The Roots of American Imperialism

Closing the Frontier

Read the passage, then answer the questions that follow. Use the back if you need it.

Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The frontier is the line of the most rapid and effective Americanization.

The frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people. The pioneer needed the goods of the coast, and so the grand series of internal improvements and railroad legislation began, with potent nationalizing effects.

But the most important effect of the frontier has been the promotion of democracy here and in Europe. As has been indicated, the frontier is productive of individualism. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control. The frontier states that came into the Union in the first quarter of a century of its existence came in with democratic suffrage provisions, and had reactive effects of the highest importance upon the older states.

To the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expediency.

What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks, breaking the bond of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities, that, and more, the ever retreating frontier has been to the United States directly, and to the nations of Europe more remotely. And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.

-Frederick Jackson Turner, The Significance of the Frontier in American History, 1893

1. What does Frederick Jackson Turner believe was the significance of the frontier in American history?

2. According to Turner, what might be the implications of the closing of the frontier?

3. With the benefit of 100+ years of hindsight, was Turner correct? Defend your answer. (Feel free to use the back.)
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The Case for Expansion

Read the following positions as stated by imperialists (those in favor of American expansion). Answer the questions that follow. Use the back if you need it.

First. In the cause of humanity and to put an end to the barbarities, bloodshed, starvation, and horrible miseries now existing there [in Cuba], and which the parties to the conflict are either unable or unwilling to stop or mitigate....

Second. We owe it to our citizens in Cuba to afford them that protection and indemnity for life and property....

Third. The right to intervene may be justified by the very serious injury to the commerce, trade, and business of our people and by the wanton destruction of property and devastation of the island.

-President McKinley's call for war against Spain, 1898

The opposition tells us that we ought not to govern a people without their consent. I answer, the rule of liberty that all just government derives its authority from the consent of the governed, applies only to those who are capable of self-government.

We govern the Indians without their consent; we govern the territories without their consent; we govern our children without their consent.

I answer, would not the natives of the Philippines prefer the just, humane, civilizing government of the Republic to the savage, bloody rule of pillage and extortion from which we have rescued them?

-Senator Albert J. Beveridge, 1900

Thus...duty and interest alike, duty of the highest kind and interest of the highest and best kind, impose upon us the retention of the Philippines, the development of the islands, and the expansion of our Eastern commerce.

-Henry Cabot Lodge

1. List and describe five different arguments in support of American expansion. Put these in order from most to least viable (in your opinion).
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The Anti-Imperialists

Read the following positions as stated by anti-imperialists (those against American expansion). Answer the questions that follow. Use the back if you need it.

A self-governing state cannot accept sovereignty over an unwilling people. The United States cannot act upon the ancient heresy that might makes right.

Platform of the Anti-Imperialist League

[Islands in the Caribbean], situated in tropical waters, and occupied by another race, of another color, never can become a permanent possession of the United States. You may seize it by force of arms or by diplomacy, where a naval squadron does more than the minister, but the enforced jurisdiction cannot endure. Already by a higher statute is that island set part to the colored race....

I protect against this legislation as another stage in a drama of blood. I protest against it in the name of Justice outraged by violence, in the name of Humanity insulted, in the name of the weak trodden down, in the name of Peace imperiled, and in the name of the African race, whose first effort at Independence is rudely assailed.

-Senator Charles Sumner’s response, 1870

1. In your own words, summarize the arguments of the anti-imperialists above.

2. How do you think the U.S.’s legacy of dealings with Native Americans and unwilling African émigrés influenced imperialist and anti-imperialist thought in the late 1800s?
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Diplomacy Workshop

For Monday, answer one of the following questions completely and convincingly.

You can draw, write, Podcast, PowerPoint, storyboard, or whatever – just record your ideas in a format you can turn in. If it’s text, I’d recommend at least three paragraphs.

Don't forget, this is your opinion. There are no right or wrong answers (though there are interesting versus dull, fertile versus barren, plausible versus whacko answers)\(^1\).

1. What principles should govern American foreign policy?

2. When should the United States interfere in the internal affairs of a foreign country?

3. What, in your view, were the relative importance of economic interest, ideology, and strategic interest in encouraging American imperialism?