

# What is Imperialism?

by Alan Singer, Editor, *Social Science Docket*

I advocate an “essential questions” approach to teaching high school global history. My goal is to engage students in defining questions about the past that they want to answer. Usually, but not always, they select particular questions about history because the exploration of these questions offer insights into contemporary controversies.

In a period when the global military and economic policies of the United States have contributed to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, increasingly concerns about the impact of globalization on the American economy and workforce, and fear of new “terrorist” attacks, an essential question that needs to be continually addressed in classes is “What is imperialism?”

Subsumed within this question is the debate over whether foreign expansion by militarily and economically powerful countries are a force for positive global change (i.e., the transformation of the role of women in traditional societies), must be condemned as a cause of exploitation, chaos and war (i.e., the upsurge in religious fundamentalism in the Islamic world), or somehow can be justified on occasion because of specific local circumstances (i.e., intervention to prevent genocide)?

## The Literature of Imperialism

In *Culture and Imperialism* (NY: Vintage, 1994), Edward Said surveyed 19th century European and American literature and explored the way support for imperialism was deeply imbedded in the culture of European societies and the United States. He quotes John Stuart Mill, a noted British philosopher and economist, who justified British imperial control over third-world people because of its importance for England’s economic development.

According to Mill, “These outlying possessions of ours are hardly to be looked upon as countries, carrying on an exchange of commodities with other countries, but more properly as outlying agricultural or manufacturing estates belonging to a larger community. Our West Indian colonies, for example, cannot be regarded as countries with a productive capital of their own... [but are rather] the place where England finds it convenient to carry on the production of sugar, coffee and a few other tropical commodities. All the capital employed is English capital; almost all the industry is carried on for English uses, there is little production of anything except for staple commodities, and these are sent to England, not to be exchanged for things exported to the colony and consumed by its inhabitants, but to be sold in England for the benefit of the proprietors there. The trade with the West Indies is hardly to be considered an external trade, but more resembles the traffic between town and country” (Said, 90).

John Ruskin, another well-known writer and thinker of that era, also justified imperialist expansion around the world. In an 1870 lecture at Oxford University, Ruskin argued that imperialism spread civilization. Britain’s “destiny,” according to Ruskin, was to be a “source of light, a centre of peace” and the “mistress of Learning and of the Arts” for the entire world.

To promote this destiny, “she [Britain] must found colonies as fast and as far as she is able, formed of her most energetic and worthiest men, seizing every piece of fruitful waste ground she can set her foot on, and there teaching these her colonists that their chief virtue is to be fidelity to their country, and that their first aim is to be to advance the power of England by land and sea, and that, though they live off a distant plot of ground, they are no more to consider themselves therefore disfranchised from their native land, than the sailors of her fleets do, because they float of distant waves” (Said, 103).

The British upper class’ sense that they were somehow chosen by God for world domination was satirized by Charles Dickens in the novel *Dombey and Son* (1848). Dickens wrote, “The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light. Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships: rainbows gave them promise of fair weather; winds blew for or against their enterprises; stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the centre. Common abbreviations took new meanings in his eyes, and had sole reference to them. A.D. had no concern with anno Domini, but stood for anno Dombei - and Son” (50).

European imperialist policies were often justified by racist ideology. Jules Harmand (1845-1921), a French naval doctor who later became Commissaries-General in Tonkin (Vietnam) and the Minister to Japan, was a leading theorist who saw imperialism as an extension of Darwinian evolution (*Imperialism*, Philip D. Curtin, ed., NY: Harper & Row, 291-293). Harmand argued that depriving a people of independence “is a demonstration of that universal law of the struggle for survival in which we are all engaged, not only on account of our nature, which condemns us to win or die, but also on account of civilization. It cannot permit such vast and fertile regions of the globe to be lost to us and to humanity by the incapacity of those who hold them and by the ill treatment given these lands so long as they are left to themselves. . . . It is necessary, then, to accept as a principle and point of departure the fact that there is a hierarchy of races and civilizations, and that we belong to the superior race and civilization.”

In his poem, “The White Man’s Burden” (1899), Rudyard Kipling echoed similar ideas when he called on the United States to join the European powers in the thankless imperial task of serving the needs of captive nations, overcoming “terror,” and filling the “mouth of Famine,” all while “sloth and heathen folly” bring your “hope to nought.”

### **The Division of Africa**

Imperial ambition and economic greed, coupled with racist ideology, were used to justify the division of Africa by Europe’s major and minor powers. From November, 1884, through February, 1885, representatives from Great Britain, France, and Germany were joined by delegates from Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the United States, in Berlin where they attempted to coordinate their expansion into sub-Saharan Africa. While the “General Act” drafted at the Berlin Conference claimed to promote free trade and preserve the rights of native tribes, its principle accomplishment was to require that future territorial claims on the continent be reported to all the signatories of the agreement so that rival claims could be resolved amicably. Among the other conference achievements was recognition of Germany’s claim to Cameroon and King Leopold II of Belgium’s sovereignty in the Congo (Ferguson, 196-198). Between 1885 and 1908, the Congo Free State was run as the personal property of Leopold II and as many as 10 million Africans died there from misgovernment, exploitation and state-sponsored terror. Forced labor did not end until around 1930 (Riding, 2005).

In the United States, the idea of Manifest Destiny -- that western expansion at the expense of Mexico and native peoples was God’s will -- was transformed into support for overseas conquest and colonies. In his poem, “Thou Mother With Thy Equal Brood,” Walt Whitman declared that the United States, the “ship of Democracy,” holds not the future of “thysself alone, not of the Western continent alone,” but the “Earth’s resume entire floats on thy keel.” He warned that the nation faced difficulties because “the livid cancer spread its hideous claws, clinging upon thy breasts, seeking to strike thee deep within” and that “consumption of the worst, moral consumption, shall rouge thy face with hectic,” but he was convinced that “thou shalt face thy fortunes, thy diseases, and surmount them all.”

Edward Said saw similar imperialist themes in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. Said describes Captain Ahab as an “allegorical representation of the American world quest; he is obsessed, compelling, unstoppable, completely wrapped up in his own rhetorical justification and his sense of cosmic symbolism” (288).

### **United States as Imperial Power**

At the dawn of the twentieth century, United States President Theodore Roosevelt was the leading advocate for a United States policy of global imperialism. According to Roosevelt, “We ourselves are becoming, owing to our strength and geographical situation, more and more the balance of power of the whole globe.” Roosevelt believed that “Conflicts between civilized nations and the ‘semi-barbarous peoples’ [are] a most regrettable but necessary international police duty which must be performed for the sake of the welfare of mankind.” He felt that “Chronic wrong-doing may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power.”

Roosevelt was also clear about the relationship between business expansion and empire. “Business concerns which have the largest means at their disposal and are managed by the ablest men take the lead in the strife for commercial supremacy among the nations of the world. America has only just begun to assume the commanding position in the international business world which we believe will more and more be hers. It is of the utmost importance that this position be not jeopardized, especially at a time when foreign markets are essential.”

Among the leading opponents of U.S. imperial expansion were Democratic Party presidential candidate (and future Secretary of State) William Jennings Bryan and the author Mark Twain. In 1899, Bryan charged that “When the advocates of imperialism find it impossible to reconcile a colonial policy with the principles of our government. . . they fall back in helpless despair upon the assertion that it is destiny. . . Avarice paints destiny with a dollar mark before it, militarism equips it with a sword” (Feder, 235).

The platform of the American Anti-Imperialist League declared that “the policy known as imperialism is hostile to liberty, and tends toward militarism. . . We insist that the subjugation of any people is ‘criminal aggression’ and open disloyalty to the distinctive principles of our Government” (Feder, 234). Mark Twain, a member of the Anti-Imperialist League, was quoted in the *New York World* on October 6, 1900 saying, “We have no more business in China than in any other country that is not ours. There is the case of the Philippines. . . , we have got into a mess, a quagmire from which each fresh step renders the difficulty of extrication immensely greater.” On October 15, 1900, he declared in the *New York Herald*, “I have seen that we do not intend to free, but to subjugate the people of the Philippines. We have gone there to conquer, not to redeem. . . It should, it seems to me, be our pleasure and duty to make those people free, and let them deal with their own domestic questions in their own way. And so I am an anti-imperialist. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land.”

During the first half of the 20th century, critics of imperialism focused on the relationship between imperialism, nationalism and capitalism. J. A. Hobson, an English economist, defined imperialism as “the endeavor of the great controllers of industry to broaden the channel for the flow of their surplus wealth by seeking foreign markets and foreign investments to take off the goods and capital they cannot use at home” (Seldes, 324). Hobson considered imperialism the natural expansion of nationality.

In a 1919 speech after the conclusion of World War I, French novelist Anatole France declared “Let us create rational human beings, capable of . . . resisting those blooded ambitions of nationalism and imperialism which have crushed their brothers” (Seldes, 254). During the Russian Revolution, V. I. Lenin described it as “capitalism dying, not dead” (Seldes, 408) and he wrote: “World capitalism has at the present time, i.e., about the beginning of the 20th century, reached the stage of imperialism. . . . Imperialist wars, i.e., wars for the mastery of the world, for markets, for bank capital and for the strangulation of small nations, are inevitable under such a state of affairs” (Seldes, 410).

### **Western Civilization?**

India, one of the main victim’s of British imperial ambition, produced some of imperialism’s most bitter critics. Mohandas Gandhi, when asked by an interviewer what he thought of Western Civilization, declared that it would be a good idea. In 1958, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharal Nehru argued that “Imperial-ism, or colonialism, suppressed, and suppresses, the progressive social forces. Inevitably, it aligns itself with certain privileged groups or classes because it is interested in preserving the social and economic *status quo*” (Seldes, 521).

Historian Richard Barnet, in his book *The Roots of War* (1972:21), argues that in the second half of the 20th century the United States’ interventionist policies around the world had “all the elements of a powerful imperial creed. . . : a sense of mission, historical necessity, and evangelical fervor.”

According to Barnet, “The [American] imperial creed rests on a theory of law-making. According to the strident globalists, like [President Lyndon Baines] Johnson, and the muted globalists, like [President Richard] Nixon, the goal of U.S. foreign policy is to bring about a world increasingly subject to the rule of law. But it is the United States which must “organize the peace,” to use Secretary of State Rusk’s words. The United State imposes the “international interest” by setting the ground rules for economic development and military deployment across the planet. Thus the United States sets rules for Soviet behavior in Cuba, Brazilian behavior in Brazil, Vietnamese behavior in Vietnam. Cold War policy is expressed by a series of directives on such extraterritorial matters as whether British Guiana may have a Marxist dentist to run it. Cicero’s definition of the early Roman empire was remarkably similar. It was the domain over which Rome enjoyed the legal right to enforce the law. Today

America's self-appointed writ runs throughout the world, including the Soviet Union and China, over whose territory the U.S. government has asserted the right to fly military aircraft. The United States, uniquely blessed with surpassing riches and an exceptional history, stands above the international system, not within it. Supreme among nations, she stands ready to be the bearer of the Law."

I believe Barnett's discussion of the United States "imperial creed" in the post-World War II period also describes the Bush credo announced at the beginning of the twenty-first century. On October 6, 2001, President George W. Bush declared that the United States had the right to impose its will on the rest of the world in the name of fighting terrorism and promoting freedom. According to Bush, "In this conflict there is no neutral ground. . . ., there can be no peace in a world of sudden terror. In the face of today's new threat the only way to pursue peace is to pursue those who threaten it. . . . We defend not only our precious freedoms but also the freedom of people everywhere to live and raise their children free from fear."

In September, 2002, President Bush, in a report to Congress, extended this policy to justify unilateral military action by the United States and preemptive strikes against countries and groups perceived of as threats to the United States. Bush argued that "Given the goals of rogue states and terrorists, the United States can no longer solely rely on a reactive posture as we have in the past. . . . As a matter of common sense and self-defense, America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed. . . . While the United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting pre-emptively against such terrorists to prevent them from doing harm against our people and our country" ("Bush outlines strategy of pre-emptive strikes, cooperation," *USA Today*, 9/20/02).

Personally, I oppose the Bush foreign policy and believe it is decidedly imperialist. Based on my reading of history, imperialist powers have never promoted the freedom of dominated peoples or the best interests of other societies. In addition, I believe the United States, under President Bush, has further destabilized the world. Its actions have driven desperate people into joining the ranks of fundamentalists who offer some hope of resistance against imperial power. By doing this, the Bush policy promotes the very terrorism it hopes to suppress and endangers us all.

As a social studies teacher, my hope is to engage students in an examination of imperialism past and present. My goal is not to get them to agree with me, but to prepare them to participate as informed and active citizens in ongoing debates within a democratic society. "If this be treason," as Patrick Henry declared in 1765, I believe we should "make the most of it."

## European Imperialism in the Congo

Source: Adam Hochschild (1999). *King Leopold's Ghost* (NY: Houghton Mifflin); Alan Riding (February 9, 2005, E3). "Art Show Forces Belgium to Ask Hard Questions About Its Colonial Past," *The New York Times*.



Belgium Congo, Early 1900's.  
Anti-slavery International, London.

A. In the 1870s, King Leopold of Belgium wanted a colony in Africa. To promote this ambition, he hosted a Geological Conference in Brussels in 1876. In his welcoming speech, Leopold presented his vision of the goal for European expansion into Africa.

"To open to civilization the only part of our globe which it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the darkness which hangs over entire peoples, is, I dare say, a crusade worthy of this century of progress. . . It seemed to me that Belgium, a centrally located and neutral country, would be a suitable place for such a meeting. . . Need I say that in bringing you to Brussels I was guided by no egotism? No, gentlemen, Belgium may be a small country, but she is happy and satisfied with her fate; I have no other ambition than to serve her well" (44-45).

B. History has preserved few examples of how conquered people viewed their conquerors. In this passage, a Waguhha from West Africa expresses his view of the White man. It is from the 1876 diary of the British explorer, Henry Morton Stanley.

"How can he be a good man who comes for no trade, whose feet you never see, who always goes covered with clothes, unlike all other people? No, there is something very mysterious about him, perhaps wicked, perhaps he is a magician, at any rate it is better to leave him alone and not disturb him" (53).

C. The British explorer Henry Morton Stanley believed that "missionaries of commerce" could spread the "gospel of enterprise" in Africa. However, for this to succeed, he felt it was necessary for Africans to abandon their ways of life and accept European customs.

"I foresaw a brilliant future of Africa, if by any miracle of good fortune I could persuade the dark millions of the interior to cast off their fabrics of grass clothing and don. . . second-hand costumes. . . See what a ready market lies here for old clothes! The garments shed by the military heroes of Europe, of the club lackeys, of the liveried servants of modern Pharaohs, the frockcoats of a lawyer, merchant, or a Rothschild; or perhaps the grave garb of these my publishers, might find people of the rank of Congo chieftainship to wear them" (69).

D. General Henry Shelton Sanford was the United States minister to Belgium and later the personal envoy of King Leopold to the United States. Sanford claimed that Leopold and Belgium were civilizing influences on Africa. In 1883, President Arthur included a passage drafted by Sanford in his annual address to Congress.

"The rich and populous valley of the Kongo is being opened by a society called the International African Association, of which the King of the Belgians is the president. . . Large

tracts of territory have been ceded to the Association by native chiefs, roads have been opened, steamboats have been placed on the river and the nuclei of states established. . . under one flag which offers freedom to commerce and prohibits the slave trade. The objects of the society are philanthropic. It does not aim at permanent political control, but seeks the neutrality of the valley” (78).

E. As a result of lobbying by King Leopold’s envoy to the United States, Secretary of State Frelinghuysen officially recognized the Belgium king’s control over the Congo.

“The Government of the United States announces its sympathy with and approval of the humane and benevolent purposes of the International Association of the Congo, administering, as it does, the interest of the Free States there established, and will order the officers of the United States, both on land and sea, to recognize the flag of the International African Association as the flag of friendly Government” (81).

F. In 1889, King Leopold of Belgium awarded the British explorer Henry Morton Stanley the Grand Cross of the Congo. In response, Stanley issued the following praise of Leopold.

“What does the greatness of a monarch consist in? If it is the extent of his territory, then the Emperor of Russia is the greatest of all. If it is the splendour and power of military organization, then William II (of Germany) takes first place. But if royal greatness consists in the wisdom and goodness of a sovereign leading his people with the solicitude of a shepherd watching over his flock, then the greatest sovereign is your own” (94).

G. This passage is from the diary of one of the officers who accompanied the British explorer Henry Morton Stanley on a trip up the Congo River in 1887. The expedition, which would include 389 Europeans, was approved by King Leopold. One of the financial backers of the trip was the British Royal Geographic Society.

“It was most interesting, lying in the bush watching the natives quietly at their day’s work. Some women...were making banana flour by pounding up dried bananas. Men we could see building huts and engaged in other work, boys and girls running about, singing...I opened the game by shooting one chap through the chest. He fell like a stone...Immediately a volley was poured into the village” (99).

H. African porters were used to carry goods and supplies around the rapids of the Congo River before a railroad was built. In 1896, Edmond Picard, a Belgian government official, described a caravan of porters.

“Unceasingly we meet these porters...black, miserable, with only a horribly filthy loin-cloth for clothing, frizzy and bare head supporting the load—box, bale, ivory tusk...barrel; most of them sickly, drooping under a burden increased by tiredness and insufficient food – a handful of rice and some stinking dried fish; pitiful walking caryatids, beasts of burden with then monkey legs, with drawn features, eyes fixed and round from preoccupation with keeping their balance and from the daze of exhaustion. They come and go like this by the thousands...requisitioned by the State armed with its powerful militia, handed over by chiefs whose slaves they are and who make off with their salaries, trotting with bent knees, belly forward, an arm raised to steady the load, the other leaning on a long walking-stick, dusty and sweaty, insects spreading out across the mountains and valleys their many fields and their task of Sisyphus, dying along the road or, the journey over, heading off to die from overwork in their villages” (120-121).

I. Stanislas Lefranc was a Belgian prosecutor who went to the Congo to work as a magistrate (judge). He witnessed the beating of African children and adults who were considered disobedient or disrespectful of Europeans. The *chicotte* was a whip made of sun-dried hippopotamus hide. Lefranc sent newspaper articles to Belgium complaining about this practice.

“The station chief selects the victims...Trembling, haggard, they lie face down on the ground...two of their companions, sometimes four, seize them by the feet and hands, and remove their cotton drawers...Each time that the torturer lifts up the *chicotte*, a reddish stripe appears on the skin of the pitiful victims, who, however firmly held, gasp in frightful contortions...At the first blows the unhappy victims let out horrible cries which soon become faint groans...In a refinement of evil, some officers, and I’ve witnessed this, demand that when the sufferer gets up, panting, he must graciously give the military salute” (121).