

## BOOK REVIEW

### The New World Power: American Foreign Policy, 1898-1917

Reviewed by Wm. Thomas Hill\*

**BOOK REVIEWED:** Robert E. Hannigan, *The New World Power: American Foreign Policy, 1898-1917* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002)

For the United States, being a “world power” at the turn of the century was not an end in itself. The purpose of being a power was to be able to create an atmosphere throughout certain parts of the world where the United States could freely conduct business without encroachment on the part of rival powers or “misbehavior” on the part of “less civilized” nations. Robert Hannigan begins this excellent study with a fairly standard reminder of the social evolutionary world view that was held by most political and business leaders in the United States at the turn of the century. In providing this background, the first chapter is brief and to the point. Hannigan discusses the issues of “character” and “self-mastery” so fundamental to the thinking of this time and explains how, at the foundations of US culture, these notions shifted from the earlier puritan notions based upon Christian principles to those embracing biological inheritance. Those nations therefore who did not manifest the necessary character or self-mastery over their baser emotions would have to be watched over by a more mature power as a parent watches over a child. Self-government was not seen as best for such nations. Strong paternal leaders, then, had to be sought for such countries until such time as they were mature enough to conduct business with the United States so that, in Taft’s words the United States would be able to get “our share in the wealth of other nations” (74).

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\* Professor, Department of English Literature, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan.

The main body of this text after the first ideological background chapter can actually be divided into two parts. The first part—Chapters 2 through 5—focuses on the development of the diplomatic relationship between the United States and the Caribbean (including the negotiations over the Panama Canal), South America, China (including US relations with the Philippines, Russia, and Japan), and finally Canada and Mexico. The second part—Chapters 6 and 7—turns our attention more directly to the major powers. Chapter 6 focuses on Washington's involvement with the Hague Conferences as well as its desire for a strong body that could settle international disputes, in ways suitable to the United States of course. Chapter 7 narrows in on Washington's negotiations primarily between England and Germany in an effort to bring an end to the First World War without the total destruction of either side. President Wilson wanted stability. He did not want to see either the Allied powers or Germany utterly destroyed, creating a political and economic vacuum in a major European country. Thus, this chapter focuses on the delicate negotiations that were going on at the time between these principle parties up until US entry into the First World War.

The effect of this type of structure in which each individual chapter begins in the later part of the nineteenth century and progresses up until the United States enters the First World War is to impress upon the reader the sense of suddenness with which the United States thrust itself upon the international stage, a stage previously occupied almost exclusively by Europeans. The United States was a nation that, thanks largely to Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan and later Theodore Roosevelt, went from having the tenth ranked navy in 1890 to the third ranked navy by 1906, a fact that would become extremely important to US emergence into the international political arena.

Hannigan's handling of the Caribbean and the US political manipulations in order to secure the Panama region for its own ends in Chapter 1 shows that the US was a bit like a school teacher brandishing the Monroe Doctrine in one hand at would-be outside (European) interferers and a stick in the other to swat misbehaving children. He quotes from letters, journals, and speeches which reveal the extremely paternal attitude that US leaders took in their negotiations with the Caribbean nations involved.

Hannigan finds the same attitudes displayed in his study of South America in Chapter 2; but interestingly it is also in this chapter that we begin to see Eli Root beginning to understand the problems that existed between the US and South American interests. Unfortunately, we don't get too much about Eli Root as a man. Nor

do we get much about any of the major players. Throughout the entire text what we get is policy. This is not a serious criticism because the focus of this text is intended to be policy, not those individuals who designed it. We are given a first chapter in which all the players are placed into the “biological inheritance” slot which is largely true but a tad reductive. For example, while Eli Root and Philander Chase Knox both hold to this position, their diplomatic approaches were radically different. Readers may wish to begin by reading Warren Zimmerman’s recent *First Great Triumph* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2002) first to find out who these people are, and then read this book to find out exactly what they did.

Since China, the focus of Chapter 4, was so far away and since European powers plus Russia and Japan had already established a financial foothold in the region, the US decided “to encourage collective, rather than unilateral approaches, both to the supervision of China and to the protection of the open door; the hope being that this was a means of containing potentially ‘greedy’ powers” (92). The rest of this chapter, then, goes on to explain how the US went about trying to negotiate for collective interest. Hannigan covers the Boxer Rebellion right up to the First World War. When Roosevelt performed his Peace Prize winning negotiations between Russia and Japan, he did it with the aforementioned collective interest in mind. He wanted neither side to be dominant in the region. He wanted all nations to be able to trade in the region equally, thus leaving the door open for US trade.

This entire text repeatedly examines the paternal language of US diplomats. This does not abate with Hannigan’s examination of Canada in Chapter 5. He states that “Canadians were viewed as unsophisticated upstarts who did not understand their proper place” (138). They were looked down upon primarily because of their attachment to England. That is, because they were a colony, they were not seen as a free people. Thus when the conflict arose between the US and Canada over the west coast of Canada from Alaska proper to the State of Washington, the US stood firm in its resolve to claim the land. After all, the US had enormous timber and mineral interests in the region. Canada complained to England, but England was uninterested in sending its navy—already stretched to the limit in other areas of the world—to defend interests in North America. Again, for a better understanding of the thinking of John Hay who plays an important role in this and the next chapter, the reader would be well advised to look at Warren Zimmerman’s book.

Also covered in this chapter are US relations with Mexico. The US wanted to

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control the leadership in Mexico. Since the turn of the century a great deal of business had poured back and forth over the border. Mexico was seen as a land ripe for exploitation, but it was also seen as an unstable region because there were so many warring factions. The US wanted the right to intervene in the disputes between these factions, but all factions were highly suspicious of US motivations.

Chapter 6 covers Germany's suspicions and England's hesitations in granting too much power to any centralized body to handle international disputes. A major issue, of course, was the sea and whether warring nations had a right to interfere with nonbelligerent vessels. The US, as always, wanted a governing body that would do its bidding. There were those who felt that anything like a Joint High Commission should be a body of attorneys. Others felt that only politicians directly involved with international affairs were qualified to deal with international problems.

Chapter 7 covers the uneasy relationship that existed between the US and England especially but also Germany between 1914 and 1917. The US was making an awfully lot of money selling military supplies to England, and they could not understand why England was not more grateful. England, on the other hand, felt that the US was essentially "getting a free ride from their efforts" (253). Wilson did not want war. This chapter carefully covers Wilson's struggle to avoid it. He wanted the warring nations to end the conflict before Germany was utterly destroyed. But Germany's insistence on disrupting US commercial efforts on the oceans forced Wilson's hand.

Hannigan's work is a carefully researched somewhat densely written text with seventy-five pages of useful Notes plus a fairly good eleven page Index. Graduate students and scholars will find this text most helpful. The notes themselves make great reading. As I noted above, however, the reader who is not familiar with all of the major players in the diplomatic pool during this time period may wish to read some supplemental material in order to connect policy with breathing human beings.