

Lecture Eleven

Informal Empire—Roosevelt to Wilson

Scope: Whereas President William McKinley established a formal empire during and after the 1898 war with Spain, his three successors established a related but informal empire in Central America and the Caribbean. That informal empire took the form of U.S. economic dominance throughout the region; the creation of an independent Republic of Panama as a site for a transoceanic canal; protectorate treaties with that new nation, as well as Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, that provided for both American military intervention and financial supervision; and a new corollary to the Monroe Doctrine to justify this behavior. The informal imperialism of the United States also involved major military interventions in Mexico that almost led to another full-scale war between the two nations. This lecture explains how and why this informal empire was created, specifically exploring the actions of the supposedly anti-imperialist Woodrow Wilson, as well the openly imperialist Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft.

Outline

- I. The acquisition of a formal overseas empire led to a massive debate in the Senate and the public at large.
 - A. Those favoring a formal overseas empire won the Senate debate over ratification of the Treaty of Paris in 1899.
 - B. The Philippine insurrection and U.S. military tactics in suppressing that insurrection led to renewed debate and congressional investigations and turned many Americans against additional overseas colonial acquisitions.
- II. The informal American empire was based primarily on trade and U.S. economic power.
 - A. Even before the war with Spain, Americans had extended their massive economic and financial power into Central America, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and Asia.
 - B. Major hopes for future trade expansion focused on China, the greatest untapped market in the world but one that the European imperialist powers appeared ready to carve up by 1898.
 - C. One reason for acquiring a colonial empire in the Pacific had been the desire to establish a series of naval bases from the United States to China to prevent such a partition.
 - D. In 1899, Secretary of State John Hay (1838–1905) issued the famous Open Door Notes regarding China.
 1. These notes affirmed U.S. policies that had actually been in effect for nearly 50 years, but with this official issuance, those policies became virtually canonized.
 2. They also became, according to some scholars, the model for the expansion of U.S. power and influence globally.
- III. In the aftermath of the war with Spain, expansion over the next two decades focused on Central America and the Caribbean.
 - A. The United States desired control of this area for a host of strategic, economic, diplomatic, and ideological reasons, most notably, the desire to build a transoceanic canal and to control the strategic approaches to that canal.
 - B. The primary method for gaining informal control was the creation of five protectorates in the area between 1901 and 1915: Cuba, Panama, Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. Each of these small nations would officially remain independent but would be subject to U.S. economic and financial control and U.S. military intervention under certain circumstances.
 - C. Cuba was the first protectorate to be established and, thus, the model in this regard via the terms of the Platt Amendment of 1901.
 1. The Cubans agreed not to incur debt beyond their means or do anything else that would allow another foreign power to obtain control and to allow both U.S. military intervention to enforce these terms and a sanitation program to wipe out yellow fever.
 2. A year later, a trade treaty allowed Cuban sugar lower U.S. tariff rates—a boon to the Cuban sugar industry but a move that made that industry, and the Cuban economy, more dependent on the United States.
 3. In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) ordered U.S. troops back into Cuba to end a revolution and civil war that had broken out.
 - D. Roosevelt also moved to build a transoceanic canal during his presidency, which led to the creation of the Republic of Panama and a second protectorate.
 1. A province of Colombia, Panama was one of two potential routes for such a canal and the site of an earlier canal effort that had failed, organized by a French engineer, Ferdinand de Lesseps.

2. Congress had at first favored the alternative route through Nicaragua, but investors in the old Panama Canal Company convinced both Roosevelt and Congress to negotiate with Colombia for the Panama route via treaty instead.
 3. When the Colombian government rejected the treaty and demanded more money, the investors organized a revolution and a new government, which Roosevelt supported and quickly recognized. A 1903 treaty gave the United States the rights to a canal zone through Panama—and the right to intervene militarily to protect it.
- E. Roosevelt also provided the official rationale for such military interventions with his famous corollary to the Monroe Doctrine.
1. According to Roosevelt, European nations had a right to collect unpaid debts in the Caribbean and Central America by force, but such action could violate the Monroe Doctrine. Under Roosevelt’s corollary, the United States would intervene for the Europeans, militarily as well as financially, to make sure the debts were paid.
 2. By this corollary and his specific actions, Roosevelt played a major role in turning the Caribbean into an American lake.
- IV. A larger number of U.S. financial and military interventions would occur under Roosevelt’s successors, William Howard Taft (1857–1930) and Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924).
- A. Taft preferred “dollar diplomacy” to Roosevelt’s military interventions, while the moralistic and anti-imperialistic Wilson opposed both and promised a major shift in Latin American policy. But Taft would send U.S. troops into Nicaragua and establish financial supervision of that nation between 1909 and 1912, while Wilson would send troops into Haiti and the Dominican Republic, establish financial supervision over the former, and continue financial and military supervision in the other protectorates.
- B. This discrepancy can be partially explained by the existence of the canal, which needed to be defended, and by the fact that Taft and Wilson shared Roosevelt’s desire for control, order, and stability in the area as one way to prevent European intervention.
- C. An additional factor for Wilson was his desire to spread democracy into the area—even if it involved the use of force.
1. Wilson’s first intervention in the Mexican Revolution in 1913–1914 was an effort to overthrow the military dictator Victoriano Huerta, who had overthrown and murdered the constitutionalist reformer Francisco Madero.
 2. This effort alienated all parties in Mexico, though it did aid in Huerta’s overthrow by Venustiano Carranza and Pancho Villa, two of Madero’s lieutenants.
 3. Carranza and Villa then fought for control of the country. When a defeated Villa attacked Americans on both sides of the border, Wilson sent an army into Mexico that soon clashed with Carranza’s forces and left the two nations on the verge of a full-scale war.
 4. War would be narrowly averted and the U.S. Army would be withdrawn, but the entire episode, as well as Wilson’s other actions in Latin America, greatly expanded the informal American empire.

Suggested Readings:

Collin, *Theodore Roosevelt’s Caribbean*.

Gilderhus, *Pan-American Visions*.

Healy, *Drive to Hegemony*.

McCormick, *China Market*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Critics have long charged that an Open Door/free trade policy constitutes “the imperialism of the strong.” Do you agree? Why?
2. Compare and contrast the policies of Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson in Central America and the Caribbean. What differences and similarities do you note?