Kinzer, Stephen. *The True Flag: Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and the Birth of American Empire* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2017).

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In his 1959 classic, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, William Appleman Williams observed three tendencies in American foreign policy: a "humanitarian impulse…the principle of self-determination…[and] the third idea…that other people cannot *really*...improve their lives unless they go about it in the same way as the United States."[1] Journalist Stephen Kinzer addresses the origins of these divergent motivations in *The True Flag*, contending that the Spanish-American War generated "the farthest-reaching debate in our history" (2-3). Per the author, this period – not the country's post-1945 rise to superpower status – lay the foundations for all ensuing foreign policy dilemmas.

Kinzer outlines the positions articulated by imperialists and anti-imperialists. The former highlighted the popularity of colonialism among contemporary powers and the necessity of markets abroad as an outlet for the country's burgeoning productivity. Critics rejected "colonizing, annexing foreign lands, taking protectorates, or projecting military power overseas" as antithetical to national tradition (11). Hawkish counterparts responded that democratic principles were solely applicable to (white) nations capable of self-rule. The author points to Theodore Roosevelt and Mark Twain as "the most prominent…admired, and…reviled spokesmen for their opposing cause." (13).

Concerns over America's global position shaped multiple registers of political discourse. Capitalists backed William McKinley for president, a Republican favorable to foreign trade and enterprise. Democrat William Jennings Bryan fueled their fears with denunciations of empire and praise for free silver. Kinzer charges the yellow press with stirring passions for Cuban intervention, which made the subsequent war "the most popular…in American history" (49). Rhetorical clashes with anti-imperialist Carl Schurz even dominated Roosevelt's New York gubernatorial bid, rather than his actual

[1] William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1959), 13.

contest with Democratic opponent August van Wyck. "Never before," the author writes, "had anyone campaigned for governor on a platform urging overseas expansion" (77).

Kinzer emphasizes that the Anti-Imperialist League, founded in 1898, boasted such eminent figures as Andrew Carnegie and Booker T. Washington. In a surprising alliance, Carnegie offered to finance Bryan's presidential candidacy if he no longer championed free silver. The Democrat doomed this effort by embracing Filipino annexation, concerned lest congressional failure to pass the Treaty of Paris diminish his popularity with voters. Advocates depicted the Philippine War as an opportunity for post-Civil War reconciliation, whereas dissenters urged its termination and fostered support that "would turn the next presidential election into a referendum on imperialism" (134). African-American organizations and newspapers echoed Washington's comparison of domestic racism with the overseas oppression of indigenous peoples. Ironically, white labor leaders betrayed racial anxieties as they decried nonwhite job competition from abroad.

To stoke popular discontent, voices against empire stressed the U.S. military's brutal methods in speeches, meetings, and publications. An upper-class literature emerged alongside the plebeian condemnations of journalist Finley Peter Dunne's fictional Mr. Dooley. "Not until the Vietnam era," Kinzer claims, "would so many Americans rise in opposition to a foreign war" (142). Many citizens, however, equated their Boxer Rebellion intervention with the likes of the Boer War and Belgian atrocities in the Congo: the likely result of dealing with recalcitrant natives. During his bungled second presidential run, Bryan's free-silver rhetoric obscured his anti-imperialist message and lost him capitalist allies.

Kinzer asserts that the oppositional movement collapsed with Roosevelt's presidential election in 1901. Captured Filipino resistance leader Emilio Aguinaldo personally affirmed U.S. hegemony, while the Supreme Court upheld the administration of "foreign lands indefinitely by decree" in the Insular Cases (202). General Jacob H. Smith suffered court-martial for his scorched-earth campaign on the island of Samar, though an investigative committee chaired by imperialist Henry Cabot Lodge dismissed this conduct as exceptional. The author states that "news of atrocities did not set off anti-war protests… [but

rather] stirred patriotic backlash" (222). Citizens prioritized domestic affairs, a trend Roosevelt mirrored with his focus on antitrust legislation and national parks.

Anti-imperialists predicted that aggrandizement would trigger indigenous revolt, making certain "that the first burst of American annexation would be the last" (228). Kinzer nevertheless blames subsequent interventionism for an influential defense industry, massive budgets, elite political control, centralized governance, the esteem of martial values, and inadequate public scrutiny of potential wars. Underlying imperialism and intervention, he maintains, is the American belief in "providential access to secrets that can produce free and prosperous societies anywhere" (231). The First World War furthered the divide between isolationists and globalists, the latter casting themselves as defenders of "economic growth, human rights, and democracy" (233). During the Second World War, Germany and Japan's reprehensible conduct justified intervention; notwithstanding challenges by the far right and left, the Cold War solidified this bipartisan consensus. Kinzer carries the argument forward, likening President Barack Obama to President Herbert Hoover for perceiving the confines of U.S. influence. An uninformed population's acceptance of "preemptive war and 'regime change' operations reflect the quintessentially American view that the world is not a situation to be understood, but a problem to be solved" (247).

Kinzer surveys America's imperialist turn in accessible prose, although he might have advanced a more original argument. He refers to historical archives in the acknowledgements, yet relies on published primary sources (newspapers, autobiographies, speeches, congressional records) and secondary literature. Moreover, his periodization claim ineffectually grapples with the relationship between westward and overseas expansion. Noting such ventures as Indian removal and the Mexican-American War, the author still purports that Roosevelt and Lodge's embrace of "ruling people beyond their own continent, without those people's consent….[was] an immense historical leap" (19). Oddly, he quotes period Americans cognizant of the parallels. Orville Platt derided anti-imperialist George Hoar for having "contradicted all of American history," and Roosevelt declared that such "doctrines condemn your forefathers and mine for ever having settled in these United States" (104, 147). *The True Flag* rightfully calls attention to the great

turn-of-the-century debate, but when Kinzer suggests that "it has faded from memory," he would do well to openly concede the extensive academic attention this topic has enjoyed (3).