



First Great Triumph

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" We were sure that we would win, that we should score the first great triumph in a mighty world-movement." -- Theodore Roosevelt, 1904

Americans like to think they have no imperial past. In fact, the United States became an imperial nation within five short years a century ago (1898-1903), exploding onto the international scene with the conquest of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, and (indirectly) Panama. How did the nation become a player in world politics so suddenly-- and what inspired the move toward imperialism in the first place?

The renowned diplomat and writer Warren Zimmermann seeks answers in the lives and relationships of five remarkable figures: the hyper-energetic Theodore Roosevelt, the ascetic naval strategist Alfred T. Mahan, the bigoted and wily Henry Cabot Lodge, the self-doubting moderate Secretary of State John Hay, and the hard-edged corporate lawyer turned colonial administrator Elihu Root. Faced with difficult choices, these extraordinary men, all close friends, instituted new political and diplomatic policies with intermittent audacity, arrogance, generosity, paternalism, and vision.

Zimmermann's discerning account of these five men also examines the ways they exploited the readiness of the American people to support a surge of expansion overseas. He makes it clear why no discussion of America's international responsibilities today can be complete without understanding how the United States claimed its global powers a century ago.

First Great Triumph Details

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Author : Warren Zimmermann

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From Reader Review First Great Triumph for online ebook

Grindy Stone says

Starts out promising, with thumbnail bios of Roosevelt, Lodge, Root, Mahan, and Hay, before bogging down in a description of the Spanish-American War. It seemed to take longer to wade through the second half of the book than the war actually lasted.

Lauren Hiebner says

This book by Zimmermann has an interesting approach in providing a brief biography of the five individuals that he says are the “founding fathers” of US modern imperialism at the turn of the century. Each brief biography includes not just personal information but political and intellectual developments of each person. They are: John Hay, Alfred T. Mahan, Elihu Root, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Theodore Roosevelt. The second half of the book looks at the first imperialist actions in Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. Zimmermann gives a fair evaluation of imperialism, it’s pros and cons which includes the anti-imperialists and their viewpoints. He does rightly say that imperialism is at heart racist. Then later he stretches it a bit to say that if it wasn’t for these five people Hitler may have won in World War II and the Communists would have won the Cold War. However, Zimmerman does accurately identify five legacies of imperialism that guided American foreign policy in the 20th Century and beyond. A very good read.

Brandy Montgomery says

I had to read this book for my Historiography class but ended up really enjoying it. It's a great read for anyone who enjoys reading about history.

Pam Walter says

Warren Zimmermann gives a fresh look at American politicians at the turn of the 20th Century. Describes political attitudes that we were not taught in school. Looks at the (then) Imperialistic nature of America. Tells of the American acquisition of Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Philippines. At the same time some social reform was legislated, largely control of Trusts and better management in Tariffs. This is quite an eye opener. Americans were of the thinking that Manifest Destiny applied to American acquisitions over seas. They saw us as an, if not The Great World Power, and first envisioned an American Empire, and believed that that was the goal to strive for. Zimmermann has shown me another side of Teddy Roosevelt that I did not know. He, along with his cabinet, friends and political allies worked toward overtaking Spanish Colonies as well as simply overthrowing small monarchies, as with Hawaii. They included John Hay, Alfred T. Mahan, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Elihu Root. An excellent and highly readable true history.

Urey Patrick says

I have mixed emotions about this book. The author argues that the US is, and has always been, an Imperialist nation. He cites the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Westward Expansion across the continent as proof of his premise... and the Spanish-American War as the fruition of American Imperialism that has since matured throughout the 20th Century. I think his analysis deeply flawed, although an argument can certainly be made that the Spanish-American War was in fact an American dalliance with Imperialism. That said, and I think it to be true, that does not validate America's Imperialist tendencies before the war, nor did it lead to continued American Imperialism.

On the other hand, his history is informative, detailed and greatly interesting. He lays out extensive biographies of his five principal "Imperialists" - John Hay, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge and Elihu Root - that are revealing and informative. I was especially interested in the personal histories of John Hay and Alfred Thayer Mahan - much here you may not find elsewhere, and concisely presented. I question the overarching primacy of these five men in creating the Imperialist outburst of 1898. They were important and influential figures, to be sure - but not the only ones.

Also, his recounting of the events, personalities, politics, diplomatic maneuverings, strategies, tactics and cultural influences surrounding the war with Spain, the annexation of Hawaii, the takings of Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines is excellent. Disappointingly, the actual war with Spain gets fairly short shrift in one chapter. And clearly the author disapproves of the Imperialist tendencies of the US - even when they are being exercised at the expense of other Imperialist powers. He recognizes, but quickly glosses over, the certain fates of Hawaii, Guam and the Philippines at the hands of the Germans, the French and particularly the Japanese - all of which were REAL Imperialist powers looking for more acquisitions. It is his analysis of underlying causes and meanings that is flawed, so read the history - don't spend a lot of time on the rest.

The author would also benefit from better editing. There are frequent annoying errors, and inexplicable word choices, that shouldn't be there. For example, discussing General Miles of the American forces in Cuba, the author mentions that he was an Indian fighter and had captured the great "Sioux" chieftain Geronimo - except Geronimo was Apache. A second reference much later in the text correctly identifies Geronimo as Apache. Another example, he dotes on the word "filibuster" - using it repeatedly as a verb to describe fleet movements. That is an esoteric definition that will puzzle most readers - the word can mean a "free-booter" in the sense of one engaging in unauthorized warfare, but the author uses it in a more general sense perhaps in accordance with his palpable disapproval of the Navy's authorized maneuvers... i.e., the US Naval ships "filibustered" from Key West towards Cuba... it just doesn't fit.

Clif says

In 2016 the United States has over 700 military bases across the world. As the sole superpower, it feels entitled to intervene anywhere it chooses and goes to great lengths to provide the network of facilities that will enable it to do so.

This situation is relatively new. When I was a young man, it was the Cold War that was used to explain American global military expansion, but as events since the end of the USSR in 1991 have shown, there has been something more driving the U.S. to dominate the world militarily, something at work, as this book describes, many decades before the Cold War.

First Great Triumph investigates the time at the turn of the 20th century when the United States took advantage of the feeble state of the Spanish Empire to make an appearance for the first time on the stage of great power deployment. The famous sinking of the U.S.S. Maine in Havana harbor, now thought to have been due to an explosion of coal fumes, provided the excuse to declare war on Spain and in short order take over authority in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines.

Warren Zimmerman chose as the backbone of his book, five people who played important roles in turning the U.S. toward expansion. John Hay started as a young aide to Lincoln and ended up Secretary of State under Teddy Roosevelt. Alfred Mahan, a lover of history and an irritating misfit in the U.S. Navy, composed his classic "The Influence of Sea Power on History" with perfect timing for it provide a template for the expansion and deployment of sea power by the United States. Elihu Root was one of those people who succeed at everything they try, going from a lawyer representing corporations to become Secretary of War under TR. Henry Cabot Lodge, an aristocratic U.S. Senator from Massachusetts played an essential role in shepherding legislation through Congress that was necessary for the handling of the newly acquired territories won from Spain. Theodore Roosevelt unsurprisingly completes the list of characters chosen by Zimmerman. TR's zest for war did not start the Spanish-American war, coming as it did before he became president, but his relentless support for military action, enthusiasm for Mahan's recipe for sea power and his close connection with the other four principals in the book, all of whom were part of or worked with his administration, make him the centerpiece of the story.

And what a rich and deep account is provided. Opening with individual biographies, Zimmerman continues with an examination of the social conditions and ideas that dominated the times. Social Darwinism in America is examined along with the bigotry it justified, present to some extent in all of the characters. Brief histories of the lands the U.S. took from Spain are included along with a history of Hawaii, another in the chain of properties that provided stepping stones across the Pacific to the big prize of the Philippines. One thing is clear, the interests of the people of the lands the U.S. took to itself were quite secondary to American global aspirations, this being the nature of imperialism.

Above all, it is the interplay of personalities and the description of how each challenge is met by the five protagonists that make the book an enjoyable read. Zimmerman states in his introduction that the book is not written to either praise or condemn American imperialism, but to approach the times in a fair way, giving an account of all sides. The triumph in the title refers to the victory for the United States in the war with Spain, giving it a place at the table of major powers, the opening move in the building of an empire that is still being maintained, somewhat shakily and at huge expense, over a hundred years later.

I leave you with a few quotes I found in the book that I found thought provoking for Americans in the 21st century.

"America does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy"

- John Quincy Adams

"There is a wide difference between taking a suitable part and bearing responsibility in world affairs and plunging the United States into every conflict on the face of the globe"

- Henry Cabot Lodge

"Our chief usefulness to humanity rests on our combining power with high purpose."

-Theodore Roosevelt

James says

Writing en route to Cuba during the Spanish-American War, Theodore Roosevelt envisioned the coming campaign as "the first great triumph in what will be a world movement." That movement—the emergence of the United States as a world power—is the subject of this thoughtful approach to the history and diplomacy of the era of the Spanish American War. The first half of the book, after an overview of the United States in 1898, consist of essays on five men who exemplified the expansionist movement and played a part in its development. They include the poet, journalist, and diplomat John Hay; Alfred T. Mahan, theorist of sea power; Elihu Root, corporation lawyer, government administrator, and presidential adviser; Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, expansionist spokesman and mentor of Theodore Roosevelt, and finally, TR himself. Mahan narrates the stories of these lives of the leaders of this era with attention to their accomplishments and, in the cases of Alfred T. Mahan and Elihu Root, these were a revelation to me.

The second half of the book was a more traditional history of the era and in it the author, while decrying the advent of American imperialism, betrayed his own preference for big government. He concludes with an analysis of the legacy on the twentieth century of the expansion led by these five men: the creation of an authentic American Imperialism (for better or worse), the preparation of the United States to be a great power, the first comprehensive assertion of of U. S. security interests abroad, the creation of foreign policy priorities in human rights and stability, and finally strengthening the American presidency. This final legacy has grown unwieldy at the beginning of our new century. Overall Zimmermann's book was an excellent historical overview of a formative period for American foreign relations.

Eric Atkisson says

This is a good read I'd strongly recommend to anyone with an interest in the major events of the McKinley and Roosevelt administrations and the rise of the United States as a global power. Zimmermann offers brief but incisive biographies of John Hay, Henry Cabot Lodge, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Theodore Roosevelt, and Elihu Root and offers a compelling portrayal of their influence on events before, during, and after the Spanish-American War--including what happened in Cuba, Hawaii, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico. The final chapters do an excellent job tying it all together and showing the lasting influence these five men had on American foreign policy.

Bill Gawne says

Zimmerman provides us with a great look at the United States around the turn of the 20th century, seen through the lives of five men: Theodore Roosevelt, Alfred T. Mahan, Henry Cabot Lodge, John Hay, and Elihu Root. Excellent history and great insight into how the actions and decisions of these men influenced American policies for the following century.

Jfarley says

Just the first third of the book, biographies of the principal personalities, makes this worth reading.

Malena says

Just a bit dense for a summer read, but really interesting history.

John says

Took a while to get through this one, but that's OK; its style lends itself to that. Zimmerman presents this as a single narrative that tells the story of "How Five Americans Made Their Country a World Power" (the book's subtitle), but it's by no means that integrated. The first 200 pages or so are the interlocking biographies of the five men in question, imperialists all: Theodore Roosevelt; TR's Secretary of State, John Hay; his Secretary of War, Elihu Root; Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge; and naval strategist Alfred Mahan. Zimmerman clearly admires what these men accomplished, but he is by no means a hagiographer; Hay comes off as ineffectual, lazy, and decadent; Lodge as vain, ambitious, and cold; and Roosevelt as a blustering bully (Root, however, comes away unscathed; Mahan just fades into the background in the presence of these bigger, more epoch-making personalities). Dispensing with their biographies, Zimmerman moves on to the Spanish-American War and the entry of the U.S. onto the world stage as an imperial power. This history he tells well, from the Establishment reluctance to go to war to the war itself to the political and diplomatic problems encountered as the U.S. tried to think through how to govern colonies. It's a fine read and could stand alone, without the long biographical intro (or perhaps different bios; by the time he's done, what he really made me hungry for was a good biography of William McKinley, who becomes far more fascinating in Zimmerman's hands than he ever has to me before). Zimmerman, himself a former U.S. diplomat, is most taken with the policy and bureaucracy of imperialism, but that's in no way bad; it makes his work more balanced and intricate than a simple triumphalist (or condemnatory) narrative. On the whole quite interesting, though I think he could have lost the 200-ish pages of biographical material and still had a fine book.
