

## LECTURAS PARA CLASE

### **“The White Man’s Burden”: Kipling’s Hymn to U.S. Imperialism\***

In February 1899, British novelist and poet Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem entitled “The White Man’s Burden: The United States and The Philippine Islands.” In this poem, Kipling urged the U.S. to take up the “burden” of empire, as had Britain and other European nations. Published in the February, 1899 issue of *McClure’s Magazine*, the poem coincided with the beginning of the Philippine-American War and U.S. Senate ratification of the treaty that placed Puerto Rico, Guam, Cuba, and the Philippines under American control. Theodore Roosevelt, soon to become vice-president and then president, copied the poem and sent it to his friend, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, commenting that it was “rather poor poetry, but good sense from the expansion point of view.” Not everyone was as favorably impressed as Roosevelt. The racialized notion of the “White Man’s burden” became a euphemism for imperialism, and many anti-imperialists couched their opposition in reaction to the phrase.

Take up the White Man’s burden—

Send forth the best ye breed—

Go send your sons to exile

To serve your captives’ need

To wait in heavy harness

On fluttered folk and wild—

Your new-caught, sullen peoples,

\* Source: Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden: The United States & The Philippine Islands, 1899.” *Rudyard Kipling’s Verse: Definitive Edition* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1929).

Half devil and half child  
Take up the White Man's burden  
In patience to abide  
To veil the threat of terror  
And check the show of pride;  
By open speech and simple  
An hundred times made plain  
To seek another's profit  
And work another's gain  
Take up the White Man's burden—  
And reap his old reward:  
The blame of those ye better  
The hate of those ye guard—  
The cry of hosts ye humour  
(Ah slowly) to the light:  
"Why brought ye us from bondage,  
"Our loved Egyptian night?"  
Take up the White Man's burden-  
Have done with childish days-  
The lightly proffered laurel,  
The easy, ungrudged praise.  
Comes now, to search your manhood  
Through all the thankless years,

Cold-edged with dear-bought wisdom,

The judgment of your peers!

## **Kipling, the ‘White Man’s Burden,’ and U.S. Imperialism\***

by John Bellamy Foster and Robert W. McChesney

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*Topics:* Imperialism

We are living in a period in which the rhetoric of empire knows few bounds. In a special report on “America and Empire” in August, the London-based *Economist* magazine asked whether the United States would, in the event of “regime changes...effected peacefully” in Iran and Syria, “really be prepared to shoulder the white man’s burden across the Middle East?” The answer it gave was that this was “unlikely”—the U.S. commitment to empire did not go so far. What is significant, however, is that the question was asked at all.

Current U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have led observers to wonder whether there aren’t similarities and historical linkages between the “new” imperialism of the twenty-first century and the imperialism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Jonathan Marcus, the BBC’s defense correspondent, commented a few months back:

It should be remembered that more than one hundred years ago, the British poet Rudyard Kipling wrote his famous poem about what he styled as “the white man’s burden”—a warning about the responsibilities of empire that was directed not at London but at Washington and its new-found imperial responsibilities in the Philippines. It is not clear if President George W. Bush is a reader of poetry or of Kipling. But Kipling’s sentiments are as relevant today as they were when the poem was written in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War. (July 17, 2003)

\* Source: *Monthly Review. An Independent Socialist Magazine*. <https://monthlyreview.org/2003/11/01/kipling-the-white-mans-burden-and-u-s-imperialism/>

A number of other modern-day proponents of imperialism have also drawn connections with Kipling's poem, which begins with the lines:

Take up the White Man's burden—  
—Send forth the best ye breed—

Before discussing the reasons for this sudden renewed interest in Kipling's "White Man's Burden," it is necessary to provide some background on the history of U.S. imperialism in order to put the poem in context.

## From the Spanish-American War to the Philippine-American War

In the Spanish-American War of 1898 the United States seized the Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and the Pacific, emerging for the first time as a world power.\* As in Cuba, Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines had given rise to a national liberation struggle. Immediately after the U.S. naval bombardment of Manila on May 1, 1898, in which the Spanish fleet was destroyed, Admiral Dewey sent a gunboat to fetch the exiled Filipino revolutionary leader Emilio Aguinaldo from Hong Kong. The United States wanted Aguinaldo to lead a renewed revolt against Spain to prosecute the war before U.S. troops could arrive. The Filipinos were so successful that in less than two months they had all but defeated the Spanish on the main island of Luzon, bottling up the remaining Spanish troops in the capital city of Manila, while almost all of the archipelago fell into Filipino hands. In June, Filipino leaders issued their own Declaration of Independence based on the U.S. model. When U.S. forces finally arrived at the end of June the 15,000 Spanish troops holed up in Manila were surrounded by the Filipino army entrenched around the city—so that U.S. forces had to request permission to cross Filipino lines to engage these remaining Spanish troops. The Spanish army surrendered Manila to U.S. forces after only a few hours of fighting on August 13, 1898. In an agreement between the United States and Spain, Filipino forces were kept out of the city and were allowed no part in the surrender. This was the final battle of the war. John Hay, U.S. ambassador to Britain, captured the imperialist

spirit of the time when he wrote of the Spanish-American War as a whole that it was “a splendid little war.”

With the fighting with Spain over, however, the United States refused to acknowledge the existence of the new Philippine Republic. In October 1898 the McKinley administration publicly revealed for the first time that it intended to annex the entire Philippines. In arriving at this decision President McKinley is reported to have said that “God Almighty” had ordered him to make the Philippines a U.S. colony. Within days of this announcement the New England Anti-Imperialist League was established in Boston. Its membership was to include such luminaries as Mark Twain, William James, Charles Francis Adams and Andrew Carnegie. Nevertheless, the administration went ahead and concluded the Treaty of Paris in December, in which Spain agreed to cede the Philippines to the new imperial power, along with its other possessions seized by the United States in the war.

This was followed by a fierce debate in the Senate on the ratification of the treaty, centering on the status of the Philippines, which, except for the city of Manila, was under the control of the nascent Philippine Republic. On February 4, 1899, U.S. troops under orders to provoke a conflict with the Filipino forces ringing Manila were moved into disputed ground lying between U.S. and Filipino lines on the outskirts of the city. When they encountered Filipino soldiers the U.S. soldiers called “Halt” and then opened fire, killing three. The U.S. forces immediately began a general offensive with their full firepower in what amounted to a surprise attack (the top Filipino officers were then away attending a lavish celebratory ball), inflicting enormous casualties on the Filipino troops. The *San Francisco Call* reported on February 5 that the moment the news reached Washington McKinley told “an intimate friend...that the Manila engagement would, in his opinion, insure the ratification of the treaty tomorrow.”

These calculations proved correct and on the following day the Senate ratified the Treaty of Paris officially ending the Spanish-American War— ceding Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines to the United States, and putting Cuba under U.S. control. It stipulated that the United States would pay Spain twenty million dollars for the territories that it gained through the war. But this did little to

disguise the fact that the Spanish- American War was an outright seizure of an overseas colonial empire by the United States, in response to the perceived need of U.S. business, just recovering from an economic downturn, for new global markets.

The United States immediately pushed forward in the Philippine-American War that it had begun two days before—in what was to prove to be one of history's more barbaric wars of imperial conquest. The U.S. goal in this period was to expand not only into the Caribbean but also far into the Pacific—and by colonizing the Philippine Islands to gain a doorway into the huge Chinese market. (In 1900 the United States sent troops from the Philippines to China to join with the other imperial powers in putting down the Boxer Rebellion.)

Kipling's "White Man's Burden," subtitled "The United States and the Philippine Islands," was published in *McClure's Magazine* in February 1899.\* It was written when the debate over ratification of the Treaty of Paris was still taking place, and while the anti-imperialist movement in the United States was loudly decrying the plan to annex the Philippines. Kipling urged the United States, with special reference to the Philippines, to join Britain in the pursuit of the racial responsibilities of empire:

Your new-caught sullen peoples,  
—Half devil and half child.

Many in the United States, including President McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, welcomed Kipling's rousing call for the United States to engage in "savage wars," beginning in the Philippines. Senator Albert J. Beveridge of Indiana declared: "God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration....He has made us adept in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples." In the end more than 126,000 officers and men were sent to the Philippines to put down the Filipino resistance during a war that lasted officially from 1899 to 1902 but actually continued much longer, with sporadic resistance for most of a decade. U.S. troops logged 2,800

engagements with the Filipino resistance. At least a quarter of a million Filipinos, most of them civilians, were killed along with 4,200 U.S. soldiers (more than ten times the number of U.S. fatalities in the Spanish-American War).\*

From the beginning it was clear that the Filipino forces were unable to match the United States in conventional warfare. They therefore quickly switched to guerrilla warfare. U.S. troops at war with the Filipinos boasted in a popular marching song that they would “civilize them with the Krag” (referring to the Norwegian-designed gun with which the U.S. forces were outfitted). Yet they found themselves facing interminable small attacks and ambushes by Filipinos, who often carried long knives known as bolos. These guerrilla attacks resulted in combat deaths of U.S. soldiers in small numbers on a regular basis. As in all prolonged guerrilla wars, the strength of the Filipino resistance was due to the fact that it had the support of the Filipino population in general. As General Arthur MacArthur (the father of Douglas MacArthur), who became military governor of the Philippines in 1900, confided to a reporter in 1899:

When I first started in against these rebels, I believed that Aguinaldo’s troops represented only a faction. I did not like to believe that the whole population of Luzon—the native population that is—was opposed to us and our offers of aid and good government. But after having come this far, after having occupied several towns and cities in succession... I have been reluctantly compelled to believe that the Filipino masses are loyal to Aguinaldo and the government which he heads.

Faced with a guerrilla struggle supported by the vast majority of the population, the U.S. military responded by resettling populations in concentration camps, burning down villages (Filipinos were sometimes forced to carry the petrol used in burning down their own homes), mass hangings and bayonetings of suspects, systematic raping of women and girls, and torture. The most infamous torture technique, used repeatedly in the war, was the so-called “water cure.” Vast quantities of water were forced down the throats of prisoners. Their stomachs were then stepped on so that the water shot out three feet in the air “like an artesian well.” Most victims died not long afterwards. General Frederick Funston did not hesitate to announce that he had personally strung up a group of thirty-five Filipino

civilians suspected of supporting the Filipino revolutionaries. Major Edwin Glenn saw no reason to deny the charge that he had made a group of forty-seven Filipino prisoners kneel and “repent of their sins” before bayoneting and clubbing them to death. General Jacob Smith ordered his troops to “kill and burn,” to target “everything over ten,” and to turn the island of Samar into “a howling wilderness.” General William Shafter in California declared that it might be necessary to kill half the Filipino population in order to bring “perfect justice” to the other half. During the Philippine War the United States reversed the normal casualty statistics of war—usually many more are wounded than killed. According to official statistics (discussed in Congressional hearings on the war) U.S. troops killed fifteen times as many Filipinos as they wounded. This fit with frequent reports by U.S. soldiers that wounded and captured Filipino combatants were summarily executed on the spot.

The war continued after the capture of Aguinaldo in March 1901 but was declared officially over by President Theodore Roosevelt on July 4, 1902—in an attempt to quell criticism of U.S. atrocities. At that time, the northern islands had been mostly “pacified” but the conquest of the southern islands was still ongoing and the struggle continued for years—though the United States from then on characterized the rebels as mere bandits.

In the southern Philippines the U.S. colonial army was at war with Muslim Filipinos, known as Moros. In 1906 what came to be known as the Moro Massacre was carried out by U.S. troops when at least nine hundred Filipinos, including women and children, were trapped in a volcanic crater on the island of Jolo and shot at and bombarded for days. All of the Filipinos were killed while the U.S. troops suffered only a handful of casualties. Mark Twain responded to early reports (which indicated that those massacred totaled six hundred rather than nine hundred men, women and children as later determined) with bitter satire: “With six hundred engaged on each side, we lost fifteen men killed outright, and we had thirty-two wounded—counting that nose and that elbow. The enemy numbered six hundred—including women and children—and we abolished them utterly, leaving not even a baby alive to cry for its dead mother. *This is incomparably the greatest victory that was ever achieved by the Christian soldiers of the United*



*States.*” Viewing a widely distributed photo that showed U.S. soldiers overlooking piles of Filipino dead in the crater, W. E. B. Du Bois declared in a letter to Moorfield Storey, president of the Anti- Imperialist League (and later first president of the NAACP), that it was “the most illuminating thing I have ever seen. I want especially to have it framed and put upon the walls of my recitation room to impress upon the students what wars and especially Wars of Conquest really mean.”\*

President Theodore Roosevelt immediately commended his good friend General Leonard Wood, who had carried out the Moro Massacre, writing: “I congratulate you and the officers and men of your command upon the brilliant feat of arms wherein you and they so well upheld the honor of the American flag.” Like Kipling, Roosevelt seldom hesitated to promote the imperialist cause or to forward doctrines of racial superiority. Yet Kipling’s novels, stories and verses were distinguished by the fact that they seemed to many individuals in the white world to evoke a transcendent and noble cause. At the same time they did not fail to reach out and acknowledge the hatred that the colonized had for the colonizer. In presenting the Nobel Prize in Literature to Kipling in 1907 the Nobel Committee proclaimed, “his imperialism is not of the uncompromising type that pays no regard to the sentiments of others.”\* It was precisely this that made Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden” and other outpourings from his pen so effective as ideological veils for a barbaric reality.

## The Moro Massacre (March 9, 1906)

The year Kipling’s poem appeared, 1899, marked not only the end of the Spanish-American War (through the ratification of the Treaty of Paris) and the beginning of the Philippine-American War, but also the beginning of the Boer War in South Africa. These were classic imperialist wars and they generated anti-imperialist movements and radical critiques in response. It was the Boer War that gave rise to John A. Hobson’s *Imperialism, A Study* (1902), which argued “Nowhere under such conditions”—referring specifically to British imperialism in South Africa—“is the theory of white government as a trust for civilization made valid.” The opening sentence of Lenin’s *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, written in 1915, stated that “especially since the Spanish-American War

(1898), and the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), the economic and also the political literature of the two hemispheres has more and more often adopted the term ‘imperialism’ in order to define the present era.”

## Kipling’s Message to Imperialists After One Hundred Years

Although imperialism has remained a reality over the last century, the term itself was branded as beyond the pale within polite establishment circles for most of the twentieth century—so great was the anti-imperialist outrage arising out of the Philippine-American War and the Boer War, and so effective was the Marxist theory of imperialism in stripping the veil away from global capitalist relations. In the last few years, however, “imperialism” has once again become a rallying cry—for neoconservatives and neoliberals alike. As Alan Murray, Washington Bureau Chief of CNBC recently acknowledged in a statement directed principally at the elites: “We are all, it seems, imperialists now” (*Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2003).

If one were to doubt for a moment that the current expansion of U.S. empire is but the continuation of a century-long history of U.S. overseas imperialism, Michael Ignatieff (Professor of Human Rights Policy at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government) has made it as clear as day:

The Iraq operation most resembles the conquest of the Philippines between 1898 and 1902. Both were wars of conquest, both were urged by an ideological elite on a divided country and both cost much more than anyone had bargained for. Just as in Iraq, winning the war was the easy part....More than 120,000 American troops were sent to the Philippines to put down the guerrilla resistance, and 4,000 never came home. It remains to be seen whether Iraq will cost thousands of American lives—and whether the American public will accept such a heavy toll as the price of success in Iraq (*New York Times Magazine*, September 7, 2003).

With representatives of the establishment openly espousing imperialist ambitions, we shouldn’t be surprised at the repeated attempts to bring back the “white man’s burden” argument in one form or another. In the closing pages of his prize-winning book, *The Savage Wars of Peace*, Max Boot quotes Kipling’s poem:

Take up the White Man's burden—  
—And reap his old reward:  
The blame of those ye better,  
—The hate of those ye guard—

Boot insists that Kipling was right, that “colonists everywhere, usually received scant thanks afterward.” Nevertheless, we should be encouraged, he tells us, by the fact that “the bulk of the people did not resist American occupation, as they surely would have done if it had been nasty and brutal. Many Cubans, Haitians, Dominicans, and others may secretly have welcomed U.S. rule.” Boot’s main implication seems clear enough—the United States should again “Take up the White Man’s burden.” His book, published in 2002, ends by arguing that the United States should have deposed Saddam Hussein and occupied Iraq at the time of the 1991 Gulf War. That task, he implied, remained to be accomplished.

Boot is former editorial features editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, now Olin Senior Fellow in National Security Studies with the Council on Foreign Relations. The title of *The Savage Wars of Peace* was taken straight from a line in Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden.” Boot’s 428-page glorification of U.S. imperialist wars received the Best Book of 2002 Award from the *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Los Angeles Times* and won the 2003 General Wallace M. Greene Jr. Award for the best nonfiction book pertaining to Marine Corps history. Boot contends that the Philippine War was “one of the most successful counterinsurgencies waged by a Western army in modern times” and declares that, “by the standards of the day, the conduct of U.S. soldiers was better than average for colonial wars.” The U.S. imperial role in the Philippines, the subject of Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden,” is thus being presented as a model for the kind of imperial role that Boot and other neoconservatives are now urging on the United States. Even before the war in Iraq, Ignatieff remarked: “imperialism used to be the white man’s burden. This gave it a bad reputation. But imperialism doesn’t stop being necessary because it is politically incorrect”—a point that might well be read as extending to the “white man’s burden” itself (*New York Times Magazine*, July 28, 2002).

The Philippine-American War is now being rediscovered as the closest approximation in U.S. history to the problems the United States is encountering in Iraq. Further, the United States has taken advantage of the September 11, 2001 attacks to intervene militarily not just in the Middle East but also around the globe—including the Philippines where it has deployed thousands of troops to aid the Philippine army in fighting Moro insurgents in the southern islands. In this new imperialist climate Niall Ferguson, Herzog Professor of History at the Stern School of Business, New York University, and one of the principal advocates of the new imperialism, has addressed Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" in his book *Empire* (2002). "No one," Ferguson tells us,

would dare use such politically incorrect language today. The reality is nevertheless that the United States has—whether it admits it or not—taken up some kind of global burden, just as Kipling urged. It considers itself responsible not just for waging a war against terrorism and rogue states, but also for spreading the benefits of capitalism and democracy overseas. And just like the British Empire before it, the American Empire unfailingly acts in the name of liberty, even when its own self-interest is manifestly uppermost.

Despite Ferguson's claim that "no one would dare" to call this "the white man's burden" today since it is "politically incorrect," sympathetic references to this term keep on cropping up—and in the most privileged circles. Boot—hardly a marginal figure since affiliated with the influential Council on Foreign Relations—is a good example. Like Ferguson himself, he tries to incorporate the "white man's burden" into a long history of idealistic intervention, downplaying the realities of racism and imperialism: "In the early twentieth century," he writes in the final chapter of his book (entitled "In Defense of the Pax Americana"), "Americans talked of spreading Anglo-Saxon civilization and taking up the 'white man's burden' today they talk of spreading democracy and defending human rights. Whatever you call it, this represents an idealistic impulse that has always been a big part in America's impetus for going to war."

Today's imperialists see Kipling's poem mainly as an attempt to stiffen the spine of the U.S. ruling class of his day in preparation for what he called "the

savage wars of peace.” And it is precisely in this way that they now allude to the “white man’s burden” in relation to the twenty-first century. Thus for the *Economist* magazine the question is simply whether the United States is “prepared to shoulder the white man’s burden across the Middle East.”

As an analyst of as well as a spokesman for imperialism Kipling was head and shoulders above this in the sense that he accurately perceived the looming contradictions of his own time. He knew that the British Empire was overstretched and doomed—even as he struggled to redeem it and to inspire the rising United States to enter the imperial stage alongside it. Only two years before writing “The White Man’s Burden” he wrote his celebrated verse, “Recessional”:

Far-called, our navies melt away;  
—On dune and headland sinks the fire;  
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday  
—Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!  
Judge of Nations, spare us yet,  
Lest we forget—lest we forget!

The United States is now leading the way into a new phase of imperialism. This will be marked not only by increased conflict between center and periphery—rationalized in the West by veiled and not-so-veiled racism—but also by increased intercapitalist rivalry. This will likely speed up the long-run decline of the American Empire, rather than the reverse. And in this situation a call for a closing of the ranks between those of European extraction (Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” argument or some substitute) is likely to become more appealing among U.S. and British elites. It should be remembered that Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden” was a call for the joint exploitation of the globe by what Du Bois was later to call “the white masters of the world” in the face of the ebbing of British fortunes.\* At no time, then, should we underestimate the three-fold threat of militarism, imperialism, and racism—or forget that capitalist societies have historically been identified with all three.

## Notes

- \* The following brief historical treatment of the Philippine-American War draws mainly on the these works: Henry F. Graff, ed., *American Imperialism and the Philippine Insurrection: Testimony Taken from Hearings on Affairs in the Philippine Islands before the Senate Committee on the Philippines—1902* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969); Angel Velasco Shaw and Luis H. Francia, *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream, 1899–1999* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Daniel B. Schirmer, *Republic or Empire: American Resistance to the Philippine War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1972) and “How the Philippine-U.S. War Began,” *Monthly Review*, September 1999; Stuart Creighton Miller, *“Benevolent Assimilation”: The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899–1903* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) ; and Daniel B. Schirmer and Stephen Rosskamm Shalom, *The Philippines Reader*(Boston: South End Press, 1987).
- \* The poem is often reproduced without the subtitle. For a correct version see *Kipling’s Verse: Definitive Edition* (New York: Doubleday, 1940).
- \* Although a quarter of the million is the “consensual” figure of historians, estimates of Filipino deaths from the war have ranged as high as one million, which would have meant depopulation of the islands by around one-sixth.
- \* Jim Zwick, ed., *Mark Twain’s Weapons of Satire* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992), p. 172. For information on the Moro massacre and the W. E. B. Du Bois quote see [www.boondocksnet.com/ai/ail/moro.html](http://www.boondocksnet.com/ai/ail/moro.html). Jim Zwick’s boondocksnet.com website is a crucial source for materials on the Philippine-American War, contemporary responses to Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden,” and Mark Twain’s anti-imperialist writings.
- \* The Nobel committee was, however, mainly impressed by Kipling’s sympathy for the Boers in South Africa—another population of white colonizers.
- \* This call upon white elites to divide the world evoked a response beyond Britain and the United States. The admiration of Kipling among the ruling classes at the center of the capitalist world was more general. As Hobsbawm tells us: “When the writer Rudyard Kipling, the bard of the Indian empire, was believed to be dying of pneumonia in 1899, not only the British and the Americans grieved—Kipling had just addressed a poem on ‘The White Man’s Burden’ to the USA on its responsibilities in the Philippines—but the Emperor of Germany sent a telegram.” Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire* (New York: Vintage, 1987), p. 82.