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IMPENDING CRISIS OF THE SOUTH, by Hinton Rowan Helper, was one of the most sensational books ever published in the United States. Appearing in the spring of 1857 as the nation was sliding toward civil war, the book became the centerpiece of an intense debate on the floor of the U.S. Congress. Helper, an obscure yeoman farmer from North Carolina, claimed that slavery was an economic disaster for the South and an insurmountable barrier to the economic advancement of the region's slaveless farmers. There was nothing new about this argument. Political economists had long claimed that slavery inhibited economic development and undermined small farmers, craftsmen, and manufacturers. Much of *The Impending Crisis* was a tedious recitation of dull statistics designed to prove this familiar argument. But Helper also added a shockingly inflammatory threat: If the southern planters did not voluntarily dismantle the slave system, he warned, the small farmers would launch a sustained class war across the South. Helper even hinted at a slave rebellion, although he himself had racist proclivities and little or no sympathy for the plight of the slaves. Coming at such a sensitive moment in national politics, it was no wonder southern leaders denounced Helper's northern supporters with such vehemence.

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James Oakes

See also **Slavery; and vol. 9: The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It.**

IMPERIALISM. Americans have long thought of themselves as an “anti-imperial” people. The nation was, after all, founded in revolt against the British Empire. In the twentieth century, the rhetoric of national “self-determination” pervaded American discussions of foreign affairs. From Thomas Jefferson to Woodrow Wilson, the United States defined itself in opposition to the imperialism of other empires.

Imperialism, in this American usage, refers to the domination of another society against the expressed will of its people. Imperialism can be both formal and informal. In the case of formal empire—as in the British rule over the thirteen American colonies during the eighteenth century—a powerful foreign state manages the day-to-day political, social, and economic affairs in another land. Informal empire, in contrast, refers to a more indirect arrangement, whereby a foreign state works through local intermediaries to manage a distant society. In early nineteenth-century India, for example, British authorities negotiated favorable trade arrangements with native monarchs rather than bear the heavy costs of direct imperial control.

Close attention to these two kinds of imperialism has led many scholars to conclude that, despite popular assumptions, imperialism as a general term applies to American history. In particular, the years after the Civil War show abundant evidence of Americans expanding their economic, political, military, and cultural control over foreign societies. The post-1865 period is distinguished from previous decades, when the young Republic was both struggling for its survival and expanding over contiguous territory that it rapidly incorporated into the constitutional structures of the United States. Imperialism implies something different from continental expansion. It refers to the permanent subordination of distant societies, rather than their reorganization as states of equal standing in a single nation. America extended its federalist structure of governance across the North American continent before the Civil War. After that watershed, a powerful United States established areas of domination in distant lands, whose people were not allowed equal representation in governance. By the dawn of the twentieth century, the United States had a large informal empire and a smaller but still significant formal empire as well.

From the Civil War to the Twentieth Century

William Henry Seward, secretary of state during and immediately after the Civil War, recognized that the United States needed an overseas empire for its future peace and prosperity. The wounds of the bloody North-South conflict would heal, he believed, only with the promise of overseas benefits for all sections of the country. Informal U.S. expansion into foreign markets—especially in Asia and the Caribbean—provided farmers and industrialists with access to consumers and resources. At a time when the U.S. economy had begun to employ factory manufacturing, mechanized agriculture, and railroad transportation, large overseas outlets became necessary for prosperity. Americans were dependent on assured access to international markets, Seward believed, and this required expansion across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Seward began by building a “highway” to Asia. This included annexation of the Brooks Islands in 1867 (renamed the Midway Islands in 1903). The secretary of state also negotiated a treaty guaranteeing American businesses access to the island kingdom of Hawaii. The U.S. Senate eventually approved this treaty in 1875. Seward expected that the Brooks Islands and Hawaii would serve as important stepping-stones for American influence in the lucrative markets of China and Japan.

When the United States encountered resistance to its post-Civil War expansion in Asia, the government employed diplomatic and military pressures. In 1866, after the Japanese government closed itself to foreign trade, the United States joined other imperial powers—the British, the French, and the Dutch—in forcing Western access to the island nation over the objections of native interests. Seward dispatched a warship, the U.S.S. *Wyoming*, to join in naval exercises off the Japanese coast.

In China, the largest and most promising market, Seward used diplomacy instead of explicit force. According to the BURLINGAME TREATY, signed in September 1868, the Chinese government gave the United States trading access to designated coastal areas, with the additional right to build railroads and telegraphs facilitating penetration of the hinterland. In return, the United States allowed thousands of Chinese laborers to migrate across the Pacific. This arrangement helped to relieve China's overpopulation difficulties, and it provided American companies—particularly on the West Coast—with a large pool of low-wage workers. The U.S. government worked with the Chinese emperor to guarantee a market for the export of American products and the import of cheap labor.

Seward's imperialism set the stage for succeeding secretaries of state, but his policies inspired strong domestic resistance. By the time he left office in 1869, Seward had built an American overseas empire that included formal possessions, including the Brooks Islands and Alaska (1867), as well as larger informal areas of influence, which included Hawaii, Japan, and, most important of all, China. Many Americans expressed discomfort with this evidence of imperialism, including Republican Senator Charles Sumner and Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*. Seward's other ambitious plans—including acquisition of the Danish West Indies (the U.S. Virgin Islands) and the construction of an isthmian canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans through a sliver of Colombia—died at the hands of anti-imperialists on the floor of the U.S. Senate.

Despite these setbacks, Seward and his successors recognized the overriding imperialist trend in American foreign policy at the time. In addition to the economic advantages derived from overseas expansion, a series of internal social and cultural pressures pushed the United States to become more involved in managing distant societies. Religious belief—in particular a desire to spread Christian “civilization”—had motivated Western settlement across the North American continent during the period of manifest destiny, before the Civil War. Now these same urges inspired overseas proselytism. Ministers like Josiah Strong of the Home Missionary Society called upon thousands of their followers to establish churches and schools throughout China and other foreign countries. Christian missionaries would not only save less privileged souls, they would also display the profound righteousness of American society. As was the case with Britain and many other imperial powers in the nineteenth century, the United States defined its national identity by asserting superiority over—and a duty to convert—“Oriental” heathens.

American imperialism, in this sense, was part of a much larger international competition. Britain, France, and Russia—and by the last decades of the nineteenth century, Germany and Japan—were all competing for influence in Asia, Africa, and other “open” spaces for expansion. American leaders felt they had to adopt impe-

rialistic policies of their own. Otherwise, the United States risked permanent exclusion from future opportunities abroad. Secretary of State John Hay's Open Door Notes of 1899 and 1900 codified this argument, proclaiming that the United States would assert its presence in China and other countries to make sure that other imperialist powers did not close off American access. As a self-conscious great power with a civilizing mission and a growing dependence on foreign markets, the United States needed its own empire—preferably informal. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner's influential 1893 essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” captured this sense that the proving ground for American society was no longer on the North American continent, but now overseas.

One could not build an empire—even an informal one—without an adequate military. After an initial decade of demobilization after the Civil War, the United States embarked upon a period of extensive naval construction in the late nineteenth century. Alfred Thayer Mahan, president of the newly created Naval War College, outlined a new military doctrine for American imperialism in his widely read lectures, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*. First published in 1890, Mahan's text mined the history of the Roman and British empires to show that a large trading state could ensure its wealth and security by asserting dominance of the sea. A large battleship navy, in control of important strategic waterways and coaling stations across the globe, would guarantee the flow of commerce. It would also allow for the United States to influence foreign societies, transporting concentrated forces across great distances.

Largely as a consequence of Mahan's influence, the U.S. naval fleet grew consistently between 1890 and 1914. More ships created new opportunities for force projection. New overseas naval interests, in turn, justified ever larger estimates of strategic necessities. By 1898, the U.S. Navy had become both an advocate and a tool of American imperialism.

The United States used its growing naval power to force the declining Spanish empire out of Cuba and the Philippines. In both areas, America became the new imperial power. In 1901, the United States—now in formal control of Cuba—forced the native government of the island to include in its constitution a series of stipulations known as the PLATT AMENDMENT (named for Senator Orville Platt, a Republican from Connecticut). These included assurances of American political and economic domination. The U.S. Navy acquired possession of a major facility on the island, Guantánamo Naval Base. Washington also asserted the future right to intervene militarily in Cuba if U.S. interests were jeopardized. After granting the island nominal independence in 1902, the United States did indeed send an “army of pacification” to the island in 1906 for the purpose of repressing anti-American groups. The United States practiced a combination of informal and formal imperialism in Cuba.

In the case of the Philippines, the United States initially went to war with Spain in 1898 for the purpose of acquiring an informal naval coaling station. Native resistance to U.S. interests and a growing recognition in Washington that the archipelago would serve as an ideal point of embarkation for trade with the Chinese mainland led President William McKinley to declare the Philippines a permanent U.S. colony on 21 December 1898. America fought a bloody forty-one-month war to secure possession of the entire archipelago. During this PHILIPPINE INSURRECTION, the United States created an occupation army that waged total war on local resistance. Forty-two hundred Americans died in battle for possession of this colony. As many as twenty thousand Filipino insurgents also died. As never before, the United States had established direct control over a foreign society—seven thousand miles from North America—through brute force. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the evidence of American imperialism was unmistakable.

Liberal Imperialism

During the first half of the twentieth century, the United States was both an advocate of democracy and a practitioner of imperialism. The two are not necessarily contradictory. Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson both believed they had an obligation to spread American ideas and interests across the globe. As a new world power, the United States had an apparent opportunity to remake the international system in a way that would eliminate the old ravages of war and corrupt alliances. Roosevelt and Wilson sought to replace militaristic aristocracies with governments that promised economic development and, eventually, democracy. International change of this variety would, they assumed, best serve America's long-term interests.

In the short run, however, the “new diplomacy” of Roosevelt and Wilson required more extensive American imperialism. When societies refused to follow the alleged tide of “modern” economic development and democracy symbolized by the United States, Washington felt an urge to intervene. On a number of occasions, U.S. leaders went so far as to force societies to be “free” on American terms. This was the rationale behind a series of early twentieth-century U.S. interventions in the Western Hemisphere that included, among others, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Mexico. In each case, the United States asserted strategic and economic interests, and a long-term commitment to the betterment of the society under Washington's control. When U.S. military forces left their foreign areas of occupation, the threat of their redeployment served to intimidate those who wished to challenge U.S. influence.

In Europe and Asia, the United States pursued a consistent policy of informal imperialism during the first decades of the twentieth century. Contrary to the image of American diplomatic isolation before and after World War I, U.S. businesses worked with Washington's ex-

plicit—though often “unofficial”—support to build new overseas markets during this period. Investment firms like J. P. Morgan and Company lent large sums to countries such as Great Britain and France, forcing them to allow more American influence in the daily workings of their economies. Industrial concerns like Standard Oil, Singer Sewing Company, and International Harvester became more active in controlling natural resources overseas and marketing their products to foreign consumers. Perhaps most significant of all, intellectual and charitable groups like the Carnegie Council and the Rockefeller Foundation began to advise leaders in Europe, Asia, and Latin America on how they could make their societies and economies look more like that of the United States. Their seemingly “objective” counsels encouraged private property concentration, natural resource extraction, and increased trade—all factors that served to increase the influence of American firms.

The worldwide economic depression of the 1930s and the rise of fascism restricted much of the international commerce and communication that had flourished in the first decades of the century. These conditions, however, only heightened the pressures for informal American imperialism. Fearful that economic and political forces—especially in Germany—were moving against trade, economic development, and democracy, the U.S. government continued to encourage the activities of American companies and advisory groups abroad.

The administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, in particular, sponsored the overseas marketing of Hollywood-produced films. Movies helped to proselytize the individual freedoms and personal prosperity that Americans believed were essential for a peaceful, liberal world. Hollywood helped nurture foreign consumers who would soon want to purchase the American-made automobiles and other products glorified on the silver screen. Most significant of all, policymakers like Roosevelt believed that movie exports would help inspire positive views of the United States in foreign societies. The president even thought this might work with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin—an avid consumer of American movies. Roosevelt hoped that Hollywood depictions of Soviet-American friendship would help solidify the two nations in their fight against Nazi fascism.

World War II and the Cold War

U.S. participation in World War II formalized America's liberal imperialism of the prior decades. As part of the Atlantic Charter—negotiated when Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill met in secret between 9 and 12 August 1941—the United States proclaimed that the war against fascism would end with a “permanent system of general security” that would embrace national self-determination, free trade, and disarmament. Citizens of foreign countries would benefit from “improved labor standards, economic advancement, and social security” when they restructured their societies to look like the

United States. The Atlantic Charter laid out an agenda for total war against the large standing armies, state-run economies, and dictatorial governments that characterized fascist regimes. This is what one scholar calls the “American way of war.” Between 1941 and 1945, the United States deployed unprecedented military force—including two atomic bombs—to annihilate its most direct challengers in Asia and Europe. American commitments to free trade, economic development, and democracy required the unconditional surrender of Japanese, German, and Italian fascists. U.S. leaders and citizens not only asserted that their nation was the necessary “arsenal of democracy,” they also proclaimed that they would remake the world after the horrors of war and genocide. The defeat of fascism would christen the “American Century,” when the United States would play the unabashed role of liberal imperialist, planting the seeds of American-style economic growth and democracy across the globe.

The United States undertook this task with extraordinary resolve as soon as World War II came to a close in 1945. In the western half of Germany and the European continent, American policymakers rebuilt war-devastated societies. The Economic Recovery Program of 1947 (also known as the *MARSHALL PLAN*, after Secretary of State George Marshall) provided a staggering \$13 billion of U.S. aid to feed starving people, reorganize industry, and jump-start economic production. Instead of the reparations and loans that weighed down European economies after World War I, the United States used the Marshall Plan to foster postwar stability, prosperity, and integration in Europe. With their economies organized along liberal capitalist lines, the west European countries developed favorable markets for American exports only a few years after the end of World War II.

In Japan and the western half of Germany, America’s liberal imperialism was formal and incredibly successful. In both societies, U.S. officials helped to write new constitutions. The Japanese national charter of 1946 prohibited militarism and state control over the economy. It gave Japanese women the right to vote for the first time, promoted noncommunist labor unions, encouraged free public expression, and created new opportunities for American-style schooling. The new German “Basic Law,” promulgated in 1949, similarly outlawed fascism and ensured individual rights, personal property ownership, and free elections. In both societies, the United States worked with a series of local politicians to uproot authoritarian traditions and impose liberal democracy. American officials sought to prevent future war, improve the lives of foreign citizens, and ensure U.S. strategic and economic interests. These goals were not incompatible; in fact, they reflected a formalization of American assumptions dating back to 1865.

The Soviet Union objected to America’s liberal imperialism for obvious reasons. Joseph Stalin and his successors recognized that U.S. expansion in Europe and Asia prohibited the spread of communist ideals. Instead

of the worker rights and economic equality championed by the Soviet Union—in words, if not in practice—American influence privileged personal liberties and individual wealth accumulation. The conflict between America’s liberal democratic vision and the Soviet Union’s communist alternative created an environment of competing imperialisms, which contemporaries called the “Cold War.”

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Soviet criticisms of U.S. imperialism gained some popular support in Asian, African, and Latin American societies struggling for independence against inherited European and American domination. This was most evident in Indochina. Despite its anticolonial inclinations, U.S. leaders supported French colonialism in this region of Southeast Asia after World War II. In the eyes of U.S. policymakers, national independence for Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian citizens threatened to undermine the stability and security of the region. Nationalist governments would allegedly threaten trade and economic development. Most significantly, American leaders feared that newly independent governments would fall under the influence of Soviet and, after 1949, Chinese communism. Liberal imperialism appeared necessary to contain communist expansion and prepare “underdeveloped” societies for eventual independence.

When Vietnamese nationalists—aided, as Washington predicted, by China and the Soviet Union—forced the French out of Indochina in 1954, the United States took over as a formal imperialist in the region. By the end of 1965, U.S. soldiers were fighting an extensive ground, sea, and air war against Vietnamese nationalists. Before the last U.S. troops withdrew from the region in 1975, hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of peasants had died or suffered dislocation as a consequence of American military activities. In addition, 58,193 U.S. soldiers perished in this war.

The Vietnam War illustrated the extended brutality of American imperialism during the Cold War. Long-standing economic and political impulses had combined with militant anticommunism to devastate much of Southeast Asia. Observers in countries around the world—including the United States—condemned American foreign policy for undermining the liberal purposes that it claimed to serve. The global revolt witnessed in 1968 on city streets across the United States, Europe, Asia, and Latin America was an international reaction against American imperialism.

After Vietnam and to the Twenty-First Century

American foreign policy was never the same after the Vietnam War. Aware of the resistance that the formal elements of American imperialism had inspired, policymakers returned to more informal mechanisms for asserting influence abroad. Economic globalization and human rights advocacy took center stage, along with continued anticommunism. The promise of American-style prosperity and individual rights—championed by politicians,

businesspeople, and Hollywood writers—triumphed over the gray authoritarianism of communist regimes. By 1991, societies across the globe rushed to attract American investment and aid. Citizens sought out American cultural exports—including McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and Michael Jordan.

America's informal imperialism in the late twentieth century was remarkably effective. It did, however, inspire serious resistance. Instead of adopting communist slogans, as they had in the 1950s and 1960s, opponents of U.S. influence after 1991 turned largely to religion. Fundamentalisms of many varieties—Christian, Jewish, and Islamic—arose to challenge the decadence and hypocrisy of American liberal democracy. They condemned the United States for undermining traditional sources of authority and morality in foreign societies. They recognized that the free trade, economic development, and popular elections advocated by the United States would destroy many local hierarchies.

International terrorism—symbolized most frighteningly by the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—emerged, in part, as a reaction to a long history of formal and informal American imperialism. This observation does not, in any way, justify the abhorrent terrorist activities. American imperialism has produced both positive and negative outcomes, as the contrast between post-World War II Japan and Vietnam makes clear. Nonetheless, the extraordinary overseas influence of the United States, dating back to 1865, has inspired violent resistance. Americans probably will not abandon their liberal imperialist assumptions in the twenty-first century, but they will surely develop new strategies for isolating and defeating foreign challengers.

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See also **Anti-Imperialists; China, Relations with; Cuba, Relations with; Hawaii; Intervention; Japan, Relations with; Philippines; Spanish-American War; Vietnam War; and vol. 9: Anti-Imperialist League Platform.**

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