## Racism and us imperialism history essay



American writer and missionary Pearl S. Buck once wrote, "Race prejudice is not only a shadow over the colored, it is a shadow over all of us, and the shadow is darkest over those who feel it least and allow its evil effects to go on."[1]For generations, historians have concluded that the last decade of the nineteenth century bred white-supremacist racial ideologies such as Anglo-Saxonism and the concept of the "white man's burden" and in turn drove the American empire into the non-white world. In Race Over Empire, Eric T. L. Love contests this outlook and offers instead that racism had almost the contradictory effect. From Grant's attempt to annex the Dominican Republic in 1870, to the annexations of Hawaii and the Philippines in 1898, Love illustrates that the imperialists' association with the racist ideologies of the era were antagonistic, not harmonious. In an era marked by the Jim Crow laws, policies of Chinese exclusion and immigration restriction, no realistic politician wanted to place non-whites at the center of an already divisive scheme by invoking the concept of the "white man's burden."[2]Moreover, convictions that defined "whiteness" created great barriers to imperialistic ambitions, particularly when Anglo-Saxon empire entered into the tropical regions of the Atlantic and Pacific. Alternatively, Love contends that policy aims had to be cloaked in more covert aims than racism.

In the first chapter, Love sets up his main line of argument that while racism may have been an inherent part of American society and ideology from 1865 to 1900, it would have been a major obstacle to include it as a stated objective in expansionism. The American people had no desire to see more foreigners associated with America, so race could only ever play an implicit motivator in imperialism according to Love. Love spends much of the rest of

his work providing examples of how race and racism had to take a "backseat" to more overt policy objectives. Love illustrates the barriers caused by the invocation of race in three different case studies in Santo Domingo, Hawaii, and the Philippines.

The affair in Santo Domingo provides a very interesting example that gives credence to Love's thesis. President Ulysses S. Grant, inheriting many expansionist schemes passed down from Johnson and Seward, rejected nearly all expansionist aims in his foreign policy; except the acquisition of Santo Domingo. Grant, while never mentioning race, wanted to annex Santo Domingo as a "racial safety valve," for African American resettlement according to Love.[3]While the implicit aim was clearly racial, there were very mixed feelings throughout Congress and the general public in regards to African American relocation; as such these implied aims were never stated directly. Instead, Grant preaches about the necessity to acquire Santo Domingo for commerce and security reasons. The island had plentiful timber and other natural resources and its position in the Caribbean made it a prime asset to ensure the safety of Americans. Ultimately, Congress rejects the call to annex Santo Domingo, and Grant takes this as a very personal defeat. In writings from his son we are able to clearly see that Grant wanted desperately to annex Santo Domingo, and this desire was most likely guided by the implicit racial motivation. Grant actually stated his drive for annexation was " for the advancement of a white America."[4]Grant never made peace with this defeat. Words spoken by Grant reveal the churning disappointment and bitterness he felt. His bitterness was actually carried on by his son Jesse Grant who stated: "I think of San Domingo and of father's

persistent efforts to bring about annexation every time I ride upon the Elevated or in the Subway, and see white women stand while negroes occupy the seats."[5]

The Santo Domingo episode is only one example of Love's thesis in action; however, I believe the clearest evidence to Love's credit comes in his analysis of Hawaiian annexation. Love argues that the United States did not want to annex Hawaii, and actually did so under a "policy of last resort."[6]After the rule of Liluokalani was subverted and the gueen was overthrown in 1893, the United States chose not to annex Hawaii due to the events that precipitated the overthrow by Americans on the island. It was not until the island was plagued by disease and suffering under a "government" that could not protect or provide for its people that we annexed Hawaii. The reason, Love argues, that we did not annex the island immediately is because of its large indigenous population. Race in this case was a road block to annexation; a testament to Love's thesis. "When the imperialists renewed their goal to take Hawaii they abandoned the rhetoric of social uplift and the Christian mission."[7]Annexation in 1898 was accomplished by changing the explicit motives for annexation. It was portrayed to the American people that Hawaii was an island of white American majority that was under threat of an insidious Asian invasion that could only be checked by American presence and annexation in Hawaii. Race and racism was an inhibitor to empire in this case, just as Love speculates in his thesis.

Love's Race Over Empire is an interesting text that can be abundantly linked to the historians and texts we have discussed in class. From the views of Michael Hunt to Walter Lafeber, it seems that Love contests the normal view https://assignbuster.com/racism-and-us-imperialism-history-essay/

of the role of race in relation to American Empire by asserting that race was not the driving factor behind American imperialism in the late nineteenth century. Love challenges the views of these historians and provides a compelling case that while race may have been an implicit motive, the use of race as an explicit motivator would have caused many of the U. S. imperialistic ventures to fail.

We have read that historian Michael Hunt believes that a driving force behind U. S. foreign relations is racism.[8]From our interactions with Haiti to American expansion into the Philippines, Hunt reads these events as a continuation on the timeline of Anglo-Saxon racial hegemony. Love counters that while many Americans were in fact racists during the late nineteenth century, the fact that they are racist is the reason that racial imperialism could not occur in this country. Love essentially states that the American people would not have supported any expansion that was sold to them under the context of race because the last thing southerners wanted were more people of color for the government to look after. The harbingers of expansionism had to sell the American people the bill of goods differently because to blatantly tell them we were expanding into the islands of the Pacific to acquire more foreigners to be under our control would not have been a compelling reason for the average American (and as Love argues not compelling for the average politician either).

In addition, Walter Lafeber in his work The American Age argues that the United States entered and annexed Hawaii under the presumption of providing trade and economic reciprocity to the natives of Hawaii.[9]This mutual trade agreement quickly became one-sided as the United States https://assignbuster.com/racism-and-us-imperialism-history-essay/

began to import cheap sugar from Cuba which stranded the Hawaiian market that had become so dependent on U. S. imports. Love argues that this economic goal was only a pretext to enter Hawaii. The way the annexation of Hawaii was "sold" to the American people was that the island was predominantly settled by white Americans, and these white Americans were under threat by Asian intruders. Unless we liberated the island of Hawaii we would see the Asian threat spill over into America's borders. Also, it was argued that Hawaii could serve as a valuable pacific naval base to further pacific expansion of American empire. Race was completely abandoned as an explicit motivator due to the fact that annexation of Hawaii was blocked for years due to the large indigenous population on the island.

Those who backed the annexation of Hawaii failed at their attempts until they quite literally took up William Appleman Williams's thesis and put it into action; we tried to make the Hawaiian's "like us."[10]In order to attain our policy objective the government essentially lied to our citizens and told them that the natives that comprised the island were white Americans like the rest of us. It was this blatant lie, not the supposed aid and spread of Christianity that finally compelled our people to deem annexation appropriate; this is in turn what J. Garry Clifford was trying to state in his essay "Bureaucratic Politics and Policy Outcomes."[11]Clifford argues that policy isn't made just on the whim of one person in our bureaucratic system, it in fact takes many people to enforce policy and to that end in order to pass policies often compromise must occur, and as Love talks about Hawaii a compromise becomes quite apparent. The fact that the usual "Christian mission" had to be abandoned in the case of Hawaii is a large compromise from those who

originally were pushing the annexation, but nonetheless through compromise the desired outcome was achieved (annexation).

Standing in contrast to Love's premise is historian Walter L. Williams.

Williams in his essay "United States Indian Policy and the Debate over
Philippine Annexation: Implications for the Origins of American Imperialism"
outlines an argument that seems to directly counter Love's theory of race as
a blockade to annexation.[12]Williams states that the United States has a
long history of invading land controlled by foreigners and dealing with the
indigenous population by denying them citizenship. Alternatively, Williams
states they become "wards" of the United States and as such are situated at
a level below citizens. To illustrate his analysis he shows how the Native
Americans and indigenous people of the Philippines are essentially cast aside
once America annexes the natives land. Williams offers a strong response to
Love's thesis and both Williams and Love's arguments are "well-built"
through careful historical analysis of the American experience.

Furthermore, historian Samuel Flagg Bemis in his work "American Foreign Policy and the Blessings of Liberty" argues that the American experience is embedded in a long history of spreading the blessings of liberty to those people and nations who do not enjoy what we consider basic liberties.

[13]Love would tend to agree that spreading the blessings of liberty is a large explicit rationale of American imperialism from 1865-1900. However, Love would not go as far as to actually postulate that spreading the blessings of liberty was a primary motivator for empire. From Love's prospective it is very simple to see that spreading liberty was a convenient means of masking policies that had at heart more menacing objectives.

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In conclusion, Race Over Empire benefits from the strong evidence that Love presents to support his argument. Looking over the events in Santo Domingo, Hawaii, and the Philippines it is hard to disagree with Love's analysis; that a purely race motivated approach to imperialism in these areas would have failed miserably for American expansionists. The main strengths of this work are that it is rooted in sound logic and the author uses pertinent evidence that helps to give "real-world" illustration to support his thesis. There are a few problems with this book however. Too often it feels that Love is trying to completely dispel race as a motivator in American foreign policy. I believe this makes his argument unbelievable at times. The period from 1865-1900, is marked in clearly racist policies and mindsets in the United States, and to argue that imperialist policies didn't have at least some racism in the back of its mind would be a very naÃ-ve point to argue. Furthermore, in his discussion of Hawaii Love fails to mention the desire of American policymakers to extend U. S. influence into Asia. Hawaii was annexed because of its position in the Pacific that allowed it to be a staging center to both control Asian migration into America, and to expand American influence into the far-east. I feel that by working so hard to show the insidious motivation behind the humanitarian angle (which he does very well), he neglects a major reason for Hawaiian annexation.

The significance of Love's work, Race Over Empire, is rather monumental.

First, Love's work challenges the contemporary view of race and racism and its correlation to American imperialism. Whenever a credible argument can be brought against the generally accepted view of history the historical community is benefitted by having its beliefs challenged. Second, the insight

that Love provides on the ulterior motives of policy is a point that resonates with American foreign policy still today. So often we take policy at its face value, and we do not look for the implicit motivations behind the policy we put into effect. If anything, Love encourages examining policy in its original context and exploring the concealed motives behind it. Finally, Love's work is significant because it illustrates a theme that is quite often forgotten in history (especially in American classrooms today), there are always different interpretations of history and we are often taught to think about history in one way. Love challenges the accepted view and provides compelling evidence as to why the views of generations of historians need to be challenged. In closing is race prejudice a continual shadow upon the United States as Pearl Buck would suggest? I am compelled by Love's argument that in an openly and belligerently racist south the people and politicians would never accept policy that allows for the mass migration of foreigners into our country, and it is for that reason race was cloaked as an implicit motivator, but rejected as the primary motivation of American imperialism.