

Monthly review: Kipling, the 'White Man's Burden,' and U.S. Imperialism
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Kipling's Message to Imperialists After One Hundred Years

If one were to doubt for a moment that the current expansion of U.S. empire is but the continuation of a century-long history of U.S. overseas imperialism, Michael Ignatieff (Professor of Human Rights Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government) has made it as clear as day:

- 5 The Iraq operation most resembles the conquest of the Philippines between 1898 and 1902. Both were wars of conquest, both were urged by an ideological elite on a divided country and both cost much more than anyone had bargained for. Just as in Iraq, winning the war was the easy part....More than 120,000 American troops were sent to the Philippines to put down the guerrilla resistance, and 4,000 never came home. It remains to be seen whether Iraq will cost thousands of American lives—and whether the American public will accept such a heavy toll as the price of success in Iraq (*New York Times Magazine*, September 7, 2003).
- 10 With representatives of the establishment openly espousing imperialist ambitions, we shouldn't be surprised at the repeated attempts to bring back the "white man's burden" argument in one form or another. In the closing pages of his prize-winning book, *The Savage Wars of Peace*, Max Boot quotes Kipling's poem:

Take up the White Man's burden— And reap his old reward:	The blame of those ye better, The hate of those ye guard—
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- Boot insists that Kipling was right, that "colonists everywhere, usually received scant thanks afterward." Nevertheless, we should be encouraged, he tells us, by the fact that "the bulk of the people did not resist American occupation, as they surely would have done if it had been nasty and brutal. Many Cubans, Haitians, Dominicans, and others may secretly have welcomed U.S. rule."
- 15 Boot's main implication seems clear enough—the United States should again "Take up the White Man's burden." His book, published in 2002, ends by arguing that the United States should have deposed Saddam Hussein and occupied Iraq at the time of the 1991 Gulf War. That task, he implied, remained to be accomplished.

- Boot is former editorial features editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, now Olin Senior Fellow in National Security Studies with the
- 20 Council on Foreign Relations. The title of *The Savage Wars of Peace* was taken straight from a line in Kipling's "White Man's Burden." Boot's 428-page glorification of U.S. imperialist wars received the Best Book of 2002 Award from the *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Los Angeles Times* and won the 2003 General Wallace M. Greene Jr. Award for the best nonfiction book pertaining to Marine Corps history. Boot contends that the Philippine War was "one of the most successful counterinsurgencies waged by a Western army in modern times" and declares that, "by the standards of the day, the conduct of
- 25 U.S. soldiers was better than average for colonial wars." The U.S. imperial role in the Philippines, the subject of Kipling's "White Man's Burden," is thus being presented as a model for the kind of imperial role that Boot and other neoconservatives are now urging on the United States. Even before the war in Iraq, Ignatieff remarked: "imperialism used to be the white man's burden. This gave it a bad reputation. But imperialism doesn't stop being necessary because it is politically incorrect"—a point that might well be read as extending to the "white man's burden" itself (*New York Times Magazine*, July 28, 2002).

- 30 The Philippine-American War is now being rediscovered as the closest approximation in U.S. history to the problems the United States is encountering in Iraq. Further, the United States has taken advantage of the September 11, 2001 attacks to intervene militarily not just in the Middle East but also around the globe—including the Philippines where it has deployed thousands of troops to aid the Philippine army in fighting Moro insurgents in the southern islands. In this new imperialist climate Niall
- 35 Ferguson, Herzog Professor of History at the Stern School of Business, New York University, and one of the principal advocates of the new imperialism, has addressed Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" in his book *Empire*(2002). "No one," Ferguson tells us, would dare use such politically incorrect language today. The reality is nevertheless that the United States has—whether it admits it or not—taken up some kind of global burden, just as Kipling urged. It considers itself responsible not just for waging a war against terrorism and rogue states, but also for spreading the benefits of capitalism and democracy overseas. And just like the British Empire before it, the American Empire unflinchingly acts in the name of liberty, even when its own self-interest is manifestly
- 40 uppermost.

- Despite Ferguson's claim that "no one would dare" to call this "the white man's burden" today since it is "politically incorrect," sympathetic references to this term keep on cropping up—and in the most privileged circles. Boot—hardly a marginal figure since affiliated with the influential Council on Foreign Relations—is a good example. Like Ferguson himself, he tries to incorporate the "white man's burden" into a long history of idealistic intervention, downplaying the realities of racism and imperialism: "In the
- 45 early twentieth century," he writes in the final chapter of his book (entitled "In Defense of the Pax Americana"), "Americans talked of spreading Anglo-Saxon civilization and taking up the 'white man's burden'; today they talk of spreading democracy and defending human rights. Whatever you call it, this represents an idealistic impulse that has always been a big part in America's impetus for going to war."

- Today's imperialists see Kipling's poem mainly as an attempt to stiffen the spine of the U.S. ruling class of his day in preparation
- 50 for what he called "the savage wars of peace." And it is precisely in this way that they now allude to the "white man's burden" in relation to the twenty-first century. Thus for the *Economist* magazine the question is simply whether the United States is "prepared to shoulder the white man's burden across the Middle East."

- As an analyst of as well as a spokesman for imperialism Kipling was head and shoulders above this in the sense that he accurately perceived the looming contradictions of his own time. He knew that the British Empire was overstretched and doomed—even as he
- 55 struggled to redeem it and to inspire the rising United States to enter the imperial stage alongside it. Only two years before writing "The White Man's Burden" he wrote his celebrated verse, "Recessional":

Far-called, our navies melt away; On dune and headland sinks the fire; Lo, all our pomp of yesterday Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!	Judge of Nations, spare us yet, Lest we forget—lest we forget!
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