

## Unit 8: World Expansion and New Responsibilities

### DBQ 15: The Debate Over American Imperialism

#### **Historical Context:**

The closing decades of the nineteenth century saw a great scramble for empire as England, France, Germany, and other major industrial nations took control of areas of Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and other regions of the world. What prompted the rise of imperialism? Sometimes colonies provided industrial nations with raw materials for their factories or captive markets for their manufactured goods. Sometimes colonies were sought for military or strategic purposes, providing coaling stations for coal-fired, steam-driven naval vessels or offering geographic locations of critical importance. Sometimes colonies were obtained for national prestige. Many people at this time felt that great nations proved their greatness by conquering and controlling large empires. Countries bragged about their empires. Boasting of their immense empire, which literally spanned the entire world, the British gloated that “the sun never sets on Great Britain.”

During most of the nineteenth century, the United States ignored this scramble for overseas empires. Americans were busy conquering their own continent, spreading settlements across the broad prairies, the Great Plains, over the Rockies to the Pacific coast. An overseas empire attracted little interest until the very end of the nineteenth century. Then, in a matter of months, overseas colonies and the allure of national empire captured the interest of the American public.

America’s new interest in colonial empire grew largely from the 1898 Spanish-American War. Begun to help Cuba free itself from Spanish colonial rule, the war was, for Americans, something of a lark, quickly won with few casualties. But there was great irony in our victory. Begun to champion the cause of anti-colonialism, the war ended with the United States in possession of its own colonial empire. Should we annex Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, former Spanish colonies which now were ours? From the war’s end in August 1898 until the U.S. Senate ratified the Treaty of Paris in February 1899 annexing these regions, a nationwide debate raged: Should the United States, a nation born in a revolt against colonialism, now become a colonial nation itself? Should we, a people who profess to believe in democracy and self-rule, now become the imperial rulers of colonial peoples? And even after the debate was supposedly settled with the February 1899 Senate vote, heated discussion continued. This national argument over imperialism became even more passionate after the Filipinos took up arms against American occupation, beginning two years of bloody jungle fighting with U.S. troops. And, as national debates often do, this domestic quarrel over imperialism became a major political issue, greatly influencing the presidential election of 1900.

- ◆ **Directions:** The following question is based on the accompanying documents (1–7). As you analyze the documents, take into account both the source of each document and the author’s point of view. Be sure to:
1. Carefully read the document-based question. Consider what you already know about this topic. How would you answer the question if you had no documents to examine?
  2. Now, read each document carefully, underlining key phrases and words that address the document-based question. You may also wish to use the margin to make brief notes.
  3. Based upon your own knowledge of the topic and on the evidence found in the documents, formulate a thesis that directly answers the question.

(continued)

## DBQ 15: The Debate Over American Imperialism *(continued)*

4. Organize supportive and relevant information into a brief outline.
5. Write a well-organized essay proving your thesis. The essay should be logically presented and should include information both from the documents and from your knowledge outside of the documents.

**Question:** *Was imperialism a proper and legitimate policy for the United States to follow at the turn of the nineteenth century?*

### Document 1

More than a decade before the Spanish-American War, Rev. Josiah Strong, a prominent Protestant clergyman, wrote *Our Country*, a book that became both popular and influential. This passage, taken from Strong's book, advocates imperialism as a policy of the United States.

It seems to me that God, with infinite wisdom and skill, is training the Anglo-Saxon race [Strong meant Americans of British and German descent] for an hour sure to come in the world's future. . . . this race of unequaled energy, with all the majesty of numbers and the might of wealth behind it—the representatives . . . of the largest liberty, the purest Christianity, the highest civilization . . . will spread itself over the earth. . . . this powerful race will move down upon Mexico, down upon Central and South America, out upon the islands of the sea, over upon Africa and beyond. And can any one doubt that the result of this competition of races will be the "survival of the fittest?"

### Document 2

Another American proponent of imperialism was a top U.S. Navy officer, Alfred T. Mahan. Mahan's views were well known and popular with many. This excerpt comes from a book he wrote shortly before the Spanish-American War, titled *The Interest of America in Sea Power* (1897).

Americans must begin to look outward. The growing production of the country demands it. An increasing volume of public sentiment demands it. The position of the United States, between the two Old Worlds and the two great oceans, makes the same claim.

*(continued)*

**DBQ 15: The Debate Over American Imperialism** *(continued)***Document 3**

The initial decision whether or not to annex the Philippines was made by President McKinley. In the following excerpt, he explains why he recommended annexation to the U.S. Senate. He was speaking to a group of religious leaders when he made this statement.

I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight; and I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance. . . . And one night late it came to me this way . . .

1. That we could not give them back to Spain—that would be cowardly and dishonorable;
2. that we could not turn them over to France or Germany—our commercial rivals in the Orient—that would be bad business and discreditable;
3. that we could not leave them to themselves—they were unfit for self-government—and they would soon have anarchy and misrule there worse than Spain’s was; and
4. that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God’s grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellowmen for whom Christ also died.

**Document 4**

U.S. Senator George F. Hoar represented Massachusetts in Congress from 1869 until his death in 1904, and was a major opponent of imperialism. The following excerpt comes from a speech Hoar made in January 1899, in opposition to the treaty annexing the Philippines.

. . . the question with which we now have to deal is whether Congress may conquer and may govern, without their consent and against their will, a foreign nation, a separate, distinct, and numerous people, a territory not hereafter to be populated by Americans. . . .

. . . under the Declaration of Independence you cannot govern a foreign territory, a foreign people, another people than your own . . . you cannot subjugate them and govern them against their will, because you think it is for their good, when they do not; because you think you are going to give them the blessings of liberty. You have no right at the cannon’s mouth to impose on an unwilling people your Declaration of Independence and your Constitution and your notions of freedom and notions of what is good.

*(continued)*

## DBQ 15: The Debate Over American Imperialism *(continued)*

### Document 5

Albert Beveridge, a Republican senator from Indiana, supported imperialism. How did he justify this policy in the following excerpt from a speech he made in the U.S. Senate in 1900?

The Philippines are ours forever. . . . We will not retreat. . . . We will not repudiate [renounce] our duty. . . . We will not abandon our opportunity in the Orient. We will not renounce our part in the mission of our race, trustee, under God, of the civilization of the world. And we will move forward to our work . . . with gratitude . . . to Almighty God that He has marked us as His chosen people, henceforth to lead in the regeneration of the world. . . .  
. . . the Pacific is the ocean of the commerce of the future. . . . The power that rules the Pacific . . . is the power that rules the world.

### Document 6

Henry Cabot Lodge, a Republican senator from Massachusetts, also supported imperialism. How did Lodge defend imperialism in this statement from a Senate speech made in 1900?

. . . we are in the Philippines as righteously [honorably] as we are there rightly and legally. . . . The taking of the Philippines does not violate the principles of the Declaration of Independence, but will spread them among a people who have never known liberty, and who in a few years will be as unwilling to leave the shelter of the American flag as those of any other territory we ever brought beneath its folds.

### Document 7

The prospect of the United States becoming an imperialistic nation galvanized a strong opposition, and many opponents rallied around the newly created American Anti-Imperialist League. Here are some excerpts from the Anti-Imperialist League’s platform which was adopted during the 1900 presidential campaign.

We hold that the policy known as imperialism is hostile to liberty and tends toward militarism, an evil from which it has been our glory to be free. We regret that it has become necessary in the land of Washington and Lincoln to reaffirm that all men, of whatever race or color, are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We maintain that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. We insist that the subjugation of any people is “criminal aggression.”  
. . . We hold, with Abraham Lincoln, that “no man is good enough to govern another man without that other’s consent.”