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A BOOK REVIEW OF RACISM IN U.S. IMPERIALISM: THE INFLUENCE OF RACIAL ASSUMPTIONS ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY, 1893-1946

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Author: Rubin Francis Weston

Title of Book: *Racism in U.S. Imperialism: The Influence of Racial Assumptions on American Foreign Policy, 1893–1946*

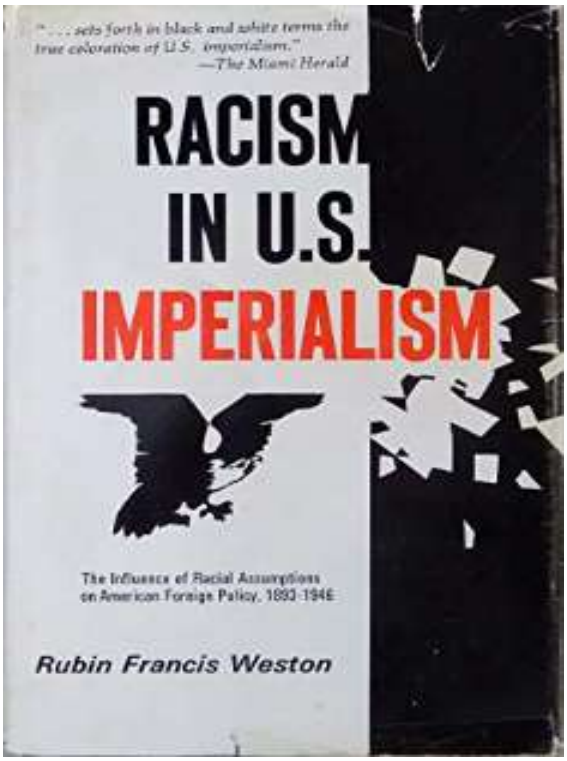
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ABSTRACT

This book review presents a thorough analysis and dissection of Rubin Francis Weston's 1972 book, *Racism in U.S. Imperialism: The Influence of Racial Assumptions on American Foreign Policy, 1893–1946*, which has become a mainstay reference work about the intersection of race and American policymaking. Using archival research vis-à-vis detailed analysis of primary sources as its principal methodology, Weston endeavors to fill a lacuna in the literature that substantiates the prevailing and undeniable conception that race, legal jurisprudence, and American imperialism are inextricably intertwined. The book critically engages with its readers as it explores the backstage of American imperialist preoccupations across the Pacific region (Hawaii and the Philippines) and the Caribbean (Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Hispaniola). In sum, despite its built-in shortcomings, Weston's observations and interpretations regarding the racial aspects of American imperialism are important to the field's historiography, as they planted the appropriate seeds that serve as the foundation for future research.

KEYWORDS: American Foreign Policy, Imperialism, Philippines, Racism, Rubin Francis Weston

I. INTRODUCTION

The very nature and concept of imperialism not only encouraged but also furthered the very idea of racism, as there are the usual imperial labels inherently attached that justified white superiority and the inherent right of whites to rule over those people with darker complexions, reinforcing the racial superiority mindset. With that qualifier, as seen in the annals of history, citing the United States as a nation that justified its 'annexation' of the former colonies of the Spanish Empire in 1898 primarily through a racist ideology serves as a seamless example. Thus, in discussing the United States as an imperial power, it is necessary to probe and retrace the racial assumptions embedded in the mindset, credo, and official policies of American officials.

Originally submitted as a dissertation at Syracuse University in 1964 under the supervision of Nelson M. Blake, Rubin Francis Weston's *Racism in U.S. Imperialism: The Influence of Racial Assumptions on American Foreign Policy, 1893–1946*, aspires to be a topical work by giving a fitting response to the discussion of the nexus of race and American imperialism by accounting for the experiences of the "others," particularly "Indians, Chinese, Japanese, and Negroes," into the formulation of the foreign policy of the Americans, not merely basing it on their own preferences (Weston 1972, xiv). Interestingly, in doing such a daunting endeavor, he primarily utilized the viewpoints and accounts of the "whites" concerning people of color to substantiate his account, since "whites have been neglected as a subject for study," as most of the records were from accounts of people of color (Weston 1972, xv). This unexpected move is not only seen as a tactic to deconstruct the existing historiographic narrative wherein the 'oppressed' fill up the majority of the works about American imperialism, but it can also be viewed as piercing the veil of the 'oppressors' minds' to take a peek at the rationale as to how the officials thought out and molded these race-driven schemes that would later become official policies by the state.

II. SUMMARY

The main thesis of the book, established in the first two chapters, is that American racial attitudes, which were theoretically abolished at the conclusion of the American Civil War, were exported to areas that came under the influence of the United States after the Spanish-American War of 1898. It meant that those people living in the areas they had acquired would be treated as a second-class 'race' or people, which brought back to American society the defining racial viewpoint of the former Southern states. It was also under the impression that the colonized people, such as the Filipinos, Puerto Ricans, Haitians, and Hawaiians, are treated like the Native Indians or Negroes in the American mainland, and because of their skin color, the American public was persuaded to believe in the innate unfitness of the less-developed peoples to govern themselves (Weston 1972, 22); thus, the "White Man's Burden" exists, expressed by Rudyard Kipling, which enamored the Americans to embark on a great yet imperialist adventure.

The main strength of Weston's book comes in his detailed, chapter-by-chapter, analysis of how these American racial attitudes were exported in the territories they have acquired. In the case of Hawaii (Chapter 3), ardent American expansionists firmly believed that their imperial scheme in Hawaii was the most sensible and awaited solution to the economic stagnation faced by the islands under their native rulers. They argued that "the native race was dying out" and with the increment of Chinese and Japanese populations in the area, fearing that the islands would be overrun and controlled by people coming from inferior races. These expansionists who advocated the exclusion of Asians in the area however, as Weston argued, failed to discern that the influx of Asian people in the area germinated primarily from the economic prospects of the area (coolie labor for the sugarcane industry), in which the white Americans would also heavily depend if they wanted the Hawaiian Islands to thrive economically.

In the case of the Philippines (Chapter 4), Weston argues that the Americans slickly utilized racism as an excuse to deny recognition of the independence proclaimed by the Filipinos on June 12, 1898, ultimately betraying the trust of the Filipinos who looked up to them as their allies, more so when it came to engaging their former Spanish colonial masters. The Americans unwittingly believed that the Filipino people resembled the skin tone of the African-Americans in their country, even though the Filipinos at that time were racially divergent, from Negritos, Malays to the Spanish and Chinese mestizos. Ultimately, the ratification of the Treaty of Paris gave birth to the 'Philippine Question' which turned out to be a contentious, sometimes heated, political-cum-legal debate over whether or not the independent Philippines should be incorporated into the United States. On one side, there is Henry Cabot Lodge Sr. and a number of Republicans who are in favor of annexing the islands for furthering American commercial interests, without thinking the broader repercussions of their actions. On the other side, figures such as Senator Desota Money of Mississippi and John W. Daniels of Virginia, in addition to politicians from the former Southern states, stated that the inclusion of the country is a huge threat to the American Republic mainly because they consider Filipinos an inferior people to them, thus fearing that the United States will eventually become a contaminated hodgepodge of "half-free and half-dependent" people (Weston 1972, pp. 92-93). Ultimately, the eruption of the Philippine-American War on February 4, 1899, forced the reluctant, skeptical, anti-expansionist senators to ratify the Treaty of Paris, cementing the legal foundation for American annexation of the Philippine islands. Emerging from the war, the Filipinos will find themselves in a political existential paradox: for the next four decades, they are under the management and tutelage of the Americans but will never become citizens of America, by virtue of the promulgation of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision from the case of *Downes v. Bidwell* in 1901.

The last Spanish Empire strongholds in the Caribbean, those of Cuba (Chapter 5) and Puerto Rico (Chapter 6) present an engaging pair of American foreign policy paradoxes. Cuba, the nearest major Caribbean island group to the United States, received mixed sentiment from its American neighbors. They were initially interested in them not only because of their supposed duty of thwarting

any European presence in the Western Hemisphere but primarily because of the economic potential that they would greatly benefit from. But after the Spanish-American War, their fervent enthusiasm had plunged drastically. The American nation, as Weston argued, was “sympathetic to the aspirations of the Cubans for republican principles but unwilling to concede political independence” (Weston 1972, 138). Thus, by virtue of the Teller Amendment, it demonstrated that American interests in Cuba were limited only to “pacification” purposes; they would not forcibly incorporate Cuba into the American union, which then left the administration and control of the island to the Cuban people themselves. Puerto Rico, on the other hand, followed a distinct trajectory compared to Cuba. By virtue of the Foraker Act of 1900, the United States has incorporated the territory into their own and established a civil government, which was headed by a resident commissioner to ensure stability and proper management. Then, by 1917, upon promulgation of the Jones-Shafroth Act, statutory birthright citizenship was accorded to people born in Puerto Rico on or after April 11, 1899, and racial immigration and naturalization quotas for Puerto Ricans were abolished. But despite all the legal underpinnings, the social reality is that those who were in positions to formulate policies denied Puerto Ricans the rights usually given to Americans.

As the final case study, Weston presented the narrative of Hispaniola (Chapter 7) and the American interests in the area. The Haitians and Dominicans were very wary of the encroachment of American interests into the island of Hispaniola, fearing that they would become annexed and treated as slaves. On the other side, the Americans viewed the people from the Dominican Republic as “lacking ambition and endurance both physically and mentally,” and the Haitians were characterized as natural prevaricators, which triggered a repugnance of interests in the area (Weston 1972, 214-215). Then, as a conclusion to the work, Weston quoted Samuel Bemis’ statement touching on the ephemerality of American imperialism: “American imperialism was an imperialism against imperialism” (Weston 1972, 257). Ephemeral, in a sense, since the Americans found themselves gerrymandering and, at certain times, dumbfounded by how far their ‘Manifest Destiny’ mission would take them, even if they were powered by a strong belief in racial superiority. Thus, Weston cleverly posited that the Americans’ strong imperialist fervor served as the Trojan horse for the limitations of the American state during the years 1893-1946.

III. ANALYSIS

Weston’s seemingly convincing statements about the intersection of race and imperialism in the American context were partly driven by the wealth of bibliographic materials used to create his work. He utilized numerous official documents from the U.S. House of Congress and U.S. Senate, which shaped the ‘insiders’ view’ of the topic, as they contain pertinent information to the conducted floor hearings and other general inquiries about the inclusion of these insular areas in the American union. These are undoubtedly helpful in mapping the roots of how these racist policies came into being.

Another commendable feature of the book is Weston's attempt, in settling an account on the interconnection of racism and American imperialism that is fair and impartial, by hearing the side of the contrarians. Anent the contrarian's perspective on this complex issue, Weston underscored the integral role played by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), in the 1920s and 1930s, to police the governmental policy relating to colored people in their overseas territories (Weston 1972, 236). Such an inclusion meant that Weston did not attempt to prescind or bar any arguments coming from the "colored people" that would undermine his laid out *white-centric* arguments. While it supports how the African-Americans viewed the miseries of the colored people under the American administration, it falls short of providing an all-encompassing account. Weston gave favored treatment to the NAACP's reception on Hispaniola, neglecting other counter-resistance movements inside the occupied territories or any endeavors made by Americans to dissuade the pervasion of the imperialist way (Weston 1972, 236-238). Weston's exclusion of Andrew Carnegie's offer of buying the Philippines worth US$20 million in order for it to remain independent is a missed-out opportunity in his discussion.

However, its major defect when it comes to its sources is that it lacked an up-to-date secondary scholarly sources as Weston did not attempt to reformulate, revise, or rethink the ideas that were once in his dissertation that eventually became his book. And in fact, the secondary sources he utilized are outnumbered by the primary sources he used, which asserted that Weston is more concerned on "*how* the events unfolded" rather than "*why* the events unfolded". It seems to the reviewer that Weston purposefully did not include a handful of important secondary sources existing at that time (the 1970s), such as that of Walter LaFeber and Ernest May, whose works about international relations would further solidify and provide more depth to the statements provided by Weston.[2] His intellectual myopia about the interconnection and integration of American imperialism, racism, political, economic, socio-cultural aspects have made it quite impossible for him to craft a more robust and comprehensive account.

Another major flaw is that Weston's book was deprived of a proper historical and reasonable appraisal of why Hawaii was granted statehood within the United States of America by 1959, and Puerto Rico was not incorporated. On page 264, Weston claimed that the *insufficient* "Americanization" of the Puerto Ricans was the primary reason why the Americans denied entry into the American union, for there exists a "continued subordinate relationship" between them. But with that plain explanation alone, it cannot grasp the severity of the historical situation.

[2] For a contemporary scholarly account on the U.S. Imperialism which runs contrary to the account of Weston, see Walter LaFeber, 1963, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press). While Weston tested the limits of prevailing historiographical inquiries into American imperialism, LaFeber contended in this specific monograph that it was "economic forces", not on the belief of racial superiority, rests the American proclivity in commercial and economic expansion, which naturally paved the groundwork for imperialism (LaFeber 1963, viii).

To have an inherent guarantee of the historical context for this shortcoming, it demands a thorough historical scrutiny. It is clear in the court opinion of one of the infamous Insular Cases mentioned earlier, *Downes v. Bidwell,* that the territory of Puerto Rico, consistent with other of the American occupied territories in the Pacific and the Caribbean, were not automatically given full protection by the United States in terms of administrative, taxation, and other economic affairs, not unless the United States Congress approves of such move. In short, the *Constitution* does not necessarily "follow the *flag*" (Burnett and Marshall 2001, 4). In relation to that ruling, Associate Justice Edward Douglass White, in his concurring opinion to the *Downes v. Bidwell*, scathingly remarked that "*there be no controversy as to the right of Congress to locally govern the island of Porto Rico as its wisdom may decide*[…]" (Downes v. Bidwell, 1901) And as seen in the exacting language used by Justice White, "right of congress to locally govern," that came through in 1917, wherein the Puerto Ricans were made United States citizens through the promulgation of the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917. Although, in reality, the repercussions of this act only encompassed the idea of granting American *citizenship*, albeit confined to a restrictive quota system, to all willing Puerto Ricans, but it does not take explicitly take into consideration the granting statehood into the American Union, or resolve the thorny issue of granting citizenship equates granting of equal constitutional rights to the Puerto Ricans.

In the landmark decision of *Balzac v. Porto Rico* in 1922, it was legally established that Puerto Rico remains an unincorporated territory of the American Union, even as the American Congress (through the Jones-Shafroth Act) extended the privilege of granting American citizenship to them. Then Chief Justice William Howard Taft, who had penned the landmark decision, stated that "*when such a step* [incorporation of Puerto Rico into the American Union] *is taken, it will be begun and taken by Congress deliberately, and with a clear declaration of purpose, and not left a matter of mere inference or construction*" (Balzac v. Porto Rico, 1922). One must remember that the opinions of justices in the Supreme Court, at the time, were embroiled in the same racial tension, which Weston tries to make a case for in his book. Thus, the United States Congress' mandate and power in terms of territorial incorporation were not found relevant by Weston in his discussion of Puerto Rico's exclusion from the American union. It highlights Weston's over-enthusiasm in referring to racial implications of the personnel involved in agreement signing or the implication of it to the colored people vis-à-vis equality with white American privilege, which, frankly, dilutes the discussion.

Furthermore, while Hawaii was groomed towards statehood due to the authoritative influence of white American corporations in the area, with the onset of the Cold War, the first democratically-elected governor of Puerto Rico, Luis Muñoz Marin, supported the initiative of nationalizing the Puerto Ricans by immersing them in their own culture, fearing that American statehood would erase the inherent native linguistic and cultural upbringing. Hence, in 1952, he championed the *Estado Libre*

Asociado or the "Free Associated State of Puerto Rico"[3] wherein it permitted "self-governance" and the proposed constitution permitted the full unification of its court system and any amendments to such constitution were to be accordingly based on Public Law 600 or the *Puerto Rico Federal Relations Act of 1950*. It finally came into being on July 25, 1952, which essentially closed the doors for further negotiations of Puerto Rican admission into the American union (Monge 1997, 118).

In addition to the defect mentioned above, there are minor defects that need to be pointed out, which concerns framing of historical information. On page 90, the census presented shows that the existing demographic total of the Philippines has no year indicated. On page 100, Weston stated, using the report given by the Schurman Commission to McKinley, "the Filipinos themselves, according to hundreds of witnesses, did not want independence." But in reality, by the time the Schurman Commission arrived, the Philippines was already an independent republic, and on the other side, Weston's assertion did not have any direct reference as to where the "Filipinos" had said that. It is more likely that Weston, just like the members of the Schurman Commission before him, believed *prima facie*, the statements given by the Filipinos, notably the *ilustrados* or elite class, they had interviewed without scrutinizing whether it holds a grain of the truth or not.

On page 141, Weston claimed that both the Hawaiian and Cuban Revolutions in the 1890s were "reactions against monarchical rule." While technically correct, Weston failed to properly distinguish and scrutinize the revolutions in those two areas as structurally distinct, even if their overarching goal is the same: to overthrow their current ruler. In Hawaii, the Hawaiians overthrew Queen Lili'uokalani in 1893 with the assistance of American industrialists; in contrast, the Cuban struggle for independence against their Spanish colonial masters precipitated the political-military intervention of the Americans, catalyzed by the *USS Maine* incident in 1898. Succinctly, the Hawaiian Revolution is characterized as a foreign-led effort to overthrow the local ruler' while the Cuban Revolution is a locally-led uprising to overthrow the foreign ruler.

IV. CONCLUSION

As a summing up, the subject of American *imperialism* demands no less. Scholars devote considerable effort and sustained time to study and make appropriate strides in this thorny and complex topic, as a guide for current and future policy. It imports and employs a multitude of concepts from allied disciplines to dissect the nature, participants involved, and events that unfolded that are pertinent appropriately and thoroughly to the transformation of the American state. Rubin Francis Weston's book

[3] Former Chief Justice of the Puerto Rican Supreme Court Jose Trías Monge noted that many scholars always fall into the trap that the literal translation of *Estado Libre Asociado* is "Commonwealth of Puerto Rico" but it is not. Its correct translation is the "Free Associated State of Puerto Rico." This erroneous translation, Monge noted, was misinterpreted and subsequently entertained by scholars of the field which was the primary reason for its persisting influence as seen in historical literature and other accounts.

offers an unmistakable scholarly attempt to escape the usual provincialism about American imperialism by centering the concept of race as a major inertia that clothed the Americans' desire to control areas both in the Pacific and the Caribbean. Moreover, it is underscored that the embodiment of racism in the arena of foreign policy-making, as shown in Weston's work, was shaped into legal jurisprudence and legislative intent, which would subsequently affirm the idea of a prevailing systemic ideological and intellectual battlefield within American society as the *imperialist* trajectory of America unfolded. Despite the shortcomings mentioned, which are common for both a trailblazing and highly provocative work, Weston has written a book that should reach students of history and allied disciplines, scholars, and even the general public. It behooves readers to abandon preconceived ideological notions about American imperialism, as it offers intellectually stimulating and nuanced perspectives to address the complex topic. It stands out as a model for future research endeavors, for good and for ill, regarding the growing presence of American influence and its complex implications and constituents, which continues to cast a huge shadow in the entire world.

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