Anchor TEXT
Topic 3

creation of the U.S. empire

An American empire? Many citizens of the United States would not think of their country as an empire. The fact is, however, that America does control a vast amount of territory and wields tremendous influence throughout the world. There is little doubt that the United States stands right now as the world's most powerful country and has grown an impressive empire.

American territories exist around the globe, and American troops are stationed around the world. In 1790, the United States conducted its first census. In that year, it owned 891,364 square miles of territory, mainly along the east coast of North America. Today, 50 states control 3,623,420 square miles. That represents a growth rate of 400%. Note that the above numbers only include the 50 states. If you include such overseas possessions as Puerto Rico and Guam, the United States controls 3,630,254 square miles of the Earth's surface.

In addition to actual territories, the United States also maintains military bases in 35 nations and has numerous military alliances with others in which the U.S. military operates. One could literally say that just like Great Britain at the turn of the 20th century, the sun never sets on the American empire at the turn of the 21st century.

How did this upstart nation that declared independence from England just a little over 200 years ago achieve this empire? There is no one explanation for the American expansion. Rather, a combination of ideology, economics, and national security is needed to explain why the United States grew to be the superpower it is today.

Early expansion can be traced initially to ideology, or more precisely, religious beliefs. Early American settlers viewed their mission to "civilize" the New World as a providential right. Linking the Puritan right to expansion, John Winthrop in 1630 stated: "For we must consider that we shall be a City upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world." He thought the colonies would be an example to the world of what people could accomplish and would lead the world with their spiritual example.

Another ideological belief in the growth of the United States had more basis in the secular world. Two Founding Fathers, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, argued that the expansion of the nation was essential to its economic well-being and to future generations. Madison asserted that this growth was necessary to prevent class strife. "This form of government," he wrote, "in order to effect its purposes, must operate not within a small but an extensive sphere."

The belief that the United States must and would expand became known as "manifest destiny." That ideology stemmed from the idea that the United States possessed a God-given right to settle new lands. Advocates of manifest destiny took the ideas of people like Jefferson, Madison, and Winthrop and argued that not only was the United States going to expand, but also that the territory west of the Mississippi River rightfully belonged to the United States. That land would inevitably become part of the United States, even though the English,

Spanish, Mexicans, and Native Americans stood in the way.

Jefferson himself presided over the largest expansion of U.S. territory. In 1803, his administration made the Louisiana Purchase from the French, which doubled the size of the United States overnight. For the modest price of less than three cents an acre, Jefferson extended U.S. ownership beyond the Mississippi River. Territorial expansion accelerated from there in the 19th century. Florida was acquired in the Adams-Onis Treaty (1819) with Spain. The annexation of Texas followed in 1845. The next year, the Oregon and Washington territories were added in a treaty with Britain. California and much of the Southwest were gained through war with Mexico in 1848. The Gadsden Purchase Treaty (1853) signed with Mexico transferred what is modern-day southern Arizona to the United States and completed American acquisition of what would become the 48 contiguous United States.

Although the claim to what would become the 48 states had been made, there still remained the need to settle those areas. To that end, Congress passed the Homestead Act (1862), which gave 160 acres of land to men who would farm it for five years. Settlers began to move across the country in great numbers via such routes as the Oregon Trail and the Santa Fe Trail. By 1900, 80 million acres of land had been claimed by 600,000 settlers.

While the French, British, Spanish, and Mexicans had yielded to the United States through either treaties or war, Native Americans still remained. War with many of the Native American tribes was the inevitable result of settlers' encroachment on Indian homelands. Some tribes conceded defeat, quickly recognizing that they were outnumbered and outgunned. Others fought valiantly for long periods until the sheer weight of "progress" overcame them. "The white children have surrounded me," mourned the Sioux chief Red Cloud on the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1870, "and have left me nothing but an island. When we first had this land we were strong; now we are all melting like snow on a hillside, while you are grown like spring grass." Reservations, which remain to this day, were created for the conquered and displaced Native Americans.

By the 1890s, the U.S. Congress had declared the frontier officially closed, the last of the American Indian wars had been fought, and American settlements had secured the territories of the United States. Also during this time, the United States had added another piece of territory, Alaska. Purchased in 1867 from Russia and granted statehood in 1959, Alaska's acquisition was significant for being the first territory acquired outside the contiguous 48 states.

By this time, some Americans had begun to look overseas for U.S. gains. A new strategic outlook began to surface that called for the country to be more active on the seas to protect shipping lanes and provide smooth economic access to the world. "Whether they will or not," wrote leading naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan in 1890, "Americans must now begin to look outward. The growing production of the country requires it." Growth overseas was the next logical step for an already powerful America.

The opportunity arose in 1898. Cuban nationalists had long sought independence from Spain and revolted. The Cubans received a very sympathetic response from the United States, and in January 1898, a blast aboard the USS *Maine* in the Cuban harbor of Havana sparked the Spanish-American War. Cuba represented one of the last bastions of the Spanish empire. Spain had been in decline for many years on the world stage and was no match for a fledgling but strong United States. As spoils for the war, the United States gained not only Cuba but also the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. Those acquisitions added to the many islands that the United States already controlled in the Pacific Ocean, including Midway. The United States also made another

important gain in 1898 by annexing the Hawaiian Islands.

All those acquisitions thrust the previously isolationist United States onto the international scene. The nations of Europe and other countries had long recognized America's potential to be a great power because of its economy and natural resources. All it lacked was overseas territory; now it had it. The flurry of American expansion cooled considerably early in the 20th century, however. Americans, despite ideologies of manifest destiny, were also anti-imperialistic. Many were very critical of overseas involvement, and further gains were small. Despite the backlash against further imperialism, President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903 acquired the Panama Canal Zone and forced an Open Door policy in trade with China, both for economic reasons.

The United States now had control over much of the Pacific and the Caribbean. There was no turning back; America was now a world power. As a result, it was much more difficult to avoid entanglements abroad. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 unnerved many Americans; most opposed U.S. involvement. As the war went on, it became increasingly difficult for President Woodrow Wilson to keep the United States out of the war. German aggression on the high seas finally forced his hand, as American merchant shipping—and as a result, economic interests—were threatened. The United States entered the war and helped the Allies win against Germany. After U.S. victory, though, many Americans wanted to retreat from the world stage. Wilson's attempts at a lasting peace failed with the Senate's rejection of the Treaty of Versailles (1919), and Wilson's hopes for a League of Nations were lost.

Anti-imperialistic and isolationist ideologies won out in the 1920s and 1930s. America turned mostly inward during the Great Depression, away from the world stage. That shift would turn out to be a mistake. The outbreak of World War II in 1939 once again threatened the balance of power in Europe and the world. Still, the United States managed to stay on the sidelines, only offering economic aid to Great Britain in the way of a lend-lease policy. Eighty percent of Americans opposed entering World War II prior to the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941. It took that tragic event to change public opinion.

After Allied victory in World War II in 1945, the United States took a far different role in world affairs than it had during most of its history. With the European powers decimated by the war, it was left to the United States to assume Western leadership against the Soviet Union and the threat of communism. The world became divided figuratively and literally between East and West in the Cold War, which lasted until 1989. During that period, the United States was the dominant force in the Western world politically, economically, and militarily. It helped to rebuild Europe and Japan, fought major wars in Korea and Vietnam, and was involved anywhere that its interests were threatened.

Today, the United States remains the world's most powerful nation, a fact that contributed to the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks on September 11, 2001. It has economic and political interests in most of the major countries of the world and in many smaller ones, too. U.S. industry is recognized all over the world through names like Nike, the Walt Disney Company, Microsoft, ExxonMobil Corporation, McDonald's Corporation, and Coca-Cola Company. New York is viewed as the world's financial center, and Wall Street is watched carefully by market analysts around the world. Moreover, the United States has fought in major wars in the Persian Gulf and the Balkans and against terrorism in Afghanistan because it was deemed to be in the interest of national security. In fact, some look to the United States to be the world's policeman.

Finally, while the United States granted the Philippines and Cuba their independence and gave back control of the Panama Canal to Panama, it maintains varying degrees of control over American Samoa, Guam, the

Marshall Islands, Micronesia, the Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Wake Island. Those territories remain instrumental to U.S. military dominance, as several have hosted the testing of nuclear weapons and the new missile-defense system.

Further Reading

Cabán, Pedro A., *Constructing a Colonial People: Puerto Rico and the United States, 1898-1932,* 1999; Crapol, Edward P., *James G. Blaine: Architect of Empire,* 2000; LaFeber, Walter, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898,* 1998; Slater, David, and Peter J. Taylor, eds., *The American Century: Consensus and Coercion in the Projection of American Power,* 1999.

Select Citation Style: MLA

MLA

Elliott, David. "creation of the U.S. empire." *American History.* ABC-CLIO, 2013. Web. 17 Oct. 2013.

back to top **Entry ID: 263207**