U.S. History MT. 3 – The U.S. as a World Power

LT. 1 - The Open Door Policy

Support for Imperialism

In the 1880s, many Americans wanted to make the United States a world power. At the time, several European nations were expanding overseas. This expansion became known as imperialism. It is the economic and political domination of a strong nation over other weaker nations.

The Europeans began expanding for several reasons. By the late 1800s, high tariffs had helped reduce trade between industrial countries. This led these countries to look overseas for markets for their products. The possibilities for investment in Europe had slowed. Most of the industries that needed to be built already had been. As a result, Europeans began investing in industries in other countries, especially in Africa and Asia. To protect their investments in these territories, the European countries began exercising control there. Some areas became colonies, while other areas became protectorates. In a protectorate, the imperial power allowed the local rulers to stay in control and protected them against rebellion or invasion. However, in exchange for the protection, the local rulers had to follow advice from Europeans on how to govern.

The United States also became interested in expanding overseas. Before the late 1800s, the United States expanded by settling more territory in North America. With most of the frontier settled by the late 1800s, many Americans looked to develop overseas markets.

Many Americans used the ideas of Social Darwinism – the belief that only the strongest nations would survive – to defend overseas expansion. Some took the idea even further, stating that English-speaking nations had superior character and systems of government and were therefore destined to control other nations.

Background

One example of U.S. expansion was the Open Door Policy. The U.S. Open Door Policy had to do with the nation of China. By the mid-1800s, China had been closed to outsiders for many centuries. Trade with other countries was prohibited or strictly limited. China was a very large and wealth nation during this time period and its leaders did not believe they needed to trade with other nations. Throughout the 1800s, however, China suffered from internal conflicts and wars with other countries. It soon became known as the “sick man of Asia”. China was even defeated by Japan, a much smaller nation, in the Sino-Japanese war in 1894. European nations tried to take advantage of China’s weakness. Britain, Germany, Russia, and France rushed to establish rights for trade within China. By 1900, these nations had carved China up into “spheres of influence”. These were areas where a foreign nation controlled trade as well as economic development. This would include railroad construction, mining, and other key industries.

U.S. Purposes

The United States was very worried about these developments in China. The United States at the time had three strong beliefs about foreign trade. The first was that the growth of the U.S. economy depended on exports. Since the U.S. could produce such much, it relied on exports to continue to expand its economy. China with its many millions of people was a huge potential market for U.S. manufactured goods. The second was the belief that the United States had the right to keep foreign markets open. Since the beginnings of the nation, the U.S. had believed in the right of all nations to trade freely and openly. The U.S. felt it was justified in using force if necessary to defend free trade. The third belief was that if one area was closed to U.S. products, people, or ideas, the United States itself was threatened. The government believed it was protecting the nation’s security by keeping markets open.

As a result of these factors, the U.S. decided to adopt the Open Door Policy with China. In 1899, U.S. Secretary of State John Hay established the Open Door Policy. This policy declared that other nations must share trading rights in China with the United States. Trade with China would proceed through an “open door”. The European nations decided they had to agree with the United States. The Chinese themselves were not even consulted.

Effects

The Open Door Policy resulted in the U.S. becoming much more involved in China and Asia. There were three important events that highlighted this new involvement. The first was the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. Many Chinese resented European and American dominance over China. In 1900, a group that Westerners called “Boxers” (because they used martial arts) attacked foreigners in China’s major cities. Hundreds of Christian missionaries and others were killed. The United States joined with other trading countries, as well as Japan, to defeat the “Boxer Rebellion” with troops. Thousands of Chinese were killed. After the Boxer Rebellion, the U.S. strengthened the Open Door policy by stating it would “safeguard for the world” open trade with China.

As President, Theodore Roosevelt supported the Open Door policy in China and worked to prevent any single nation from controlling trade there. This concern prompted Roosevelt to step in and negotiate peace in a war between Japan and Russia in 1905. The two nations had been fighting for control of trading ports and other territories in China. Roosevelt convinced the two nations to stop fighting and seek no further territory. For his efforts in ending this war, Roosevelt won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906.

President Roosevelt continued to worry, though, about the growing power and influence of Japan. This concern led to the third important event. In 1907, Roosevelt sent 16 battleships of the new United States Navy, known as the “Great White Fleet” on a voyage around the world. The purpose of this voyage was to show off U.S. military power. The ships made a stop in Japan to demonstrate that the U.S. could and would defend its interests in China and the rest of Asia.

The principles of the Open Door policy were used to guide U.S. foreign policy for many years. The United States continued to use persuasion and force to keep markets open.