

The New Imperialists

*Nothing in all history had ever succeeded like
America, and every American knew it.¹*

—HENRY STEELE COMMAGER



Even before America became a world power, other great powers had begun carving out spheres of interest in a disintegrating Chinese empire—Britain in the Yangtze Valley, Germany in Shantung, Russia in Manchuria. To prevent partition and keep the United States from being shut out of the China trade, John Hay advanced an idea said to have sprung from the fertile mind of an old British China hand, Alfred E. Hoppisley: declare an “open door” for all imperial powers in China. The original source of the idea was—the British Foreign Office. Alarmed at encroachments on its China preserve, London wanted the United States to jointly support a policy by which all imperial players would be entitled to equal treatment in all spheres of interests. Thus, the imperial latecomers would be prevented from excluding the British.

When London first broached the idea, America was preoccupied with Spain. But after the annexation of the Philippines, Hay in 1899 unilaterally proposed an “open door” under which each imperial power would retain its sphere of interest, but all would be subject to the same port fees and customs duties. China would keep control of its trade. Hay sent a note outlining the new U.S.

policy to the imperial capitals. When all, save Russia, nodded some form of assent, Hay declared the Open Door in force.

A revolution in China in 1900 caused Hay to broaden the concept. Zealots of the Order of Liberty Patriotic Harmonious Fists—"Boxers" in Western slang—began to attack "foreign devils" and Chinese converts to Christianity. After several massacres, the imperial powers demanded that the dowager empress suppress the Boxers. She refused. The Boxers then demanded that all foreign envoys get out. They refused.

When a German ambassador and a Japanese diplomat were murdered in Peking, foreign officials and businessmen fled to the Legation Quarter, which was defended by 377 soldiers from eight countries, including fifty-six U.S. Marines with the lone machine gun. Another fifty men had hunting rifles to which they attached butcher knives as bayonets. They took their place on the wall as "Thornhill's Roughs." The 149 women served as nurses. Seventy-nine children were in the compound, and 2,700 Chinese converts had taken refuge there. In an epic story, this *ad hoc* force held off a horde of Boxers and dynastic troops for fifty-five days.

To relieve the siege, 2,500 U.S. soldiers joined an international force of 18,000 that marched from the port of Tientsin to Peking in a dramatic rescue. Tientsin had been attacked by 10,000 Boxers and dynastic troops, but they failed to dislodge the 2,400 allied defenders due to the barricades built under the guidance of a U.S. engineer named Herbert Hoover.

U.S. troops spearheaded the drive into the Forbidden City, and China was forced to pay a large indemnity and erect monuments honoring the Westerners and Chinese Christians killed. Only U.S. pressure kept the indemnity within reason, and America used the few millions it had been awarded to finance scholarships for Chinese students in the United States.

Hay now feared that the presence of a multinational army in

Peking, coupled with rampant anti-Chinese sentiment among the imperial powers, would mean partition of China. Russia was already using the attacks on its citizens in Manchuria as a pretext for annexation. In 1900 Hay boldly and unilaterally declared it to be U.S. policy to "preserve Chinese territorial and administrative entity."²

The Open Door was seen as "a triumph of idealism over power politics, an American policy that saved China."³ Henry Adams declared that "nothing so meteoric had ever been done in American diplomacy."⁴ This was gross hyperbole. Yet out of an effort to preserve a commercial *status quo* in China would come a cardinal dogma of U.S. foreign policy to rival the Monroe Doctrine. America had signed no treaty, but the Open Door would come to be regarded as a unilateral U.S. guarantee of China's territorial integrity.

Despite Hay's declaration, the imperial powers continued their encroachments. And there was a measure of insincerity in the Open Door. In the Philippines, the United States had slammed the door shut to all rivals, and in 1900 Hay secretly instructed the U.S. minister in Peking to obtain a naval coaling station on China's coast at Samsah Bay.⁵ Japan, which looked on Samsah as within its own sphere, blocked the move, politely reminding Hay of his commitment to China's territorial integrity.

As the Russians pressed China virtually to cede Manchuria, Tokyo asked Hay if the United States would stand by Japan and resist any further Russian seizures. Hay's reply: The United States "was not prepared... singly, or in concert with other Powers, to enforce these views in the east by any demonstration which could present a character of hostility to any other Power."⁶ Japan concluded the Open Door was merely American bluster and bluff.

The American Century had begun in 1898 at Manila Bay. By 1900 McKinley had abandoned the tradition of nonintervention outside

the hemisphere and entangled the nation in world politics through the back door of Asia. His motivation had been that familiar Yankee cocktail of high-minded idealism and commercial interest, of morality and money; the purpose of U.S. foreign policy was to make the world safe for American capitalism. As for the "China trade," the lure of which had persuaded U.S. businesses to back annexation of the Philippines and an open door to 400 million Chinese customers, it proved a mirage. In 1900 China had taken 1 percent of U.S. exports. For thirty years after the Open Door was declared, China never took much more than 2 percent—with up to 70 percent of that accounted for by sales of tobacco and cigarettes.⁷

IMPERIAL OVERSTRETCH IN ASIA

Since Russia had been most aggressive in preying on the carcass of the Manchu Dynasty, America began to look to Japan as Asia's buffer against tsarist expansion. Theodore Roosevelt, now president, said openly that in the event of war, he hoped Japan would defeat Russia. When war did come, the United States tilted toward Tokyo. But the stunning Japanese victory at Tsushima Straits in 1905 dramatically altered the American perspective. Russia was suddenly a defeated empire, rife with revolution, and Japan an emerging threat to the Philippines.

Asked by a victorious but near-bankrupt Japan to mediate the war, Roosevelt invited the belligerents to New Hampshire. In the Treaty of Portsmouth, Japan was awarded the South Manchuria Railroad, Liaotung peninsula, and the southern half of Sakhalin Island, and Russia recognized Japan's paramount interest in Korea. Tokyo wanted all of Sakhalin and a large monetary indemnity, but Russia balked and threatened to walk out. Having failed to break Russia's armies, Japan grudgingly accepted the deal. But Japan blamed TR for its having been shortchanged and looked aside as anti-American riots broke out in Tokyo. Four American churches

were burned, and the U.S. Embassy had to be put under guard. For his diplomatic coup, Roosevelt won worldwide popularity and America's first Nobel Prize for Peace—but United States–Japan relations had now begun their long downhill slide.

Roosevelt did not want conflict with Japan and sought to recreate the old warmth with the Taft–Katsura Agreement of 1905. Signed in Tokyo by Secretary of War William Howard Taft, it contained Japan's disavowal of "any aggressive designs whatever" on the Philippines and America's recognition of Japan's dominant interest in Korea. In November 1905 the United States became the first great power to close its legation in Seoul. Korea's independence came to an end. Roosevelt and Taft–Katsura are not fondly remembered by Koreans, but the United States was only acceding to what it was powerless to prevent. When Japan occupied the peninsula, TR conceded:

Korea is absolutely Japan's. To be sure, by treaty it was solemnly covenanted that Korea should remain independent. But Korea was itself helpless to enforce the treaty, and it was out of the question to suppose that any other nation... would attempt to do for the Koreans what they were utterly unable to do for themselves.⁸

Brutally frank, and utterly true. "Who would be free themselves must strike the blow." So the poet Byron wrote.

But while he spoke softly, TR brandished his big stick. In 1907 he sent the U.S. battleship fleet to circle the globe and impress on Japan the full extent of U.S. naval power. When the fleet reached the Pacific, the emperor invited it to pay a visit. As the warships steamed into Tokyo Bay, the Japanese were impressed. The reception was tumultuous; talk of war dissipated. "Every particle of trouble with the Japanese Government and the Japanese press stopped like magic," said Roosevelt, "as soon as they found that our fleet had actually sailed, and was obviously in good trim."⁹

By the time TR left office, the Open Door was “more a phrase than a fact.”¹⁰ Russia had ignored it in Manchuria. Japan had slammed it shut in Manchuria and Korea. Other imperial powers did not feel bound by U.S. declarations, and America was unwilling to back it up with force. As revisionist historian William Appleman Williams wrote, the Open Door “was conceived and designed to win the victories without the wars.”¹¹ Roosevelt summed it up succinctly:

The Open Door policy in China was an excellent thing, and I hope it will be a good thing in the future, so far as it can be maintained by general diplomatic agreement; but, as has been proved by the whole history of Manchuria, alike under Russia and under Japan, the ‘Open Door’ policy, as a matter of fact, completely disappears as soon as a powerful nation determines to disregard it, and is willing to run the risk of war rather than forego its intention.¹²

“That was the heart of the matter,” writes Alexander DeConde. “It was not to the interest of the United States to risk war over principles not vital to its foreign policy.”¹³ By its inaction as Russia and Japan trampled on the principle of the Open Door, America was saying that preserving China’s territorial integrity was not a cause worth fighting for.

The Open Door was a classic example of the American penchant for “declaratory overstretch”—noble and sweeping statements of policy and purpose the United States lacks the will or power to back up. Such declarations mislead friends into trusting our words, and cause enemies to hold us in contempt, and to miscalculate. Seeing that the Open Door contained elements of fakery and fraud, Tokyo set out on a course that would bring it into direct collision with the United States in 1941.

Annexation of the Philippines had produced a three-year guer-

rilla war, embroilment in imperial rivalries in China, an Open Door we were unprepared to keep open with force, deteriorating relations with Japan, and acquiescence in Tokyo’s seizure of Korea—in return for Japan’s promise to respect our position in the Philippines, which even TR was now calling our “heel of Achilles.”¹⁴ The Republic’s maiden voyage into the realm of *realpolitik* had been a limited success.

A NOBEL FOR THEODORE

McKinley had ended the U.S. tradition of nonintervention in Asia, and Roosevelt led America into the power politics of Europe. The issue was the Moroccan crisis of 1905, and it was serious. Britain and France had formed their Entente Cordiale in 1904, aimed at Germany. France had recognized Britain’s paramount interest in Egypt in return for British recognition of France’s interest in Morocco, where the French were busily taking over and closing the door to foreign merchants. Egged on by his foreign minister, the kaiser one morning in March 1905 showed up in Tangier, riding a charger, to visit the sultan and show Berlin’s support for Moroccan independence. There, Wilhelm delivered a saber-rattling speech. A full-blown crisis was at hand. France’s foreign minister wanted to threaten Germany with war over the insult but was overruled by the cabinet and resigned. Emotions ran high. There was talk that the long-anticipated European war was at hand.

A nervous kaiser urged Roosevelt to convene a conference to mediate, and to maintain an open door for Germany in Morocco. He gave TR a pledge: If a deadlock developed, he would accept the president’s arbitration. A mistake—for TR was more alarmed at the prospect of a German presence on the Atlantic than about closing the open door and a possible partition of Morocco. Roosevelt agreed to mediate.

The conference was called in Algeiras, a Spanish seacoast town near Gibraltar. The resulting General Act of Algeiras proved a defeat

for a Germany that was unprepared to face down the entente. The principle of the open door was upheld for German merchants, but France was left in a privileged position with the Moroccan police. Roosevelt's popularity soared, but many were alarmed that, for the first time, the United States had intruded in the power politics of Europe when no vital interest was at risk.

INTERNATIONALISTS VS. GLOBALISTS

Wilson is said to have been the first president to lead America out of "isolation," but this, as we have seen, is myth. The United States was never isolationist. Only if one looks at the world from a Eurocentric vantage point—as some foreign policy scholars do—can one make such a case. For twelve decades before Wilson, America was the most expansionist nation on earth, and, by 1900, had become an empire. McKinley and Hay had sent troops to Peking and enmeshed us in the politics of China. They had been first to accept Tsar Nicholas II's invitation to the 1899 Hague conference on disarmament. Teddy Roosevelt was the most famous and popular leader on earth for mediating the Russo-Japanese War and Moroccan crisis. He had declared a "Roosevelt Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine whereby the United States asserted a right to intervene in Latin America to prevent defaults and chaos that might otherwise invite European intervention. Closer to the mark about this era is the dictum credited to Captain Mahan about the guiding principles of U.S. foreign policy: In the Far East, cooperation; in Europe, abstention; in Latin America, dominance.¹⁵

Progressive Imperialism was America's fifth great foreign policy tradition. Forever associated with McKinley, Roosevelt, and Henry Cabot Lodge, it broke with the vision of the Farewell Address and raised Manifest Destiny to a new level. America's destiny now entailed overseas annexations and domination of other peoples. The British Empire was no longer our great antagonist, but an exemplar

in advancing the hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon race and civilization. Rooted in a belief that American ideals and institutions were superior, Progressive Imperialism incorporated the conviction that any who got in our way were blocking the path of progress and must be removed without apology. Talk that God Himself had instructed McKinley to take the Philippines and "Christianize" our "little brown brothers" nicely encapsules the basic idea.

The leading Republicans of this era were unmoved by some gauzy vision of a world without war or altruistic idea of what was best for mankind. They made decisions based on what would enhance U.S. power and glory. McKinley and TR were imperialists, not globalists; unilateralists, not multilateralists. Throughout the years prior to and during the Great War, Theodore Roosevelt would strive to make clear how different was his internationalism from that of Wilson and Bryan:

I regard the Wilson-Bryan attitude of trusting to fantastic peace treaties, to impossible promises, to all kinds of scraps of paper without any backing in efficient force as abhorrent. It is infinitely better for a nation and for the world to have the Frederick the Great and Bismarck tradition as regards foreign policy than to have the... Bryan-Wilson attitude.... A milk-and-water righteousness unbacked by force is to the full as wicked as and even more mischievous than force divorced from righteousness.¹⁶

TR was a better and greater man than Wilson, and he and Lodge were instinctively right about the nature of the Hobbesian world of the twentieth century we had entered. But Wilson and Bryan, the men of "milk-and-water righteousness," would prove, in their desire to keep America out of the horrifying and futile wasteland of blood and lives on the Western Front, wiser than Roosevelt, whose idea of warfare was that glorious charge up Kettle Hill.