



The irresistible tendency to expansion...seems again in operation, demanding new outlets for American capital and new opportunities for American enterprise. This new movement is not a matter of sentiment. It is the result of a natural law of economic and race development. The great civilized peoples have to-day at their command the means of developing the decadent nations of the world. This means, in its material aspects, is the great excess of saved capital which is the result of machine production.[2]

Conant was echoing his English counterpart Cecil Rhodes, who three years earlier had offered the following anecdote:

I was in the East End of London yesterday and attended a meeting of the unemployed. I listened to the wild speeches, which were just a cry for "bread," "bread," "bread," and on my way home I pondered over the scene and I became more than ever convinced of the importance of imperialism.... My cherished idea is a solution for the social problem, i.e., in order to save the 40,000,000 inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced by them in the factories and mines. The Empire, as I have always said, is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists.[3]

Such rhetoric did not necessarily guide policy, but empire, whether US or European, was in these important men's minds an economic phenomenon that grew out of capitalism's inexorable expansion. As we will see, numerous critics of imperialism pounced on this economic point, and a smaller number took up the connection between empire and "race development" announced by Conant. There did exist a lively debate within official circles in the United States about the consequences of imperial expansion, though much of this discussion remained within parameters that assumed the racial, economic, and gendered social order atop which this elite conducted its affairs.[4] Concurrently, a transcontinental conversation was underway involving anticolonial, antiracist, and anarchist interlocutors that ranged from Manila to Havana to New York to London, in which a broader analysis of racial capitalism's imperial inequalities took place.[5]

- 4 As it turned out, by 1898, the discussion of the colonial attributes of the United States was already underway. In 1896, the year the Supreme Court enshrined the legality of racial segregation and Ethiopian forces militarily checked the Italian imperial project, W.E.B. Du Bois published *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States*, a work that irrevocably linked US history to European empire building. Du Bois contributed to a major theme of African American thought that often infused the international contextualization of the United States with an anticolonial sensibility emphatic of US empire building's unexceptionality, both before and after 1776.[6] Such sentiments found expression in Du Bois's most famous line: "The problem of the twentieth century is the color line, – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." [7]
- 5 Du Bois's contributions to the historiography of colonialism in the United States were themselves part of an old story by the late nineteenth century. His enduring insights were in part the product of a Black radical tradition in which the denial of African humanity attending the slave trade encountered "the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality." [8] Thus racial slavery and the innumerable refusals and resistances to it helped determine Du Bois's present, as it continues to do so for our own. [9] The Black radical tradition took shape in collaboration with, and in parallel fashion to, anticolonial praxis and knowledge production by indentured servants, sailors, and Indigenous thinkers. [10]
- 6 Therefore, at the beginning of the twentieth century, thinking about US empire was founded upon deep roots. By then, two themes were established that would rightly continue to pervade analysis and debate: the universally agreed upon centrality of economics, and the less widely understood importance of race. More themes would emerge, as would further intertwining of the two then extant. To be sure, there continued to be intellectuals – from Walter Lipmann to Henry Luce to Walter Rostow to Samuel Huntington – and policy architects – from Woodrow Wilson to George Kennan to Robert McNamara to Madeline Albright – who brought their skills and influence to a pro-imperial politics. [11] But none of these figures openly advocated for US empire. Instead, the unabashed imperialism of Conant and Rhodes remained dormant until quite recently.
- 7 As McKinley's wars concluded, as Hawai'i, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines appeared to become permanently within a US sphere of influence, and as other issues competed for attention, discussion of US empire began to subside.





































[87] My thinking about exceptionalism and United States and world history has been influenced by George Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); David W. Noble, *Death of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, "World History in a Global Age," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 4 (October 1995): 1034-1060; Michael Adas, "From Settler Colony to Global Hegemon: Integrating the Exceptionalist Narrative of the American Experience into World History," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (December 2001): 1692-1720; Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations*.

Copyright © GSJ & Author(s). ISSN 1557-0266  
GSJ is published at Stony Brook University by the Stony Brook Institute for Global Studies (SBIGS)