

## 20-4 Alfred T. Mahan, The Influence of Sea Power, 1890

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*The historian and naval strategist Alfred T. Mahan believed that the ability to control the sea was the key factor in shaping history. His 1890 book, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, was perhaps the single most influential work on the foreign policy and military strategy of his time. Mahan's friends included such powerful political figures as William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. His works helped justify and shape the key foreign policy decisions of the era: expansion of the nation's navy, with a new emphasis on battleships; taking possession of Caribbean and Pacific Islands; and building the Panama Canal. SOURCE: William A. Williams, ed., *The Shaping of American Diplomacy*, Vol. I (1956).*

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...The conditions which now constitute the political situation of the United States, relatively to the world at large, are fundamentally different from those that obtained at the beginning of the century. It is not a mere question of greater growth, of bigger size. It is not only that we are larger, stronger, have, as it were, reached our majority, and are able to go out into the world. That alone would be a difference of degree, not of kind. The great difference between the past and the present is that we then, as regards close contact with the power of the chief nations of the world, were really in a state of political isolation which no longer exists....

It is important to recognize this, for it will help clear away the error from a somewhat misleading statement frequently made,—that the United States needs a navy for defence only, adding often, explanatorily, for the defence of our own coasts. Now in a certain sense we all want a navy for defence only. It is to be hoped that the United States will never seek war except for the defence of her rights, her obligations, or her necessary interests. In that sense our policy may always be defensive only, although it may compel us at times to steps justified rather by expediency—the choice of the lesser evil—than by incontrovertible right. But if we have interests beyond sea which a navy may have to protect, it plainly follows that the navy has more to do, even in war, than to defend the coast; and it must be added as a received military axiom that war, however defensive in moral character, must be waged aggressively if it is to hope for success....

Like each man and woman, no state lives to itself alone, in a political seclusion resembling the physical isolation which so long was the ideal of China and Japan. All, whether they will or no, are members of a community, larger or smaller; and more and more those of the European family to which we racially belong are touching each other throughout the world, with consequent friction of varying degree. That the greater rapidity of communication afforded by steam has wrought, in the influence of sea power over the face of the globe, an extension that is multiplying the points of contact and emphasizing the importance of navies, is a fact, the intelligent appreciation of which is daily more and more manifest in the periodical literature of Europe, and is further shown by the growing stress laid upon that arm of military strength by foreign governments; while the mutual preparation of the armies on the European continent, and the fairly settled territorial conditions, make each state yearly more wary of initiating a contest, and thus entail a political quiescence there, except in the internal affairs of each country. The field of external action for the great European states is now the world, and it is hardly doubtful that their struggles, unaccompanied as yet by actual clash of arms, are even under that condition drawing nearer to ourselves. Coincidentally with our own extension to the Pacific Ocean, which for so long had a good international claim to its name, that sea has become more and more the scene of political development, of commercial activities and rivalries, in which all the great powers, ourselves included, have a share. Through these causes Central and Caribbean America, now intrinsically unimportant, are brought in turn into great prominence, as constituting the gateway between the Atlantic and Pacific when the Isthmian canal shall have been made, and as guarding



the approaches to it. The appearance of Japan as a strong ambitious state, resting on solid political and military foundations, but which scarcely has reached yet a condition of equilibrium in international standing, has fairly startled the world; and it is a striking illustration of the somewhat sudden nearness and unforeseen relations into which modern states are brought, that the Hawaiian Islands, so interesting from the international point of view to the countries of European civilization, are occupied largely by Japanese and Chinese.

In all these questions we have a stake, reluctantly it may be, but necessarily, for our evident interests are involved, in some instances directly, in others by very probable implication. Under existing conditions, the opinion that we can keep clear indefinitely of embarrassing problems is hardly tenable; while war between two foreign states, which in the uncertainties of the international situation throughout the world may break out at any time, will increase greatly the occasions of possible collision with the belligerent countries, and the consequent perplexities of our statesmen seeking to avoid entanglement and to maintain neutrality....

It is because so much of the world still remains in the possession of the savage, or of states whose imperfect development, political or economical, does not enable them to realize for the general use nearly the result of which the territory is capable, while at the same time the redundant energies of civilized states, both government and peoples, are finding lack of openings and scantiness of livelihood at home, that there now obtains a condition of aggressive restlessness with which all have to reckon.

That the United States does not now share this tendency is entirely evident. Neither her government nor her people are affected by it to any great extent. But the force of circumstances has imposed upon her the necessity, recognized with practical unanimity by her people, of insuring to the weaker states of America, although of racial and political antecedents different from her own, freedom to develop politically along their own lines and according to their own capacities, without interference in that respect from governments foreign to these continents. The duty is self-assumed; and resting, as it does, not upon political philanthropy, but simply upon our own proximate interests as affected by such foreign interference, has towards others rather the nature of a right than a duty. But, from either point of view, the facility with which the claim has been allowed heretofore by the great powers has been due partly to the lack of pressing importance in the questions that have arisen, and partly to the great latent strength of our nation.

...But while our claim thus far has received a tacit acquiescence, it remains to be seen whether it will continue to command the same if the states whose political freedom of action we assert make no more decided advance towards political stability than several of them have done yet, and if our own organized naval force remains as slender, comparatively, as it once was, and even yet is. It is probably safe to say that an undertaking like that of Great Britain in Egypt, if attempted in this hemisphere by a non-American state, would not be tolerated by us if able to prevent it; but it is conceivable that the moral force of our contention might be weakened, in the view of an opponent, by attendant circumstances, in which case our physical power to support it should be open to no doubt.

That we shall seek to secure the peaceable solution of each difficulty as it arises is attested by our whole history, and by the disposition of our people; but to do so whatever the steps taken in any particular case, will bring us into new political relations and may entail serious disputes with other states....A navy, therefore, whose primary sphere of action is war, is, in the last analysis and from the least misleading point of view, a political factor of the utmost importance in international affairs, one more often deterrent than irritant. It is in that light, according to the conditions of the age and of the nation, that it asks and deserves the appreciation of the state, and that it should be developed in proportion to the reasonable possibilities of the political future.



1. According to Mahan, what world changes have occurred that require the United States to re-think its traditional naval strategy?

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2. How does Mahan justify the right of the U.S. to intervene in the affairs of the “weaker states of America?”

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3. How does Mahan invoke racial differences to support his arguments?

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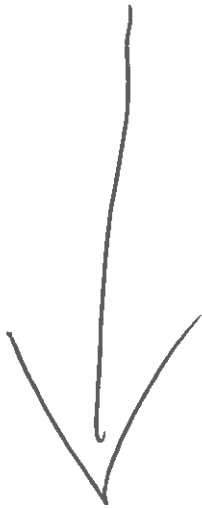
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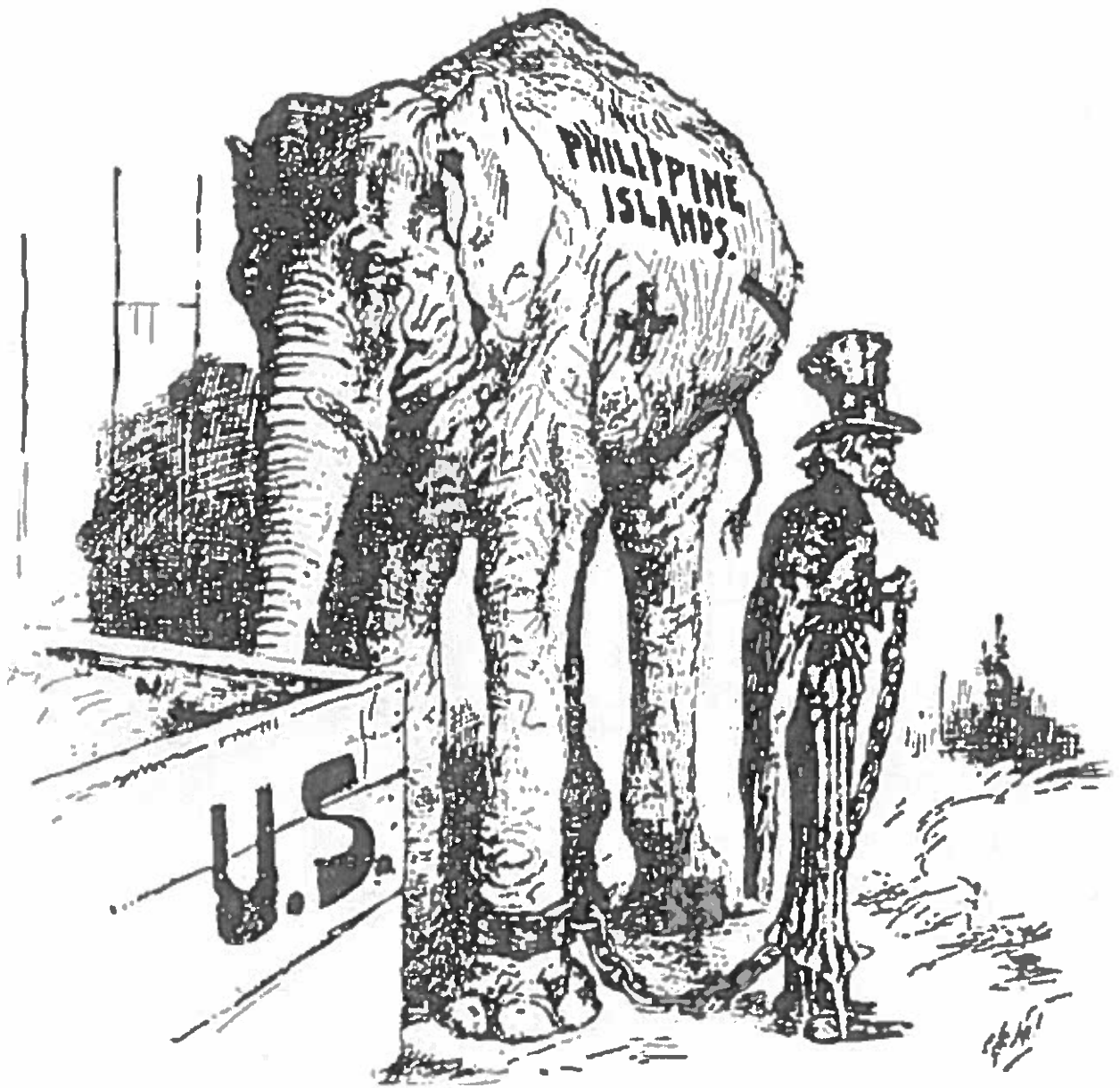


A21-01 = DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Complete an APPARTY on the following document:



A21-02: Document Analysis = White Elephant Cartoon



Why is the Uncle Sam depicted tied to an elephant and the US as an empty box? Do you agree with these representations? (Develop your answers.)



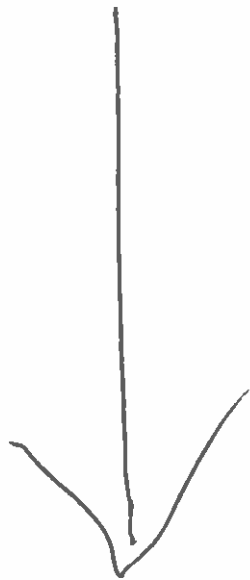
A21-01 = DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Complete an APPARTY on the following document:



Yes,

Still more



**Senator Benjamin Tillman of South Carolina: Speech made to the Senate February 7th 1899**

As though coming at the most opportune time possible, you might say just before the treaty [with Spain that ceded sovereignty over the Philippines in return for \$20,000,000] reached the Senate, or about the time it was sent to us, there appeared in one of our magazines a poem by Rudyard Kipling, the greatest poet of England at this time. This poem, unique, and in some places too deep for me, is a prophecy. I do not imagine that in the history of human events any poet has ever felt inspired so clearly to portray our danger and our duty. It is called "The White Man's Burden." With the permission of Senators I will read a stanza, and I beg Senators to listen to it, for it is well worth their attention. This man has lived in the Indies. In fact, he is a citizen of the world, and has been all over it, and knows whereof he speaks.

1

"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."

2

I will pause here. I intend to read more, but I wish to call attention to a fact which may have escaped the attention of Senators thus far, that with five exceptions every man in this chamber who has had to do with the colored race in this country voted against the ratification of the treaty. It was . . . because we understand and realize what it is to have two races side by side that cannot mix or mingle without deterioration and injury to both and the ultimate destruction of the civilization of the higher. We of the South have borne this white man's burden of a colored race in our midst since their emancipation and before.

3

It was a burden upon our manhood and our ideas of liberty before they were emancipated. It is still a burden, although they have been granted the franchise. It clings to us like the shirt of Nessus, and we are not responsible, because we inherited it, and your fathers as well as ours are responsible for the presence amongst us of that people. Why do we as a people want to incorporate into our citizenship ten millions more of different or of differing races, three or four of them? But we have not incorporated them yet, and let us see what this English poet has to say about it, and what he thinks.

4

Ah, if we have no other consideration, if no feeling of humanity, no love of our fellows, no regard for others' rights, if nothing but our self-interest shall actuate us in this crisis, let me say to you that if we go madly on in the direction of crushing these people into subjection and submission we will do so at the cost of many, many thousands of the flower of American youth. There are 10,000,000 of these people, some of them fairly well civilized, and running to the extreme of naked savages, who are reported in our press dispatches as having stood out in the open and fired their bows and arrows, not flinching from the storm of shot and shell thrown into their midst by the American soldiers there.

5

The city of Manila is surrounded by swamps and marshes, I am told. A few miles back lie the woods and jungles and mountains. These people are used to the climate. They know how to get about, and if they mean to have their liberties, as they appear to do, at what sacrifice will the American domination be placed over them? There is another verse of Kipling. I have fallen in love with this man. He tells us what we will reap: Those peoples are not suited to our institutions. They are not ready for liberty as we understand it. They do not want it. Why are we bent on forcing upon them a civilization not suited to them and which only means in their view degradation and a loss of self-respect, which is worse than the loss of life itself?

6

**Look in each paragraph identified below and note the reason presented against Imperialism.**

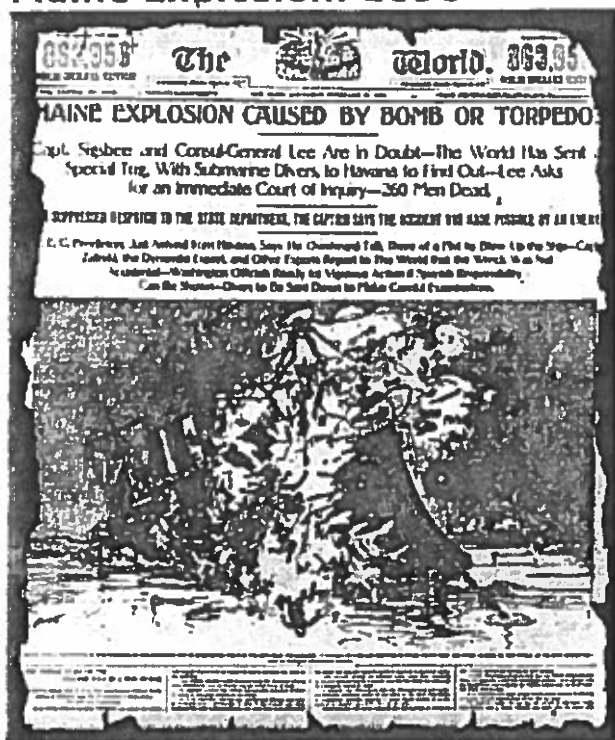
**Paragraph 3:**

**Paragraph 4:**

**Paragraph 5:**

**Paragraph 6:**

### Maine Explosion. 1898



This headline from the New York World asks whether the USS Maine explosion was caused by a bomb or torpedo. (*New York World*)

#### Thought Questions

1. Does this headline seem overly militant?
2. What assumptions does it make regarding responsibility for the explosion?
3. How is this headline a classic example of "yellow journalism"?

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