos, Portuguese, and others) as a way to keep the workers divided and unlikely to challenge them.

QUEEN LILIUOKALANI

Native Hawaiians did not accept their subordination without protest. In 1891, they elevated a powerful nationalist to the throne: Queen Liliuokalani, who set out to challenge the growing American control of the islands. But she remained in power only two years. By 1890, the United States had eliminated the privileged position of Hawaiian sugar in international trade. The result was devastating to the economy of the islands, and American planters concluded that the only way for them to recover was to become part of the United States (and hence exempt from its tariffs). In 1893, they staged a revolution and called on the United States for protection. After the American minister ordered marines from a warship in Honolulu harbor to go ashore to aid the rebels, the queen yielded her authority.

A provisional government, dominated by Americans (who constituted less than 5 percent of the population of the -islands), immediately sent a delegation to Washington to negotiate a treaty of annexation. But debate continued until 1898, when the Republicans returned to power and approved the agreement.

ACQUISITION OF SAMOA

Three thousand miles south of Hawaii, the Samoan islands had also long served as a way station for American ships in the Pacific trade. As American commerce with Asia increased, business groups in the United States and the American navy began urging the government to annex the Samoan harbor at Pago Pago. In 1878, the Hayes administration extracted a treaty from Samoan leaders for an American naval station there.

But Great Britain and Germany were also interested in the islands, and they too secured treaty rights from the native princes. For the next ten years the three powers jockeyed for dominance in Samoa, occasionally coming dangerously close to war. Finally, the three nations agreed to share power over Samoa. The three-way arrangement failed to halt the rivalries of its members; and in 1899, the United States and Germany divided the islands between them, compensating Britain with territories elsewhere in the Pacific. The United States retained the harbor at Pago Pago.

IMPERIALISM

EMPIRES were not, of course, new to the nineteenth century, when the United States acquired its first overseas colonies. They have existed since the early moments of recorded history–in ancient Greece, Rome, China, and many other parts of the world. But in the mid- and late nineteenth century, the construction of empires took on a new and different form from those of earlier eras, and the word “imperialism” emerged for the first time to describe it. European powers now created colonies not by sending large numbers of migrants to settle and populate new lands but, instead, by creating military, political, and business structures that allowed them to dominate and profit from the existing populations. This new imperialism changed the character of the imperial nations themselves, enriching them greatly and producing new classes of people whose lives were shaped by the demands of imperial business and administration. It changed the character of colonized societies even more, by drawing them into the vast nexus of global industrial capitalism and by introducing European customs, institutions, and technologies to the subject peoples.

THE BRITISH RAJ
The Drum Corps of the Royal Fusiliers in India poses here for a formal portrait, taken in 1877. Although the drummers are British, an Indian associate is included at top left. This blending of the dominant British with subordinate Indians was characteristic of the administration of the British Empire in India–a government known as the “raj,” from the Indian word for “rule.”

Champions of the new imperialism argued that the acquisition of colonies was essential for the health, even the survival, of their own industrializing nations. Colonies were sources of raw materials vital to industrial production, they were markets for manufactured goods, and they could be suppliers of cheap labor. Defenders of the idea of empire argued as well that imperialism was good for the colonized people too. Many saw colonization as an opportunity to export Christianity to “heathen” lands, while secular apologists argued that imperialism helped bring colonized people into the modern world. The British poet Rudyard Kipling was perhaps the most famous spokesman for empire. In his celebrated poem “The White Man's Burden,” he spoke of the duty of the colonizers to lift up primitive peoples, to “fill full the mouth of famine and bid the sickness cease.”

The greatest imperial power of the nineteenth century, indeed one of the greatest imperial powers in all of human history, was Great Britain. By 1800, despite its recent loss of the colonies that became the United States, it already possessed vast territory in North America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific–most notably Canada and Australia. But in the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain greatly expanded its empire. Its most important acquisition was India. In 1857, when native Indians revolted against British authority, British forces brutally crushed the rebellion and established formal colonial control over the land. British officials, backed by substantial military power, now governed India through a large civil service staffed mostly by people from England and Scotland, but with some Indians serving in minor or symbolic positions. The British invested heavily in railroads, telegraphs, canals, harbors, and agricultural improvements to enhance the economic opportunities available to them. They created schools for Indian children in an effort to draw them into British culture and make them supporters of the imperial system.

Britain also extended its empire into Africa and other parts of Asia. Cecil Rhodes expanded a small existing British colony at Cape Town into a substantial colony that included what is now South Africa. In 1895, he added new territories to the north, which he named Rhodesia (today, Zimbabwe and Zambia). Other imperialists spread British authority into Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, and much of Egypt. With the acquisition of Singapore, Hong Kong, Burma, and Malaya, Britain extended its empire into east Asia.

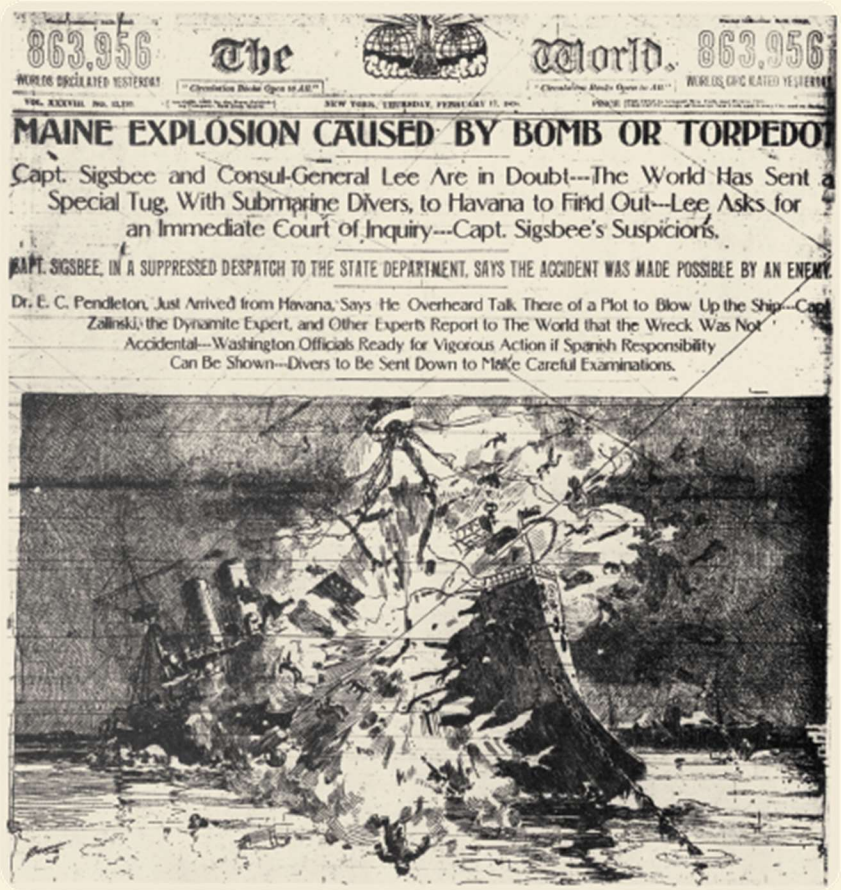
Other European states, watching the vast expansion of the British Empire, quickly jumped into the race for colonies. France created colonies in Indochina (Vietnam and Laos), Algeria, west Africa, and Madagascar. Belgium moved into the Congo in west Africa. Germany established colonies in the Cameroons, Tanganyika, and other parts of Africa, and in the Pacific islands north of Australia. Dutch, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian, and Japanese imperialists created colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific–driven both by their own commercial interests and by the frenzied competition that had developed among rival imperial powers. In 1898, the United States was drawn into the imperial race as an unanticipated result of the Spanish-American War. But Americans also sought colonies, although only a few, as a result of the efforts of pro-imperialists (among them Theodore Roosevelt), who believed that in the modern industrial-imperial world a nation without colonies would have difficulty remaining, or becoming, a true great power.

UNDERSTAND, ANALYZE, AND EVALUATE

1. What motivated the European nations' drive for empire in the late nineteenth century?
2. Why was Great Britain so successful in acquiring its vast empire?
3. How do the imperial efforts and ambitions of the United States at the end of the nineteenth century compare with those of the European powers that were also acquiring empires at this time?

YELLOW JOURNALISM

JOSEPH Pulitzer was a successful newspaper publisher in St. Louis, Missouri, when he traveled to New York City in 1883 to buy a struggling paper, the *New York World*. “There is room in this great and growing city,” he wrote in one of his first editorials, “for a journal that is not only cheap, but bright, not only bright but large, not only large but truly democratic … that will serve and battle for the people with earnest sincerity.” Within a year, the *World's* daily circulation had soared from 10,000 to over 60,000. By 1886, it had reached 250,000 and was making enormous profits.



863,956 The World. 863,956

MAINE EXPLOSION CAUSED BY BOMB OR TORPEDO?

Capt. Sigsbee and Consul-General Lee Are in Doubt---The World Has Sent a Special Tug, With Submarine Divers, to Havana to Find Out---Lee Asks for an Immediate Court of Inquiry---Capt. Sigsbee's Suspicions.

CAPT. SIGSBEE, IN A SUPPRESSED DESPATCH TO THE STATE DEPARTMENT, SAYS THE ACCIDENT WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY AN ENEMY.

Dr. E. C. Pendleton, Just Arrived from Havana, Says He Overheard Talk There of a Plot to Blow Up the Ship---Capt. Zalinski, the Dynamite Expert, and Other Experts Report to The World that the Wreck Was Not Accidental---Washington Officials Ready for Vigorous Action if Spanish Responsibility Can Be Shown---Divers to Be Sent Down to Make Careful Examinations.

THE YELLOW PRESS AND THE WRECK OF THE *MAINE* **No evidence was ever found tying the Spanish to the explosion in Havana harbor that destroyed the American battleship *Maine* in February 1898. Indeed, most evidence indicated that the blast came from inside the ship, a fact that suggests an accident rather than sabotage. Nevertheless, the newspapers of Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst ran sensational stories about the incident that were designed to arouse public sentiment in support of a war against the Spanish. This front page from Pulitzer's *New York World* is an example of the lurid coverage the event received. Circulation figures at the top right of the page indicate, too, how successful the coverage was in selling newspapers.**

The success of Pulitzer's *World* marked the birth of what came to be known as “yellow journalism,” a phrase that reportedly derived from a character in one of the *World*'s comic strips: “the Yellow Kid.” Color printing in newspapers was relatively new, and yellow was the most difficult color to print; so in the beginning, the term “yellow journalism” was a comment on the new technological possibilities that Pulitzer was so eagerly embracing. Eventually, however, it came to refer to a sensationalist style of reporting and writing that spread quickly through urban America and changed the character of newspapers forever.

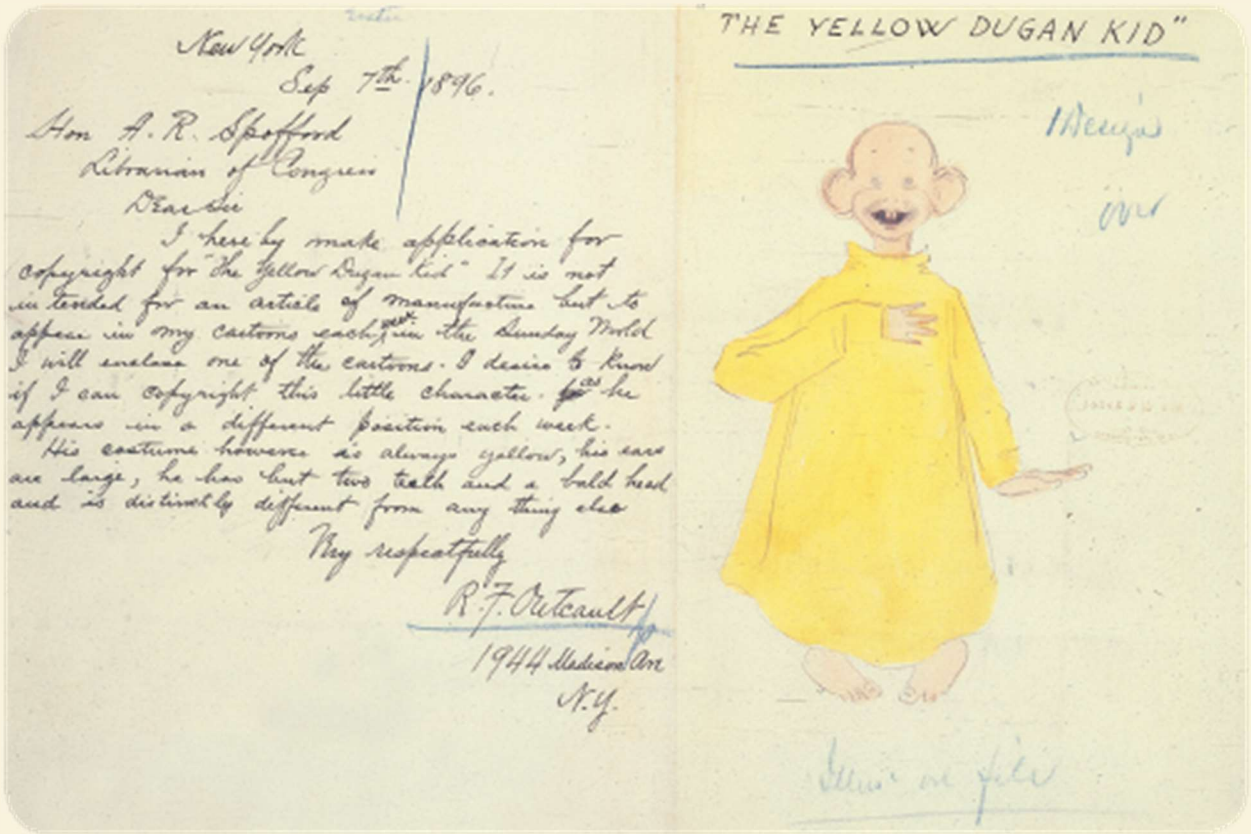
Sensationalism was not new to journalism in the late nineteenth century, of course. Political scandal sheets had been publishing lurid stories since before the American Revolution. But the yellow journalism of the 1880s and 1890s took the search for a mass audience to new levels. The *World* created one of the first Sunday editions, with lavishly colored special sections, comics, and illustrated features. It expanded coverage of sports, fashion, literature, and theater. It pioneered large, glaring, overheated headlines that captured the eyes of people who were passing newsstands. It published exposés of political corruption. It made considerable efforts to bring drama and energy to its coverage of crime. It tried to involve readers directly in its stories (as when a *World* campaign helped raise $300,000 to build a base for the Statue of Liberty, with much of the money coming in donations of five or ten cents from working-class readers). And it introduced a self-consciously populist style of writing that appealed to working-class readers. “The American people want something terse, forcible, picturesque, striking,” Pulitzer said. His reporters

wrote short, forceful sentences. They did not shy away from expressing sympathy or outrage. And they were not always constrained by the truth.

Pulitzer very quickly produced imitators, the most important of them the California publisher William Randolph Hearst, who in 1895 bought the *New York Journal,* cut its price to one cent (Pulitzer quickly followed suit), copied many of the *World's* techniques, and within a year raised its circulation to 400,000. Hearst soon made the *Journal* the largest-circulation paper in the country–selling more than a million copies a day. Pulitzer, whose own circulation was not far behind, accused him of "pandering to the worst tastes of the prurient and the horror-loving" and "dealing in bogus news." But the *World* wasted no time before imitating the *Journal.* The competition between these two great "yellow" journals soon drove both to new levels of sensationalism. Their success drove newspapers in other cities around the nation to copy their techniques.

The civil war in Cuba in the 1890s gave both papers their best opportunities yet for combining sensational reporting with shameless appeals to patriotism and moral outrage. They avidly published exaggerated reports of Spanish atrocities toward the Cuban rebels, fanning popular anger toward Spain. When the American battleship *Maine* mysteriously exploded in Havana harbor in 1898, both papers (without any evidence) immediately blamed Spanish authorities. The *Journal* offered a $50,000 reward for information leading to the conviction of those responsible for the explosion, and it crowded all other stories off its front page ("There is no other news," Hearst told his editors) to make room for such screaming headlines as THE WHOLE COUNTRY THRILLS WITH WAR FEVER and HAVANA POPULACE INSULTS THE MEMORY OF THE *MAINE* VICTIMS. In the three days following the *Maine* explosion, the *Journal* sold more than 3 million copies, a new world's record for newspaper circulation.

In the aftermath of the *Maine* episode, the more conservative press launched a spirited attack on yellow journalism. That was partly in response to Hearst's boast that the conflict in Cuba was "the *Journal*'s war." He sent a cable to one of his reporters in Cuba saying: "You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war." Growing numbers of critics tried to discourage yellow journalism, which "respectable" editors both deplored and feared. Some schools, libraries, and clubs began to banish the papers from their premises. But the techniques the "yellow" press pioneered in the 1890s helped map the way for a tradition of colorful, popular journalism–later embodied in "tabloids," some elements of which eventually found their way into television news–that has endured into the present day.



"THE YELLOW DUGAN KID" ***Hogan's Alley,*** **one of the most popular cartoons of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, debuted in the *New York World* in 1895. Perhaps its best-known character was Mickey Dugan, the goofy-looking creation of cartoonist Richard Outcault, known as "the Yellow Kid," whose nickname very likely was the source of the term "yellow journalism." *Hogan's Alley* was the forerunner of modern serial cartoons–not least because it was one of the first newspaper features to make elaborate use of color. (The drawing above accompanied Outcault's letter requesting copyright registration for the character of what he called "the yellow Dugan kid.")**
(The Library of Congress)

UNDERSTAND, ANALYZE, AND EVALUATE

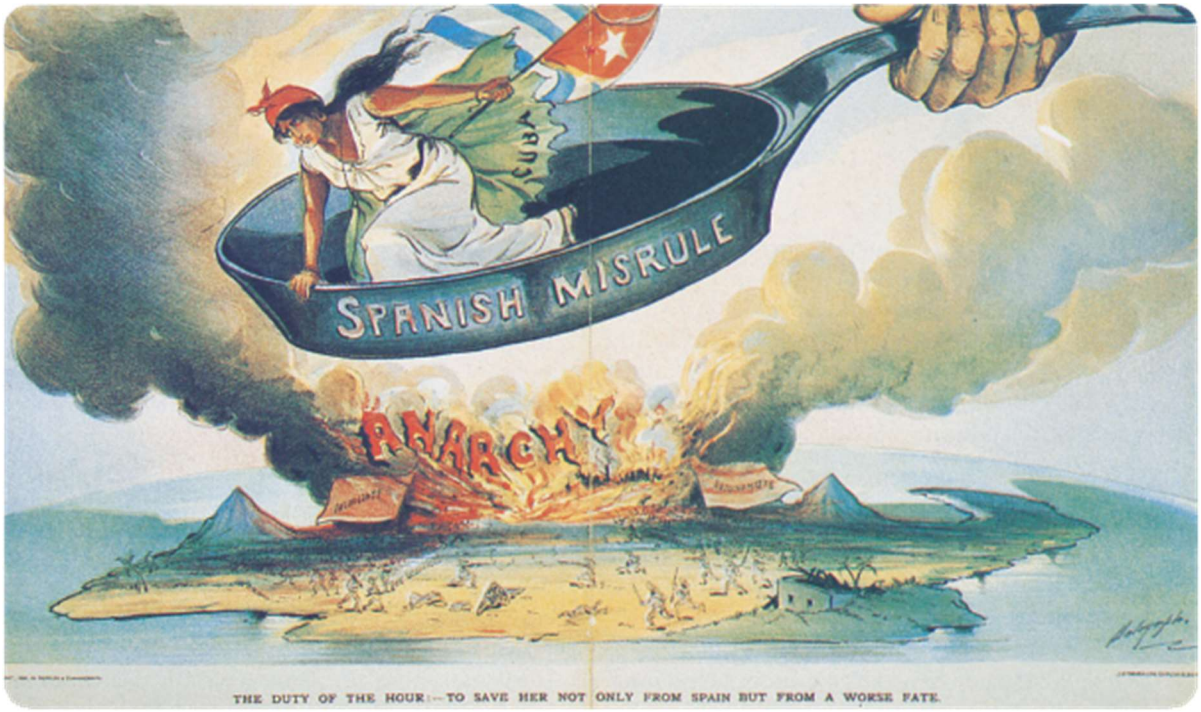
1. Did Pulitzer's *World,* Hearst's *Journal,* and their imitators report the news or manufacture it?
2. How did the "yellow" press influence the public's perception of the Spanish-American War?
3. How does television news continue the tradition of "yellow" journalism? In what other mass media do you see the style and techniques pioneered by the "yellow" press?

VI. WAR WITH SPAIN

Imperial ambitions had thus begun to stir within the United States well before the late 1890s. But a war with Spain in 1898 turned those stirrings into overt expansionism. The war transformed America's relationship to the rest of the world and left the nation with a far-flung overseas empire.

A. CONTROVERSY OVER CUBA

The Spanish-American War was a result of events in Cuba, which along with Puerto Rico now represented all that remained of Spain's once extensive American empire. Cubans had been resisting Spanish rule since at least 1868. Many Americans had sympathized with the Cubans during that long struggle, but the United States had not intervened.



"THE DUTY OF THE HOUR" This 1892 lithograph was no doubt inspired by the saying "Out of the frying pan and into the fire." A despairing Cuba, struggling to escape from the frying pan of Spanish misrule, contemplates an even more dangerous alternative: "anarchy" (or home rule). Cartoonist Louis Dalrymple here suggests that the only real solution to Cuba's problems is control by the United States, whose "duty" to Cuba is "To Save Her Not Only from Spain but from a Worse Fate."

CUBAN REVOLT

In 1895, the Cubans rebelled again. This revolution produced a ferocity on both sides that horrified many Americans. The Cubans deliberately devastated the island to force the Spaniards to leave. The Spanish, commanded by General Valeriano Weyler, confined civilians in some areas to hastily prepared concentration camps, where they died by the thousands, victims of disease and malnutrition. The American press took to calling the general "Butcher Weyler." The Spanish had used some of these same savage methods during earlier struggles in Cuba without shocking American sensibilities. But the revolt of 1895 was reported more fully and sensationally by the American press, which helped create the impression that the Spaniards were committing all the atrocities, when in fact there was considerable brutality on both sides.

The conflict in Cuba came at a particularly opportune moment for the publishers of some American newspapers, Joseph Pulitzer with his *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst with his *New York Journal.* (See "Patterns of Popular Culture," pp. 536–537.) In the 1890s, Hearst and Pulitzer were engaged in a ruthless circulation war, and they both sent batteries of reporters and illustrators to the island with orders to provide accounts of Spanish atrocities. A growing population of Cuban émigrés in the United States–centered in Florida, New York City, Philadelphia, and Trenton, New Jersey–gave extensive support to the Cuban Revolutionary Party (whose headquarters were in New York City) and helped publicize the Cuban cause as effectively as those of the yellow journalists in generating American support for the revolution.

The mounting storm of indignation against Spain did not persuade President Cleveland to support intervention. But when McKinley became president in 1897, he formally protested Spain's "uncivilized and inhuman" conduct, causing the Spanish government (fearful of American intervention) to recall Weyler, modify the concentration policy, and grant the island a qualified autonomy.

But whatever chances there were for a peaceful settlement vanished as a result of two dramatic incidents in February 1898. The first occurred when a Cuban agent stole a private letter written by Dupuy de Lôme, the Spanish minister in

Washington, and turned it over to the American press. The letter described McKinley as a weak man and “a bidder for the admiration of the crowd.” This was no more than many Americans, including some Republicans, were saying about their president. (Theodore Roosevelt described McKinley as having “no more backbone than a chocolate eclair.”) But coming from a foreigner, it created intense popular anger. Dupuy de Lôme promptly resigned.

THE MAINE

While excitement over the de Lôme letter was still high, the American battleship *Maine* blew up in Havana harbor with a loss of more than 260 people. The ship had been ordered to Cuba in January to protect American lives and property. Many Americans assumed that the Spanish had sunk the ship, particularly when a naval court of inquiry hastily and inaccurately reported that an external explosion by a submarine mine had caused the disaster. (Later evidence suggested that the disaster was actually the result of an accidental explosion inside one of the engine rooms.) War hysteria swept the country, and Congress unanimously appropriated $50 million for military preparations. “Remember the *Maine*!” became a national chant for revenge.

McKinley still hoped to avoid a conflict. But others in his administration (including Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt) were clamoring for war. In March 1898, the president asked Spain to agree to an armistice, negotiations for a permanent peace, and an end to the concentration camps. Spain agreed to stop the fighting and eliminate the concentration camps but refused to negotiate with the rebels and reserved the right to resume hostilities at its discretion. That satisfied neither public opinion nor the Congress; and a few days later the United States declared war on Spain.

B. “A SPLENDID LITTLE WAR”

SUPPLY AND MOBILIZATION PROBLEMS

Secretary of State John Hay called the Spanish-American conflict “a splendid little war,” an opinion that most Americans–except many of the enlisted men who fought in it–seemed to share. Declared in April, it was over in August, in part because Cuban rebels had already greatly weakened the Spanish resistance, which made the American intervention in many respects little more than a “mopping-up” exercise. Only 460 Americans were killed in battle or died of wounds, although some 5,200 others perished of disease: malaria, dysentery, and typhoid, among others. Casualties among Cuban insurgents, who continued to bear the brunt of the fighting, were much higher.

And yet the American war effort was not without difficulties. United States soldiers faced serious supply problems: a shortage of modern rifles and ammunition, uniforms too heavy for the warm Caribbean weather, inadequate medical services, and skimpy, almost indigestible food. The regular army numbered only 28,000 troops and officers, most of whom had experience in quelling Indian outbreaks but none in larger-scale warfare. As in the Civil War, the United States had to rely heavily on National Guard units, organized by local communities and commanded for the most part by local leaders without military experience.

There were racial conflicts. A significant proportion of the American invasion force consisted of black soldiers. Some were volunteer troops put together by African American communities (although some governors refused to allow the formation of such units). Others were members of the four black regiments in the regular army, who had been stationed on the frontier to defend white settlements against Indians and were now transferred east to fight in Cuba. As the black soldiers traveled through the South toward the training camps, they chafed at the rigid segregation to which they were subjected and occasionally resisted the restrictions openly. African American soldiers in Georgia deliberately made use of a “whites only” park; in Florida, they beat a soda-fountain operator for refusing to serve them; in Tampa, white provocations and black retaliation led to a nightlong riot that left thirty people wounded.

Racial tensions continued in Cuba, where African Americans played crucial roles in some of the important battles of the war (including the famous charge at San Juan Hill) and won many medals. Nearly half the Cuban insurgents fighting with the Americans were of African descent, and unlike their American counterparts they were fully integrated into the rebel army. (Indeed, one of the leading insurgent generals, Antonio Maceo, was a black man.) The sight of black Cuban soldiers fighting alongside whites as equals gave African Americans a stronger sense of the injustice of their own position.

C. SEIZING THE PHILIPPINES

By an accident of history, the assistant secretary of the navy during the Cuban revolution was Theodore Roosevelt, an ardent Anglophile eager to see the United States join the British and other nations as imperial powers. Roosevelt was, in fact, a relatively minor figure in the Navy Department, but he was determined to expand his power. British friends had persuaded him that the war in Cuba gave the United States a rare opportunity to expand the American empire. Roosevelt responded by sending the navy's Pacific fleet to the Philippines, with orders to attack as soon as American declared war. On May 1, 1898, Commodore George Dewey led the fleet into Manila Harbor, quickly destroyed the aging Spanish fleet, and forced the Spanish government to surrender with hardly a shot fired. He became the first American hero of the war.

In the rejoicing over Dewey's victory, few Americans paused to note that the character of the war was changing. What had begun as a war to free Cuba was becoming a war to strip Spain of its colonies. The United States was now - confronted with the question of what to do with the Spanish possessions it was suddenly acquiring.

CONSIDER THE SOURCE

MEMORIALIZING NATIONAL HISTORY

PUBLIC MONUMENTS ARE CONSTRUCTED FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS: to remember tragedy, to commemorate sacrifice, to celebrate specific persons or groups, and to honor acts of courage, heroism, and endurance. The structures differ in purpose, theme, and meaning, but all serve to satisfy our need to reflect upon the meaning of events, groups, or people memorialized.

The explosion of the battleship *Maine* in Havana Harbor in February 1898 resulted in the deaths of 266 men and served to propel the United States into war with Spain. Twelve years after the conclusion of the short-lived war, work began on a monument to memorialize the *Maine* and commemorate the men who died in the explosion. Dedicated on February 15, 1915, the monument, located in Arlington National Cemetery and pictured in the first two images below, includes the main mast from the *Maine.* The names of those killed in the disaster are inscribed around the base of the monument, which represents the turret of a battleship.

THE MAINE–1898/1915

(The Library of Congress (381569pu))

UNDERSTAND, ANALYZE, AND EVALUATE

1. Whose story does the *Maine* memorial tell? What information about the event does the memorial provide?
2. This *Maine* memorial is located in Arlington National Cemetery, a military cemetery near the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. What effect might that location have on persons seeing this memorial?
3. What emotions are likely to be evoked by the monument?

A memorial commemorating those killed in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York City, Pennsylvania, and at the Pentagon, as well as those killed in the February 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, opened at the site of the attack on September 12, 2011. A museum dedicated to the events around the destruction of the World Trade Towers opened in May of 2014. The memorial consists of two pools, each - approximately one acre in size, set within the footprints of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. The names of every person killed have been inscribed around the edges of the pools. Four hundred oak trees have been planted to add to the site a sense of quiet solemnity and reminder of enduring life.

THE VICTIMS OF TERRORISM–2014

(© Aristide Economopoulos/Star Ledger/Corbis)

(© Atlantide Phototravel/Corbis)

MAKE CONNECTIONS

1. What story does this memorial tell? How does the memorial use the idea of memory and remembrance to tell that story?
2. What types of stylistic differences and differences in materials used exist between the two monuments? What do these differences tell us about the times in which they were created?
3. Do you think each event should be memorialized? Why or why not?

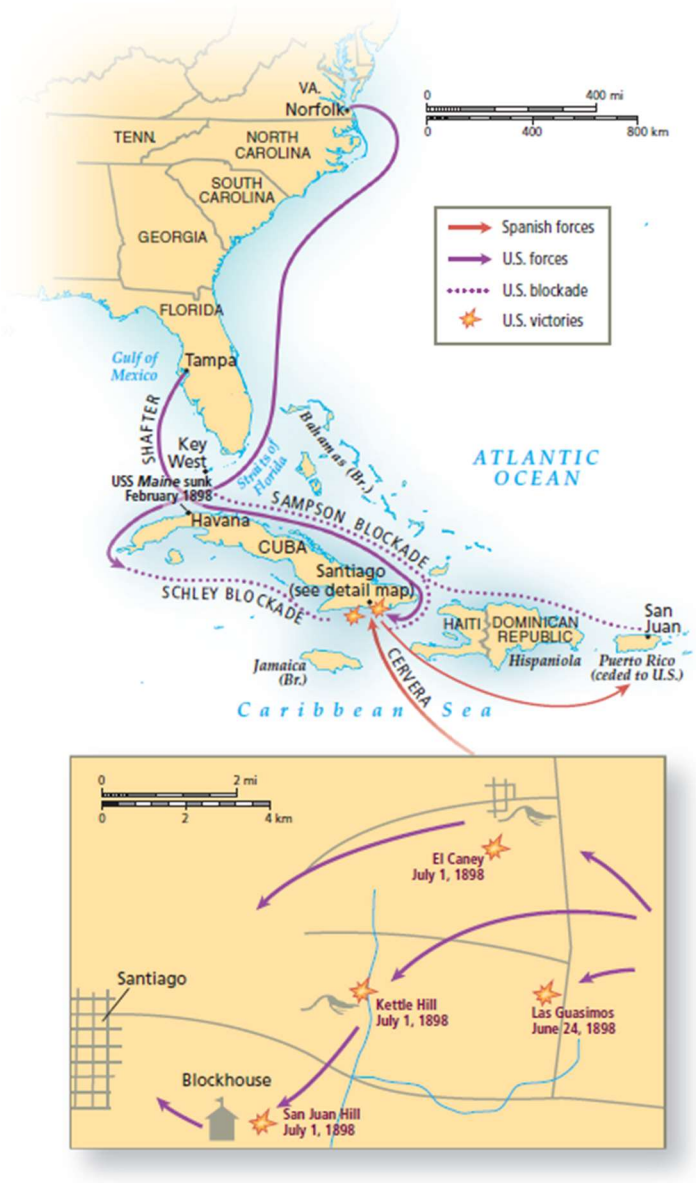
D. THE BATTLE FOR CUBA

The war in Cuba continued after the capture of the Philippines. At first, the American commanders planned a long period of training before actually sending troops into combat. But when a Spanish fleet under Admiral Pascual Cervera slipped past the American navy into Santiago harbor on the southern coast of Cuba, plans changed quickly. The American Atlantic fleet quickly bottled Cervera up in the harbor. And the U.S. Army's commanding general, Nelson A. Miles, hastily altered his strategy and left Tampa in June with a force of 17,000 to attack Santiago. Both the departure from Florida and the landing in Cuba were scenes of fantastic incompetence. It took five days for this relatively small army to go ashore, even with the enemy offering no opposition.

THE ROUGH RIDERS

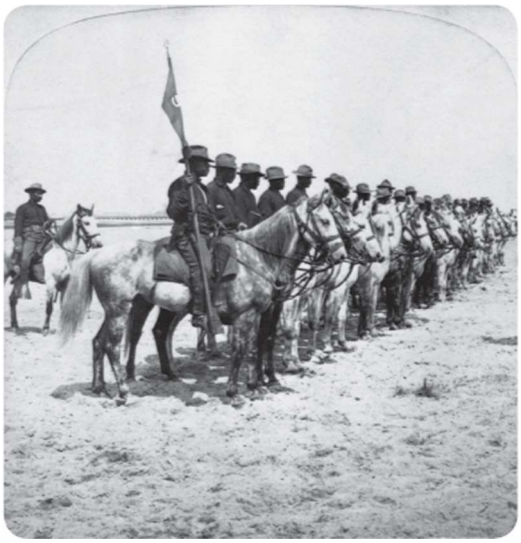
General William R. Shafter, the American commander, moved toward Santiago, which he planned to surround and capture. On the way he met and defeated Spanish forces at Las Guasimos and, a week later, in two simultaneous battles, El Caney and San Juan Hill. At the center of the fighting (and on the front pages of the newspapers) during many of these engagements was a cavalry unit known as the Rough Riders. Nominally commanded by General Leonard Wood, its real leader was Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, who had resigned from the Navy Department to get into the war and who had struggled to ensure that his regiment made it to the front before the fighting ended. His passion to join the war undoubtedly reflected the decision of his beloved father, Theodore Roosevelt Sr., not to fight in the Civil War, a source of private shame within his family that his son sought to erase.

Roosevelt rapidly emerged as a hero of the conflict. His fame rested in large part on his role in leading a bold, if perhaps reckless, charge up Kettle Hill (a charge that was a minor part of the larger battle for the adjacent San Juan Hill) directly into the face of Spanish guns. Roosevelt himself emerged unscathed, but nearly a hundred of his soldiers were killed or wounded. He remembered the battle as “the great day of my life.”



THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR IN CUBA, 1898
The military conflict between the United States and Spain in Cuba was a brief affair. The Cuban rebels and an American naval blockade had already brought the Spanish to the brink of defeat. The arrival of American troops was simply the final blow. In the space of about a week, U.S. troops won four decisive battles in the area around Santiago in southeast Cuba–one of them (the Battle of Kettle Hill) the scene of Theodore Roosevelt's famous charge up the adjacent San Juan Hill. This map shows the extent of the American naval blockade, the path of American troops from Florida to Cuba, and the location of the actual fighting.

- ***What were the implications of the war in Cuba for Puerto Rico?***



AFRICAN AMERICAN CAVALRY
Substantial numbers of African Americans fought in the U.S. Army during the Spanish-American War. Although confined to all-black units, they engaged in combat alongside white units and fought bravely and effectively. This photograph shows a troop of African American cavalry in formation in Cuba.
(© Corbis)

Although Shafter was now in position to assault Santiago, his army was so weakened by sickness that he feared he might have to abandon his position, particularly once the commander of the American naval force blockading Santiago refused to enter the harbor because of mines. But unknown to the Americans, the Spanish government had by now decided that Santiago was lost and had ordered Cervera to evacuate. On July 3, Cervera tried to escape from the harbor. The waiting American squadron destroyed his entire fleet. On July 16, the commander of Spanish ground forces in Santiago surrendered. At about the same time, an American army landed in Puerto Rico and occupied it against virtually no opposition. On August 12, an armistice ended the war.
Under the terms of the armistice, Spain recognized the independence of Cuba. It ceded Puerto Rico (now occupied by American troops) and the Pacific island of Guam to the United States. And it accepted continued American occupation of Manila pending the final disposition of the Philippines.

THE ROUGH RIDERS
Theodore Roosevelt resigned as assistant secretary of the navy to lead a volunteer regiment in the Spanish-American War. They were known as the Rough Riders, and their bold charge during the battle of San Juan Hill made Roosevelt a national hero. Roosevelt is shown here (at center with glasses) posing with the other members of the regiment.
(© Bettmann/Corbis)

E. Puerto Rico and the United States

Annexation of Puerto Rico

The annexation of Puerto Rico produced relatively little controversy in the United States. The island of Puerto Rico had been a part of the Spanish Empire since Ponce de León arrived there in 1508, and it had contained Spanish settlements since the founding of San Juan in 1521. The native people of the island, the Arawaks, had mostly disappeared as a result of infectious diseases, Spanish brutality, and poverty. Puerto Rican society developed, therefore, with a Spanish ruling class and a large African workforce for the coffee and sugar plantations that came to dominate its economy.

As Puerto Rican society became increasingly distinctive, resistance to Spanish rule began to emerge, just as it had in Cuba. Uprisings occurred intermittently beginning in the 1820s; the most important of them–the so-called Lares Rebellion–was, like the others, effectively crushed by the Spanish in 1868. But the growing resistance did prompt some reforms: the abolition of slavery in 1873, representation in the Spanish parliament, and other changes. Demands for independence continued to grow, and in 1898, in response to political pressure organized by the popular politician Luis Muñoz Rivera, Spain granted the island a degree of independence. But before the changes had any chance to take effect, control of Puerto Rico shifted to the United States. American military forces occupied the island during the war. They remained in control until 1900, when the Foraker Act ended military rule and established a formal colonial government: an American governor and a two-chamber legislature (the members of the upper chamber appointed by the United States, the members of the lower elected by the Puerto Rican people). The United States could amend or veto any legislation the Puerto Ricans passed. Agitation for independence continued, and in 1917, under pressure to clarify the relationship between Puerto Rico and America, Congress passed the Jones Act, which declared Puerto Rico to be United States territory and made all Puerto Ricans American citizens.

Sugar Economy

The Puerto Rican sugar industry flourished as it took advantage of the American market that was now open to it without tariffs. As in Hawaii, Americans began establishing large sugar plantations on the island and hired natives to work them; many of the planters did not even live in Puerto Rico. The growing emphasis on sugar as a cash crop, and the transformation of many Puerto Rican farmers into paid laborers, led to a reduction in the growing of food for the island. Puerto Ricans became increasingly dependent on imported food and hence increasingly a part of the international commercial economy. When international sugar prices were high, Puerto Rico did well. When they dropped, the island's economy sagged, pushing the many plantation workers–already poor–into destitution. Unhappy with the instability, the poverty among natives, and the American threat to Hispanic culture, many Puerto Ricans continued to agitate for independence. Others, however, began to envision closer relations with the United States, even statehood.

F. The Debate over the Philippines

Although the annexation of Puerto Rico produced relatively little controversy, the annexation of the Philippines created a long and impassioned debate. Controlling a nearby Caribbean island fit reasonably comfortably into the United States's sense of itself as the dominant power in the Western Hemisphere. Controlling a large and densely populated territory thousands of miles away seemed different and, to many Americans, more ominous.

The Philippines Question

McKinley claimed to be reluctant to support annexation. But, according to his own accounts, he came to believe there were no acceptable alternatives. Emerging from what he described as an “agonizing night of prayer,” he claimed divine guidance for his decision to annex the islands. Returning them to Spain would be “cowardly and dishonorable,” he claimed. Turning them over to another imperialist power (France, Germany, or Britain) would be “bad business and discreditable.” Granting the islands independence would be irresponsible; the Filipinos were “unfit for self government.” The only solution was “to take them all and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them.”

The Treaty of Paris, signed in December 1898, brought a formal end to the war. It confirmed the terms of the armistice concerning Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Guam. American negotiators startled the Spanish by demanding that they cede the Philippines to the United States, something the original armistice had not included. The Spanish objected briefly, but an American offer of $20 million for the islands softened their resistance. They accepted all the American terms.

Anti-Imperialist League

In the U.S. Senate, however, resistance was fierce. During debate over ratification of the treaty, a powerful anti--imperialist movement arose around the country to oppose acquisition of the Philippines. The anti-imperialists included some of the nation's wealthiest and most powerful figures: Andrew Carnegie, Mark Twain, Samuel Gompers, Senator John Sherman, and others. Their motives were various. Some believed simply that imperialism was immoral, a repudiation of America's commitment to human freedom. Some feared “polluting” the American population by introducing “inferior” Asian races into it. Industrial workers feared being undercut by a flood of cheap laborers from the new colonies. Conservatives worried about the large standing army and entangling foreign alliances that they -believed imperialism would require and that they feared would threaten American liberties. Sugar growers and others feared unwelcome competition from the new territories. The Anti-Imperialist League, established late in 1898 by -

upper-class Bostonians, New Yorkers, and others to fight against annexation, attracted a widespread following in the Northeast and waged a vigorous campaign against ratification of the Paris treaty.
Favoring ratification was an equally varied group. There were the exuberant imperialists such as Theodore Roosevelt, who saw the acquisition of empire as a way to reinvigorate the nation and keep alive what they considered the healthy, restorative influence of the war. Some businessmen saw opportunities to dominate the Asian trade. And most Republicans saw partisan advantages in acquiring valuable new territories through a war fought and won by a Republican administration. Perhaps the strongest argument in favor of annexation, however, was that the United States already possessed the islands.
When anti-imperialists warned of the danger of acquiring territories with large populations who might have to become citizens, the imperialists had a ready answer: the nation's long-standing policies toward Indians–treating them as dependents rather than as citizens–had created a precedent for annexing land without absorbing people. Supporters of annexation argued that the “uncivilized” Filipinos “would occupy the same status precisely as our Indians…. They are, in fact, ‘Indians'–and the Fourteenth Amendment does not make citizens of Indians.”
The fate of the treaty remained in doubt for weeks, until it received the unexpected support of William Jennings Bryan, a fervent anti-imperialist. He backed ratification not because he approved of annexation but because he hoped to move the issue out of the Senate and make it the subject of a national referendum in 1900, when he expected to be the Democratic presidential candidate again. Bryan persuaded a number of anti-imperialist Democrats to support the treaty so as to set up the 1900 debate. The Senate ratified it finally on February 6, 1899.

ELECTION OF 1900

But Bryan miscalculated. If the election of 1900 was in fact a referendum on the Philippines, as Bryan expected, it proved beyond doubt that the nation had decided in favor of imperialism. Once again Bryan ran against McKinley; and once again McKinley won–even more decisively than in 1896. It was not only the issue of the colonies, however, that ensured McKinley's victory. The Republicans were the beneficiaries of growing prosperity–and also of the colorful personality of their vice presidential candidate, Theodore Roosevelt, the hero of San Juan Hill.

VII. THE REPUBLIC AS EMPIRE

The new American empire was small by the standards of the great imperial powers of Europe. But it embroiled the United States in the politics of both Europe and the Far East in ways the nation had always tried to avoid in the past. It also drew Americans into a brutal war in the Philippines.

A. GOVERNING THE COLONIES

Three of the American dependencies–Hawaii, Alaska (acquired from Russia in 1867), and Puerto Rico–presented relatively few problems. They received territorial status (and their residents American citizenship) relatively quickly: Hawaii in 1900, Alaska in 1912, and Puerto Rico in 1917. The U.S. Navy took control of the Pacific islands of Guam and Tutuila. Some of the smallest, least populated Pacific islands now under American control the United States simply left alone. Cuba was a thornier problem. American military forces, commanded by General Leonard Wood, remained there until 1902 to prepare the island for independence. They built roads, schools, and hospitals, reorganized the legal, financial, and administrative systems, and introduced medical and sanitation reforms. But the United States also laid the basis for years of American economic domination of the island.

PLATT AMENDMENT

When Cuba drew up a constitution that made no reference to the United States, Congress responded by passing the Platt Amendment in 1901 and pressured Cuba into incorporating its terms into its constitution. The Platt Amendment barred Cuba from making treaties with other nations (thus, in effect, giving the United States control of Cuban foreign policy); it gave the United States the right to intervene in Cuba to preserve independence, life, and property; and it required Cuba to permit American naval stations on its territory. The amendment left Cuba with only nominal political independence.

AMERICAN ECONOMIC DOMINANCE

American investments, which quickly took over the island's economy, made the new nation an American economic appendage as well. Americans poured into Cuba, buying up plantations, factories, railroads, and refineries. Absentee American ownership of many of the island's most important resources was the source of resentment and agitation for decades. Resistance to “Yankee imperialism” produced intermittent revolts against the Cuban government–revolts that at times prompted U.S. military intervention. American troops occupied the island from 1906 to 1909 after one such rebellion; they returned again in 1912, to suppress a revolt by black plantation workers. As in Puerto Rico and Hawaii, sugar production–spurred by access to the American market–increasingly dominated the island's economy and subjected it to the same cycle of booms and busts that so plagued other sugar-producing appendages of the United States economy.

"MEASURING UNCLE SAM FOR A NEW SUIT," BY J. S. PUGHE, IN *PUCK* MAGAZINE, 1900
President William McKinley is favorably depicted here as a tailor, measuring his client for a suit large enough to accommodate the new possessions the United States obtained in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War. This detail from a larger cartoon tries to link this expansion with earlier, less controversial ones such as the Louisiana Purchase.
(The Library of Congress (LC-DIG-ppmsca-25453))

B. THE PHILIPPINE WAR

Americans did not like to think of themselves as imperial rulers in the European mold. Yet, like other imperial powers, the United States soon discovered–as it had discovered at home in its relations with the Indians–that subjugating another people required more than ideals; it also required strength and brutality. That, at least, was the lesson of the American experience in the Philippines, where American forces soon became engaged in a long and bloody war with insurgent forces fighting for independence.

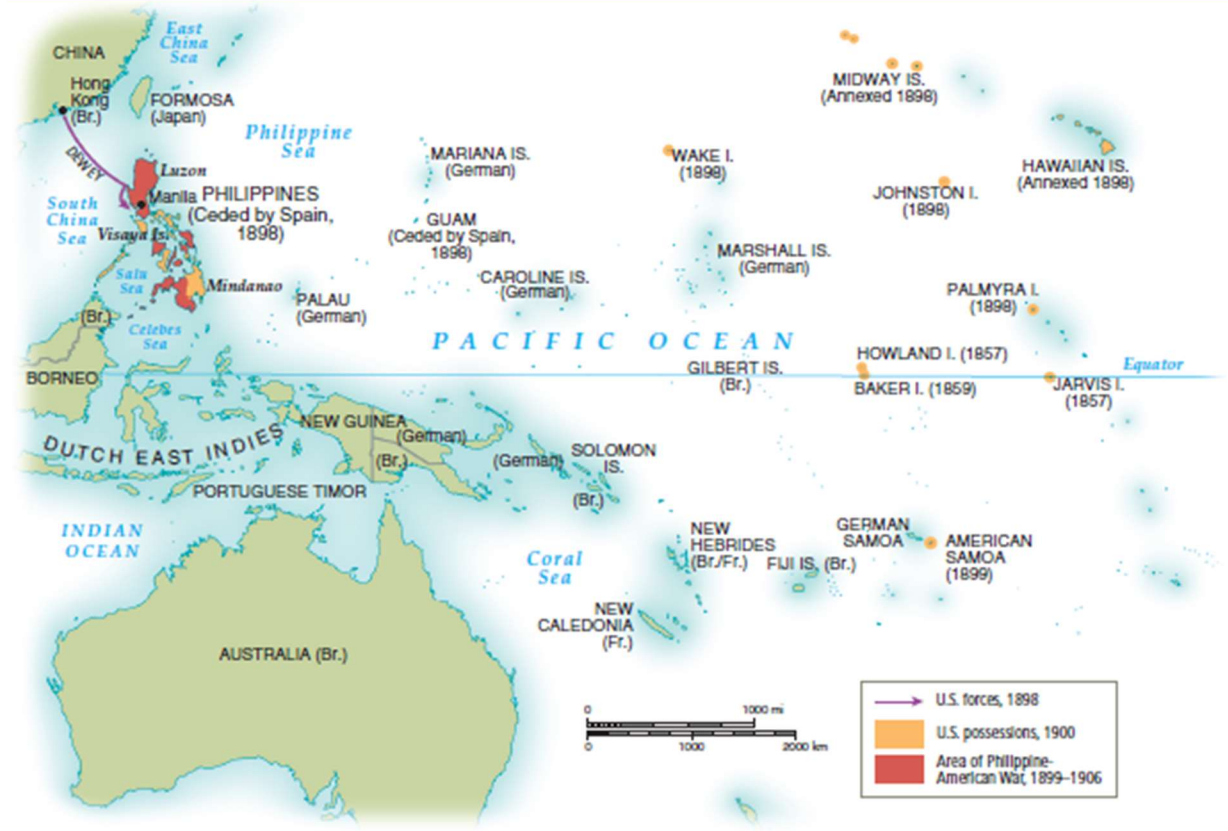
The conflict in the Philippines is the least remembered of all American wars. It was also one of the longest, lasting from 1898 to 1902, and one of the most vicious. It involved 200,000 American troops and resulted in 4,300 American deaths, nearly ten times the number who had died in combat in the Spanish-American War. The number of Filipinos killed in the conflict has long been a matter of dispute, but it seems likely that at least 50,000 natives (and perhaps many more) died. The American occupiers faced brutal guerrilla tactics in the Philippines, very similar to those the Spanish occupiers had faced prior to 1898 in Cuba. And they soon found themselves drawn into the same pattern of brutality that had outraged so many Americans when Weyler had used them in the Caribbean.

EMILIO AGUINALDO

The Filipinos had been rebelling against Spanish rule even before 1898. And as soon as they realized the Americans had come to stay, they rebelled against them as well. Ably led by Emilio Aguinaldo, who claimed to head the legitimate government of the nation, Filipinos harried the American army of occupation from island to island for more than three years. At first, American commanders believed the rebels had only a small popular following. But by early 1900, General Arthur MacArthur, an American commander in the islands (and father of General Douglas MacArthur), was writing: "I have been reluctantly compelled to believe that the Filipino masses are loyal to Aguinaldo and the government which he heads."

To MacArthur and others, that realization was not a reason to moderate American tactics or conciliate the rebels. It was a reason to adopt much more severe measures. Gradually, the American military effort became more systematically vicious and brutal. Captured Filipino guerrillas were treated not as prisoners of war, but as murderers. Many were summarily executed. On some islands, entire communities were evacuated–the residents forced into concentration camps while American troops destroyed their villages, farms, crops, and livestock. A spirit of savagery grew among some American soldiers, who came to view the Filipinos as almost subhuman and at times seemed to take pleasure in killing arbitrarily. One American commander ordered his troops "to kill and burn, the more you kill and burn the better it will please me…. Shoot everyone over the age of 10." Over fifteen Filipinos were killed for every one wounded; in the American Civil War–the bloodiest conflict in U.S. history to that point–one person had died for every five wounded.

FILIPINO PRISONERS
American troops guard captured Filipino guerrillas in Manila. The suppression of the Filipino insurrection was a much longer and costlier military undertaking than the Spanish-American War, by which the United States first gained possession of the islands. By mid-1900 there were 70,000 American troops in the Philippines, under the command of General Arthur MacArthur (whose son Douglas won fame in the Philippines during World War II).
(The Library of Congress)



THE AMERICAN SOUTH PACIFIC EMPIRE, 1900
Except for Puerto Rico, all of the colonial acquisitions of the United States in the wake of the Spanish-American War occurred in the Pacific. The new attraction of imperialism persuaded the United States to annex Hawaii in 1898. The war itself gave America control of the Philippines, Guam, and other, smaller Spanish possessions in the Pacific. When added to the small, scattered islands that the United States had acquired as naval bases earlier in the nineteenth century, these new possessions gave the nation a far-flung Pacific empire, even if one whose total territory and population remained small by the standards of the other great empires of the age.

- ***What was the reaction in the United States to the acquisition of this new empire?***

GROWING ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE

By 1902, reports of the brutality and of the American casualties had soured the American public on the war. But by then, the rebellion had largely exhausted itself and the occupiers had established control over most of the islands. The key to their victory was the March 1901 capture of Aguinaldo, who later signed a document urging his followers to stop fighting and declaring his own allegiance to the United States. (Aguinaldo then retired from public life and lived quietly until 1964.) Fighting continued in some places for another year, and the war revived intermittently until as late as 1906; but American possession of the Philippines was now secure. In the summer of 1901, the military transferred authority over the islands to William Howard Taft, who became their first civilian governor. Taft announced that the American mission in the Philippines was to prepare the islands for independence, and he gave the Filipinos broad local autonomy. The Americans also built roads, schools, bridges, and sewers; instituted major administrative and financial reforms; and established a public health system. The Philippine economy–dominated by fishing, agriculture, timber, and mining–also became increasingly linked to the economy of the United States. Americans did not make many investments in the Philippines, and few Americans moved there. But trade with the United States grew to the point that the islands were almost completely dependent on American markets.

In the meantime, a succession of American governors gradually increased Filipino political autonomy. On July 4, 1946, the islands gained their independence.

C. THE OPEN DOOR

The acquisition of the Philippines greatly increased the already strong American interest in Asia. Americans were particularly concerned about the future of China, with which the United States had an important trade and which was now so enfeebled that it provided a tempting target for exploitation by stronger countries. By 1900, England, France, Germany, Russia, and Japan were beginning to carve up China among themselves. They pressured the Chinese government for “concessions,” which gave them effective control over various regions, most along the coast of China. In some cases, they simply seized Chinese territory and claimed it as their own. Many Americans feared that the process would soon cut them out of the China trade altogether.

HAY'S “OPEN DOOR NOTES”

Eager for a way to advance American interests in China without risking war, McKinley issued a statement in September 1898 saying the United States wanted access to China, but no special advantages there. “Asking only the open door for ourselves, we are ready to accord the open door to others.” The next year, Secretary of State John Hay translated those words into policy when he addressed identical messages–which became known as the “Open Door notes”–to England, Germany, Russia, France, Japan, and Italy. He asked them to approve three principles: each nation with a sphere of influence in China was to respect the rights and privileges of other nations in its sphere; Chinese officials were to continue to collect tariff duties in all spheres (the existing tariff favored the United States); and nations were not to discriminate against other nations in levying port dues and railroad rates within their own spheres. Together, these principles would allow the United States to trade freely with the Chinese without fear of interference and without having to become militarily involved in the region. They would also retain the illusion of Chinese sovereignty and thus prevent formal colonial dismemberment of China, which might also create obstacles to American trade.

Europe and Japan received the Open Door proposals coolly. Russia openly rejected them; the other powers claimed to accept them in principle but to be unable to act unless all the other powers agreed. But Hay refused to consider this a rebuff. He boldly announced that all the powers had accepted the principles of the Open Door in “final and definitive” form and that the United States expected them to observe those principles.

No sooner had the diplomatic maneuvering over the Open Door ended than the Boxers, a secret Chinese martial-arts society with highly nationalist convictions and a somewhat mystical vision of their invulnerability to bullets, launched a revolt against foreigners in China. The Boxer Rebellion spread widely across eastern China, attacking Westerners wherever they could find them–including many Christian missionaries. But the climax of the revolt was a siege of the entire Western foreign diplomatic corps, which took refuge in the British embassy in Beijing. The imperial powers (including the United States) sent an international expeditionary force into China to rescue the diplomats. In August 1900, it fought its way into Peking and broke the siege.

BOXER REBELLION

The Boxer Rebellion became an important event for the role of the United States in China. McKinley and Hay had agreed to American participation in quelling the Boxer Rebellion so as to secure a voice in the settlement of the -uprising and to prevent the partition of China by the European powers. Hay now won support for his Open Door approach from England and Germany and induced the other participating powers to accept compensation from the Chinese for the damages the Boxer Rebellion had caused. Chinese territorial integrity survived at least in name, and the United States retained access to its lucrative trade.

D. A Modern Military System

The war with Spain had revealed glaring deficiencies in the American military system. The army had exhibited the greatest weaknesses, but the entire military organization had demonstrated problems of supply, training, and coordination. Had the United States been fighting a more powerful foe, disaster might have resulted. After the war, McKinley appointed Elihu Root, an able corporate lawyer in New York, as secretary of war to supervise a major overhaul of the armed forces. (Root was one of the first of several generations of attorney-statesmen who moved easily between public and private roles and constituted much of what has often been called the American "foreign policy establishment.")

THE BOXER REBELLION, 1900

This photograph shows imprisoned Boxers in Beijing. Days earlier, they had been involved in the siege of the compound in which Western diplomats lived. An expeditionary force of numerous European powers in China, and of the United States, had broken the siege and captured the Boxers.

Root's Military Reforms

Between 1900 and 1903, the Root reforms enlarged the regular army from 25,000 to a maximum of 100,000. They established federal army standards for the National Guard, ensuring that never again would the nation fight a war with volunteer regiments trained and equipped differently than those in the regular army. They sparked the creation of a system of officer training schools, including the Army Staff College (later the Command and General Staff School) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and the Army War College in Washington. And in 1903, a general staff (named the Joint Chiefs of Staff) was established to act as military advisers to the secretary of war. It was this last reform that Root considered most important: the creation of a central planning agency modeled on the example of European general staffs. The Joint Chiefs were charged with many functions. They were to "supervise" and "coordinate" the entire army establishment and to establish an office that would plan for possible wars. An Army and Navy Board was to foster interservice cooperation. As a result of the new reforms, the United States entered the twentieth century with something resembling a modern military system.

LOOKING BACK

For nearly three decades after the end of Reconstruction, American politics remained locked in a rigid stalemate. The electorate was almost evenly divided, and the two major parties differed on only a few issues. A series of dull, respectable presidents presided over this political system as unwitting symbols of its stability and passivity. Beneath the calm surface of national politics, however, great social issues were creating deep divisions: battles between employers and workers, growing resentment among American farmers facing declining prosperity, outrage at what many voters considered corruption in government and excessive power in the hands of corporate titans. When a great depression, the worst in the nation's history to that point, began in 1893, these social tensions exploded.

The most visible sign of the challenge to the political stalemate was the Populist movement, a great uprising of American farmers demanding far-reaching changes in politics and the economy. In 1892, they created their own political party, the People's Party, which for a few years showed impressive strength. But in the climactic election of 1896, in which the Populist hero William Jennings Bryan became the presidential nominee of both the Democratic Party and the People's Party, the Republicans won a substantial victory–and in the process helped create a great electoral realignment that left the Republicans with a clear majority for the next three decades.

The crises of the 1890s coincided with, and helped to strengthen, a growing American engagement in the world. In 1898, the United States intervened in a colonial war between Spain and Cuba, won a quick and easy military victory, and signed a treaty with Spain that ceded significant territory to the Americans, including Puerto Rico and the Philippines. A vigorous anti-imperialist movement failed to stop the imperial drive. But taking the colonies proved easier than holding them. In the Philippines, American forces became bogged down in a brutal four-year war with Filipino rebels. The conflict soured much of the American public, and the annexation of colonies in 1898 proved to be both the beginning and the end of American territorial imperialism.

KEY TERMS/ PEOPLE/ PLACES/ EVENTS

Boxer Rebellion
Emilio Aguinaldo
Farmers' Alliances
Foraker Act
"Free silver"
Half-Breeds
Interstate Commerce Act
Jacob Coxey
Mary E. Lease
"Open Door"
Panic of 1893
Pendleton Act
Platt Amendment
Populism
Sherman Antitrust Act
Stalwarts
The Grange
William Jennings Bryan
William McKinley
Yellow journalism

RECALL AND REFLECT

1. How and why did the federal government attempt to regulate interstate commerce in the late nineteenth century?
2. What efforts did farmers undertake to deal with the economic problems they faced in the late nineteenth century?
3. What was the "silver question"? Why was it so important to so many Americans? How did the major political parties deal with this question?
4. How did the Spanish-American War change America's relationship to the rest of the world?
5. What were the main arguments of those who supported U.S. imperialism and those who opposed the nation's imperial ambitions and efforts?

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS