

THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN

By Rudyard Kipling

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The quest for empire dominated latter nineteenth-century Western affairs. Virtually every major European nation and the United States engaged in some type of territorial acquisition. The reasons behind the imperialistic movement are numerous and include quests for raw materials and markets to fuel the growing industrialization of Western nations, nationalism, and militarism. Even racism played a role in the movement as many nations, including Great Britain, argued that their civilization was the fittest and should be spread to "backward" peoples. These motivations led to European entry into the African interior after 1885 and the carving up of China into spheres of influence by 1900. By this time, the United States had emerged as an industrial power and needed markets; safe harbors for its military and coaling stations for its navy; and protection for American investments in foreign nations. The Spanish-American War demonstrated America's commitment as Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines were added as U.S. possessions.

Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" was published in McClure's Magazine in February 1899, at a pivotal point in the American debate over imperialism. Debate raged in American political circles over imperialism, highlighted by the terms of the Treaty of Paris that would give the U.S. control of Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Kipling's poem urged the United States to take up the burden of "civilizing" the former Spanish colonies; a thankless task but a noble undertaking. Kipling's poem also contains several warnings, and these seemed to come true. Beginning in 1899 and lasting into 1902, native Filipinos revolted against American dominance of their homeland just as they had against the Spanish in 1896. A bitter three-year war followed as America fought to maintain control of its new possession.

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,
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 ye 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 cloak your weariness.
By all ye will or whisper,
By all ye leave or do,
The silent sullen peoples
Shall weigh your God and you.

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 hope to nought.

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.

Take up the White Man's burden--
No iron 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, make them with your living
And mark them with your dead.

Questions

What is the "White Man's Burden"?

Kipling's poem and imperialism in this period in general have racist undertones. What are some found in this poem?

What do you think was the historical motivation for issuing the document? What contemporary events may have forced the document to the forefront?