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IMPERIALISM

Imperialism refers to the creation and maintenance of unequal relations between an empire and subordinate client states.

The term typically refers to western political and economic domination of Latin America and Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries, although the phenomenon has a much longer and broader history. Empires as diverse as the Romans, Tawantinsuyu (Inkas), and Japanese engaged in expansionistic policies. Imperialism includes both direct territorial control, such as when Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, and other European powers colonized the Americas in the 16th and 17th centuries, as well as British and U.S. economic expansion into Latin America in the 19th century. Although arguably interventions could be motivated by noble and high-minded objectives with positive outcomes, imperialism is typically used in a pejorative sense to refer to an expansionist and aggressive foreign policy that harms the subjugated population.



Uncle Sam criticized for “coasting” on his empire. (Library of Congress)

U.S. domination of Latin America has included military, economic, and social aspects. On a regular basis, the U.S. government updates the document *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad* that lists hundreds of instances beginning in 1798 in which the United States has intervened militarily in other countries. On occasion, policy makers have used these repeated interventions to provide a precedent and justification for new interventions. Direct and overt military intervention into the affairs of another country is the most visible form of imperialism, though not necessarily the most egregious and damaging. Often interventions promoted U.S. economic interests, pointing to an inherently mercantile nature of imperial endeavors. In contrast, in his book *How to Read Donald Duck*, Ariel Dorfman maintains that ultimately cultural hegemony was as damaging as military and economic interventions in advancing imperialist ideologies.

U.S. imperial designs on its neighbors date almost to the founding of the republic. With much of Latin America gaining its political independence from Spain in the 1820s, U.S. president James Monroe declared that the region fell within its sphere of influence. The 1823 Monroe Doctrine stipulated that, unless U.S. interests were involved, the country would stay out of European wars. In exchange, the Americas were not to be subject to future colonization by any European power, and the United States would view any European attempt to colonize the hemisphere as an unfriendly act.

Although the United States had intervened repeatedly in Latin America during the 19th century in defense of U.S. economic interests, the nature and scale

of international interventions escalated dramatically in the 1890s. Several factors contributed to an increase in expansionism. In 1890, the U.S. Census Bureau declared the western frontier closed, which meant no more free land and geographical mobility for settlers. Underlying this was a concern that the United States was being left behind in an international race for territory. The same year, a massacre at Wounded Knee in South Dakota was the last major Indian battle. Furthermore, a severe depression and labor strikes in 1893 represented a diminishment of economic opportunities. Wealthy capitalists feared a class war, and international adventures could stir up nationalist sentiments to deflect internal strife.

With this domestic context, the United States intervened in Cuba's independence struggle in 1898. Cuba had not gained its independence together with the rest of Latin America in the 1820s, both because of its geopolitical significance as the rear guard of the Spanish Empire and because its economy was booming with the shift of sugar production from Haiti in the aftermath of that neighbor's successful slave revolt. José Martí launched a Cuban independence struggle in 1895, and the patriots were on the verge of victory when the United States intervened.

Scholars have long debated the motivation for U.S. intervention in Cuba and by extension whether the United States practiced imperialism. Certainly humanitarian factors including moral opposition to colonization and public sympathy for Cuba's cause were factors. Most famously, publishers William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer engaged in sensationalistic journalism that overexaggerated Spanish atrocities to sell

their newspapers. Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt famously welcomed a war to boost morale in the United States, and President William McKinley was in search of foreign markets for the country's surplus products. Underlying the intervention was a search for political and economic expansion.

As an alleged statement of its high-minded objectives, the Teller Amendment declared that the United States had no intention of annexing Cuba. Politicians were quiet, however, on the other Spanish possessions of Puerto Rico and Guam, which they subsequently occupied. The United States also imposed the Platt Amendment on Cuba that from 1901 to 1934 permitted unilateral intervention into the internal affairs of that country. Cuba also signed a treaty that granted the United States access to a coal-*ing* station at Guantánamo Bay, although subsequent uses of that base have been in violation of the treaty.

The 1898 war introduced a period of greatly expanded U.S. interventions into Latin American affairs, with 34 interventions in nine countries over the next three decades. In 1903, the United States helped engineer a coup to separate Panama from the rest of Colombia to gain more favorable terms to build a canal through the isthmus. In 1903, European powers blockaded Venezuela to collect debts, and in the process excluded the United States. This development led to the 1904 Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine in which President Theodore Roosevelt declared that the United States had the right to police Caribbean areas. In 1905, the United States implemented this policy by placing the Dominican Republic in customs receivership. Extensive and repeated U.S. interventions also

look place in Haiti and Nicaragua in the first decades of the 20th century. In the Dominican Republic in 1916, the United States military began an eight-year occupation that was very similar to formal European imperialism. U.S. military officers not only dismantled the legislature but also occupied for themselves the top posts of the executive, including appointing a military governor who directly governed Dominicans.

After a 20-year break inspired by Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, the United States resumed a practice of intervening either overtly or covertly in the affairs of other American states when their policies ran counter to those of its perceived economic or political interests (Guatemala in 1954, Cuba in 1961, Chile in 1973, among others). By the end of the 20th century, the most egregious forms of imperial intervention were not overt military adventures but neoliberal economic policies designed to benefit an industrial core at a cost to an underdeveloped periphery. U.S. imperialist policies continued into the 21st century with support for coups against leftist governments in Venezuela in 2002, Haiti in 2004, and Honduras in 2009.

Latin American governments raised repeated challenges to U.S. imperial endeavors. In 1868, the Argentine jurist Carlos Calvo articulated an argument that international private investments assume an inherent risk and cannot appeal to external diplomatic or military intervention on its behalf. Furthermore, disputes have to be resolved in local courts instead of in the investor's home country. The Calvo Doctrine was one of the first Latin American attempts to force the United States to recognize the international principle of nonintervention.

In 1902, Argentine minister of foreign affairs Luis María Drago declared that countries, including the United States, could not use debt collection as an excuse for foreign intervention. Rather, countries must use arbitration and litigation to solve conflicts. In 1907, the Hague Conference accepted the Drago Doctrine as part of international law.

Also in 1907, Ecuadorian diplomat Carlos Tobar formulated a policy of nonrecognition of coups d'état against a recognized government. The Tobar Doctrine stipulated that such disputes should be handled by the Pan-American Union. In 2001, the successor organization, the Organization of American States (OAS), drafted the Democracy Charter that affirmed a similar purpose of nonrecognition of extraconstitutional changes in government.

In addition to government initiatives, citizens in both the United States and Latin America engaged in efforts to halt imperial policies. The Anti-Imperialist League formed in New England in 1898 in opposition to U.S. expansionist policies. Among its prominent members was the noted author Mark Twain. Its members did not always approach their anti-imperialism from a progressive perspective, with many of its members motivated by racist and anti-Catholic sentiments. In the 1920s, communists formed the Anti-Imperialist League of the Americas with its headquarters in Mexico City. It featured such leaders as the muralist Diego Rivera, and among its prominent campaigns was Hands Off Nicaragua in solidarity with Augusto César Sandino's fight against the U.S. Marines in Nicaragua. In the 1980s, international solidarity campaigns helped prevent a direct U.S. military intervention against

the leftist Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

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See also: Anti-interventionism; Calvo Doctrine; Drago Doctrine; Haiti; Monroe Doctrine (1823); Roosevelt, Theodore; Spanish-Cuban-American War (1898)

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