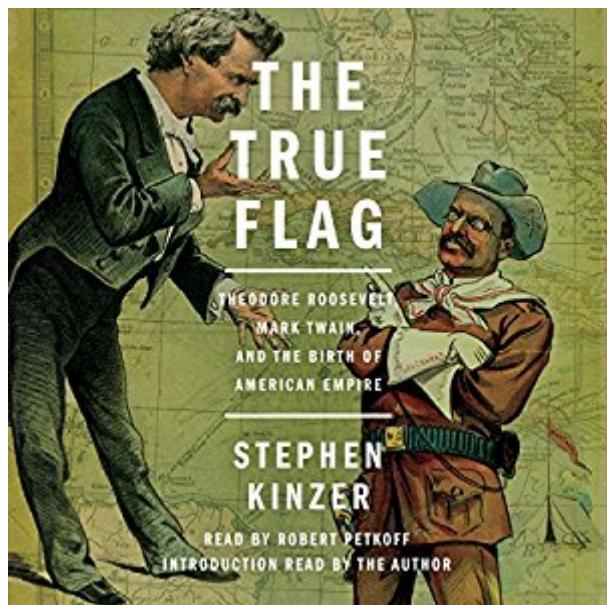


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The True Flag: Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, And The Birth Of American Empire



Synopsis

The best-selling author of *Overthrow* and *The Brothers* brings to life the forgotten political debate that set America's interventionist course in the world for the 20th century and beyond. How should the United States act in the world? Americans cannot decide. Sometimes we burn with righteous anger, launching foreign wars and deposing governments. Then we retreat - until the cycle begins again. No matter how often we debate this question, none of what we say is original. Every argument is a pale shadow of the first and greatest debate, which erupted more than a century ago. Its themes resurface every time Americans argue whether to intervene in a foreign country.

Revealing a piece of forgotten history in *The True Flag*, Stephen Kinzer transports us to the dawn of the 20th century, when the United States first found itself with the chance to dominate faraway lands. That prospect thrilled some Americans. It horrified others. Their debate gripped the nation. The country's best-known political and intellectual leaders took sides. Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, and William Randolph Hearst pushed for imperial expansion; Mark Twain, Booker T. Washington, and Andrew Carnegie preached restraint. Only once before - in the period when the United States was founded - have so many brilliant Americans so eloquently debated a question so fraught with meaning for all humanity. All Americans, regardless of political perspective, can take inspiration from the titans who faced off in this epic confrontation. Their words are amazingly current. Every argument over America's role in the world grows from this one. It all starts here. This program includes an introduction read by the author.

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Customer Reviews

In *The True Flag: Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and the Birth of the American Empire*, award-winning journalist and author Stephen Kinzer recalls the four-year period 1898-1902, when the United States made its debut as a world power. The central event in this story was the U.S. seizure of Cuba, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines and the annexation of Hawaii, all in 1898. The central question in U.S. foreign policyDrawing on the newspapers and magazines of the times and on historical archives, Kinzer recalls the debates surrounding these events in colorful detail. His stated aim is to examine the central question of U.S. foreign policy: "Should we defend our freedom, or turn inward and ignore growing threats? Put differently: Should we charge violently into faraway lands, or allow others to work out their own destinies?" Kinzer's thesis is that American entry into war with Spain in 1898 marked the crucial turning point in this debate. That brief, inglorious conflict represented the advent of the U.S. as a world power. Mark Twain vs. Teddy Roosevelt? To bring focus to his story, the author casts a spotlight on the debate between President Theodore Roosevelt and Mark Twain. The book's subtitle frames this picture. As Kinzer writes, the two were "deliciously matched. Their views on life, freedom, duty, and the nature of human happiness could not have been further apart . . . Roosevelt considered colonialism a form of "Christian charity." Twain pictured Christendom as "a majestic matron in flowing robes drenched with blood." Unfortunately, the emphasis on these two men is misleading. Others played much larger roles in the crucial years of 1898-1900 than Twain did. He came into the picture later, as Kinzer himself clearly explains. The two sides of the debateKinzer draws our attention to the principal figures in the two factions that lined up before the Spanish-American War. What might be termed the imperialist faction was led by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, then New York Governor Theodore Roosevelt, and publisher William Randolph Hearst. These three men were largely responsible for pushing the United States into war with Spain. Former U.S. Senator and Union Army general Carl Schurz, William Jennings Bryan, former President Grover Cleveland, and later Andrew Carnegie led the opposition. Mark Twain came to the debate belatedly, becoming the most recognizable voice of the anti-imperialist movement once Roosevelt was in the White House. Kinzer depicts Teddy Roosevelt as bloodthirsty and racist to the core. In the 1890s, "Roosevelt racked his brain to find a possible enemy. "I should welcome almost any war, for I think this country needs one." he wrote in 1895. Henry Cabot Lodge and William Randolph Hearst gave him the war he craved, Lodge from his seat in the U.S. Senate and Hearst by manipulating public opinion through his influential newspaper chain. As Kinzer makes clear, Lodge was the driving force in Roosevelt's career. It was he who

persuaded President McKinley to name the young New Yorker assistant secretary of the Navy, then gained him the nomination as Governor of New York, and later maneuvered him into the Vice Presidency. From there, of course, Roosevelt succeeded to the Presidency upon McKinley's assassination in 1901. Lodge viewed Roosevelt as his agent to lead the nation onto the world stage. The two men were in touch on a daily basis throughout these crucial years. The Anti-Imperialist League Superficial histories of the years just before and after the turn of the 20th century give the impression that America's drive to war with Spain and the seizure of its overseas colonies was irresistible and inevitable. Undoubtedly, *this was the most popular war in American history . . . Americans had their first taste of overseas conquest, and they loved it.* But the sentiment was hardly universal. An Anti-Imperialist League spread nationwide from its base in New England, led by Carl Schurz, William Jennings Bryan, and Grover Cleveland. As Kinzer shows, the force these men represented was powerful. Debate erupted nationwide and greatly intensified as the U.S. grabbed the Philippines and went to war with its independence movement. In the U.S. Senate, the treaty to approve the acquisition of the Philippines was debated furiously for months and was only approved by the narrowest of margins—and then only because William Jennings Bryan changed sides at the last minute, swaying several Senators to switch and robbing the opponents of the treaty of a likely victory. When did the U.S. become an imperialist nation? Most Americans date the beginning of what has come to be called the American empire to the Spanish-American War of 1898, as Kinzer does in his book. At any rate, that's the story we're taught as children. Truth to tell, however, the United States has been an imperialist nation (in the contemporary sense of the term) since the origins of our republic. Thomas Jefferson famously purchased the Louisiana Territory in 1803, doubling the size of the young nation. Then-General Andrew Jackson ousted the Spanish from Florida in 1818. James K. Polk led the U.S. into war with Mexico in 1846, adding an additional one-third to our territory and extending our reach to the Pacific Ocean. And none of this acknowledges our country's genocidal wars against the Native American peoples who had lived on this land for at least 12,000 years before Europeans arrived. If these actions don't constitute imperialism, the term means little. From time to time Kinzer quotes individuals who acknowledged this during those crucial years, so he doesn't entirely overlook this history. But he fails to emphasize what surely is the most significant evidence that the foreign policy debate he writes about did not emerge whole in 1898.

Every country has a "before and after" narrative - a critical turning point. For the USA, we frequently

cite the Civil War or WWII. At these junctions, we had a choice, took a particular path, and changed the country profoundly. These were defining moments. The True Flag pinpoints an entirely different junction - mid-way between the Civil War and WWII, at the turn of the 20th Century. This is the time when the entire country debated whether or not to become an imperialist power. The pawns in the game were Cuba, Puerto Rico and other Caribbean Islands, Hawaii, and the Philippines. The US successfully fought Spain to "free" these territories, but then had second thoughts. Twain, Carnegie, and Hearst, championed self-governance for these far-flung lands, outside our existing borders. Teddy Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge were on the other side, arguing for the US to become a strong world power. They persuaded President McKinley. The True Flag focuses on the very short period of time during which this debate was engaged, and fatefully resolved. Every bad thing you ever heard about the US war in the Philippines comes alive on these pages, and things you never heard. Ditto Cuba. The bitter surprise is that the debate came so close. On several occasions, the anti-imperialists lost by a single vote. The whole country threw itself into this agonizing debate, much as it is doing now, with Trump. Digest this sad story, and a whole heck of a lot of our current political and international situations will suddenly make more sense. Tragic sense. The True Flag is VERY well-written, a page turner, and a bitter-sweet story of what might have been. Despite our history of genocide, slavery, and other well-known depravities, the United States also had some important ideals and democratic principles imbedded in our Constitution - ideals that have inspired others throughout the world, and provided a corrective force to our nation's many missteps. Key among these principles is the idea that government should function by consent of the governed - the people. When the imperialists won the debate at the end of the 19th century, arguing cynically that brown people were incapable of governing themselves, the American democratic experiment hung in the balance, then went down to defeat. We have McKinley, Teddy Roosevelt, and Henry Cabot Lodge to thank, long before Donald Trump arrived on the scene to trample the remnants.

A succinct and quite readable history of the genesis of America's interventionism, beginning with the Spanish-American War in 1898. The author does an excellent job in analyzing the personality clashes and ensuing bitterness between "interventionist" and "non-interventionist" emerging schools of thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The book inevitably raises the implicit--though never stated--question of what we never seem to learn from past--sometimes well-intentioned--overseas blunders, making one wonder why we never appear to derive any lessons from our own history. The last 10-15% of the book is a bit polemical, and condenses about 120 of history into a few dozen pages, though the theme (and lesson) is clear. For those who, like

me, were largely unaware of the seminal implications of the Spanish-American War, and the concomitant bloody, merciless conquest of the Philippines, this is well worth reading.

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