

Following are two readings about American imperialism. The first might well be the most influential poem in American history. It was actually the work of a famous British poet named Rudyard Kipling, but it was published in an American magazine called McClure's on February 12, 1899. At the time, Americans were debating whether the nation should get involved in "rescuing" Cuba and the Philippines from Spanish control. Kipling's poem became a powerful statement in favor of involvement abroad, and inspired much commentary, some positive, some negative. Read the poem more than once; it's not easy to understand on the first reading. We will also discuss it in class.

Thanks to Kipling's poem, imperialism--the idea that America should be an empire--entered the national vocabulary at this time, and many important voices weighed in on the issue, some of them (Theodore Roosevelt, Alfred Thayer Mahan, etc.) strongly in favor of an American empire, others (Mark Twain, Jane Addams, William Jennings Bryan) strongly opposed. The second selection you will read here is an editorial published in the San Francisco Call shortly after the appearance of Kipling's poem. It helps to explain what Kipling was trying to say in his poem, and it outlines some of the common objections to an imperialist policy. As you read, you might want to consider any parallels to the current situation in Iraq, and the arguments made for and against that war.

"The White Man's Burden," by Rudyard Kipling

Take up the White Man's burden--
Send forth the best ye breed--
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild--
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.

Take up the White Man's burden--
In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror
And check the show of pride;
By open speech and simple,

An hundred times made plain
To seek another's profit,
And work another's gain.

Take up the White Man's burden--
The savage wars of peace--
Fill full the mouth of Famine
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
The end for others sought,
Watch sloth and heathen Folly
Bring all your hopes to nought.

Take up the White Man's burden--
No tawdry rule of kings,
But toil of serf and sweeper--
The tale of common things.
The ports ye shall not enter,
The roads ye shall not tread,
Go mark them with your living,
And mark them with your dead.
Take up the White Man's burden--
And reap his old reward:
The blame of those ye better,
The hate of those ye guard--
The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah, slowly!) toward the light--
"Why brought he us from bondage,
Our loved Egyptian night?"

Take up the White Man's burden--
Ye dare not stoop to less--
Nor call too loud on Freedom
To cloke your weariness;
By all ye cry or whisper,
By all ye leave or do,
The silent, sullen peoples
Shall weigh your gods and you.

Take up the White Man's burden--
Have done with childish days--
The lightly proffered laurel,
The easy, ungrudged praise.
Comes now, to search your manhood
Through all the thankless years
Cold, edged with dear-bought wisdom,
The judgment of your peers!

“Response to ‘The White Man’s Burden,’” by the *San Francisco Call*

Rudyard Kipling has joined the ranks of those eminent British jingoes who are trying to induce the United States to help Great Britain in her imperial schemes by taking part in the Oriental imbroglio. Chamberlain and Balfour have enticed us with lofty oratory. Kipling woos us with a song published in *The Call* of Sunday.

The title of the ballad is “The White Man’s Burden.” Mr. Kipling sings:

Take up the White Man's burden--
Have done with childish days--
The lightly proffered laurel,
The easy, ungrudged praise;
Comes now, to search your manhood
Through all the thankless years,
Cold, edged with dear-bought wisdom,
The judgement of your peers.

By way of further information as to what we shall have to do when we have done with childish days and set about winning the approving judgment of our peers with their cold, edged, dear-bought wisdom, the poet, drawing an easy lesson from the experience of Great Britain, adds:

Take up the White Man's Burden--
Send forth the best ye breed--
Go, bind your sons to exile
To serve your captive's need;
To wait, in heavy harness,

On fluttered folk and wild--
Your new-caught sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child.

It seems we are to infer from this that if we do not consent to send forth the best we breed to serve in exile amid the jungles of tropic islands for the noble purpose of imposing American law and civilization upon the mongrel races, half devil and half child, we shall lose the esteem of European powers now engaged in that task, and possibly the esteem of Mr. Kipling also. It is a dilemma from which we cannot escape. Fate has ordained it and face it we must.

We might be more willing to enter upon the imperial task if our British cousins were not so outspoken in their eagerness to get us to do so. Their willingness to have us share the glory of civilizing the Orient awakens a suspicion that the glory is not altogether a profitable one. Great Britain evidently has more than she can carry and would like to divide the glory with us.

The invitation to take part is flattering to our pride, but not attractive to our common sense. We have a pretty heavy white man's burden at home and it will take something more than a song even from so strong a singer as Kipling to coax us to go to the Orient in search of an increase.

In all seriousness the eagerness of Chamberlain, Balfour and other British leaders to get the United States involved in the affairs of the Orient and indirectly made a party to all European squabbles, is a significant sign of the times, and ought to be a sufficient warning to all intelligent Americans to avoid imperialism as they would a plague.

The pursuit of imperialism has raised up antagonists to Great Britain in every part of the world; it has imposed upon her people a heavy burden of debt and taxation; it has disturbed her politics by the continual menace of war and thus prevented the accomplishment of many needed reforms at home; and finally it has brought her into a position where without an ally she is confronted by a hostile world and is in danger of having her commerce, and perhaps even her empire, swept away at the first outbreak of war.

Rightly considered the white man's burden is to set and keep his own house in order. It is not required of him to upset the brown man's house under pretense of reform and then whip him into subjugation whenever he revolts at the treatment.