After the end of the Civil War in 1865, the United States embarked on low-key expansion until the Spanish–American War in 1898. The main goal of the U.S. government was the acquisition of naval bases in the Caribbean and Pacific, and the spread of U.S. trade and commercial interests. The changes in naval propulsion, from sail to steam, meant that the United States Navy needed coaling stations to project power overseas. As American merchants and companies sought new overseas markets for manufactured goods and foodstuffs, they expected the U.S. flag to follow for protection. Along with the economic imperatives driving U.S. expansion, American racism and the Protestant missionary impulse also influenced U.S. policy. The Spanish–American war in 1898 was merely the culmination, not the beginning, of U.S. imperialism.

Following the cessation of hostilities, the United States faced a lengthy Reconstruction of the former Confederate states with a new president. Republicans hoped Andrew Johnson would favor a harsh Reconstruction, only to be cruelly disappointed as the former senator from Tennessee sought to quickly bring the South back into the Union with no protection of African-American rights.

When Radical Republicans gained control of Congress in the 1866 election and frustrated his domestic policies, Johnson turned to foreign policy to garner popular support. He inherited Secretary of State William Seward, and by 1866 Seward was the dominant cabinet member of the Johnson administration. Seward embarked on a territorial expansion campaign that also sought to breathe new life into the Monroe Doctrine. The policy had remained dormant since being issued in 1823 as the United States did not have the military or economic power to enforce it. During the Civil War, the United States had been unable to prevent a French intervention in Mexico. At the end of the war, General Ulysses S. Grant dispatched 50,000 men to the Texas border under the command of General Phillip Sheridan to intimidate the French. Seward successfully diplomatically pressured French emperor Napoleon III to announce a French withdrawal.

Seward pursued an expansion policy that sought to gain new territory for the United States as well as coaling stations in the Caribbean. He sought naval bases in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, only to be rebuffed by Haiti and foiled by a Dominican revolution. His attempt to buy the Virgin Islands from Denmark failed when a hurricane struck the islands and the Senate refused to ratify the annexation treaty. He negotiated a treaty with Columbia to give the United States the right to build a canal across the Panamanian isthmus, but the Columbian Senate rejected it. The United States failed to gain any new Caribbean territory during his tenure.
In the Pacific, however, Seward enjoyed more success as the United States started its path to becoming the dominant Pacific power. In 1867, the Navy claimed Midway Island under an 1850 law encouraging the seizure of uninhabited islands with possible guano deposits. The island proved of little value until the 1930s when Pan American airlines used it as a fueling station for its Clipper service, and the Navy developed air bases on the island. The Japanese attempted an invasion in June 1942, only to be defeated in the pivotal naval battle of Midway.

If the seizing of Midway attracted little attention, Seward's purchase of Alaska was hotly debated within the country and the Senate in 1867. The United States had eyed annexing Canada since the American Revolution. The failure of U.S. invasions in both the Revolution and the War of 1812 had not cooled the lust of expansionists like Seward toward Canada. Acquiring Alaska from Russia would create additional pressure on Great Britain to give Canada to the United States. It would have the additional bonus of expelling Russia from North America, leaving Great Britain as the last European imperial power on the continent. Seward negotiated a treaty with Russia that sold Alaska to the United States for $7.2 million. Critics denounced the treaty as "Seward's Folly" because Alaska seemingly had little value. The Radical Republicans' fierce opposition to the Johnson administration seemingly doomed the treaty's ratification until Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, gave an impassioned speech that turned around Republican opinion. For less than two cents an acre, the United States received one of the great bargains in history with the addition of a territory that ultimately proved to be rich in gold and oil.

In 1868, General Ulysses S. Grant easily won the White House and entered office favoring U.S. expansion. His selection of Hamilton Fish as secretary of state, however, contradicted this because Fish remained steadfastly opposed to expansion throughout his eight years in office. In 1869, Grant's private secretary, Orville Babcock, and the president of the Dominican Republic concocted a plan to annex that country to the United States. Both men and their cronies would financially benefit from expansion because they bought up prime real estate in the hope that prices would rise once the country was a U.S. territory. The Dominican annexation failed because of the opposition of Sumner in the Senate.

Fish became the dominant member of the Grant cabinet, and controlled policy on the role of the United States in the Cuban rebellion that had started in 1868. Known as the Ten Years' War, the conflict threatened to drag the United States into a war with Spain. The Cuban rebels used the United States as their base of operations and attempted to buy arms and munitions and enlist American volunteers. The Cuban-American community raised money for the rebellion and attempted to buy influence in Washington by bribing public officials, including Grant's secretary of war, John Rawlins, and journalists. The longer the war dragged on, the greater the chance that the United States would be drawn in. Fish tried twice, in 1869 and then again in 1875, to offer U.S. mediation between the Cuban insurgents and the Spanish government, but both times Madrid refused to consider the offer.

Fish sought to end the fighting to avert U.S. entry into the war, but his worst fears were almost realized in 1873 with the *Virginiss* affair. The Cuban rebels bought a former Confederate blockade runner, hired an American captain and crew and used the ship to smuggle men and munitions to the island. In November 1873, the Spanish Navy captured the ship while it was flying the American flag and proceeded to execute 42 Americans and Cuban passengers and crew. Newspapers and politicians across the United States demanded either war or Spanish repartitions for the massacre and dishonor to the American flag. War was averted only by a Spanish apology and the discovery that the *Virginiss* was not entitled to fly the American flag. The 1873 war scare, though, demonstrated that the United States Navy had become obsolete.
and indeed, decrepit. When the fleet gathered off Key West, Florida, many of the ships’ engines broke down under the strain. The Nation mocked the U.S. Navy as “almost useless for military purposes.”

The pitiful state of the Navy during the crisis helped inspire the naval reforms and renaissance in the 1880s. As Great Britain and other leading naval powers experienced a technological revolution, much of the U.S. Navy in the 1870s was either obsolete wooden sailing ships or monitors that could only sail in calm, offshore waters. When war erupted between Chile and her neighbors Peru and Bolivia, the U.S. Pacific squadron dispatched to protect American interests was hopelessly outclassed by the Chilean Navy. In order for the United States to assert itself within the hemisphere and globally, the Navy had to be modernized and enlarged. It also needed to be intellectually reinvigorated to develop new missions and goals.

The man who came to dominate U.S. naval policy and strategy well past his death was Captain (later Rear Admiral) Alfred Thayer Mahan. With the creation of the Naval War College in Newport, RI to teach midlevel officers strategy, the U.S. entered a new era of strategic thinking. Appointed as a professor in 1885, Mahan’s book The Influence of Seapower upon History, 1660–1783 created modern strategy and tactics. Mahan called for the building of a large American fleet, to be dominated by capital ships, whose primary purpose was to seek out and destroy the enemy’s fleet. U.S. naval strategy since the American Revolution had been based on attacking the enemy’s merchant shipping. Mahan called for the concentration of power at sea and defeating the enemy in a decisive battle. His writings and philosophy not only inspired the creation of the modern U.S. Navy, but also deeply influenced Germany’s Kaiser Wilhelm II and his quest for naval parity with Great Britain.

Beginning in the 1880s, the U.S. Navy underwent a technological revolution. The introduction in 1883 of the so-called ABC cruisers (the Atlanta, Boston and Chicago) heralded a new era in U.S. naval construction. These all-steel ships, while small compared to their European counterparts, were the first modern U.S. warships, despite their retention of sails as backup to steam engines.

In the Pacific, it would be the Navy that spread U.S. influence and imperialism. Because of the vast nature of the area, oftentimes naval officers created U.S. policy. In 1871, a joint effort by the U.S. minister to China, Frederick Low, and Rear Admiral John Rodgers attempted to open Korea to relations and trade with the United States. Though the effort failed, Washington’s interest in Korea remained. In 1880, Secretary of State James G. Blaine sent Rear Admiral Robert Shufeldt on the USS Ticonderoga to open relations. Shufeldt had extensive service in China, and believed that the Navy’s role was opening up the region to U.S. commerce and influence. The mission ultimately failed due to the Korean government not wanting to provoke Japan, which had imperial ambitions for the country.

Expanding American trade and interests in China became a dominant theme of U.S. foreign policy from the Civil War to the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. China was seen as an untapped market but with the establishment of European concessions throughout the country, U.S. business interests needed the American government to keep it open to American goods. U.S. diplomats pursued an “Open Door” policy that would prevent outright annexation of Chinese territory by European countries and Japan and force all nations to treat imports equally in their sphere of influences in China. The United States sought to treat China as an equal, but racism often intervened. The Burlingame Treaty of 1868 granted the United States most-favored status in China while allowing for Chinese emigration into the United States. While Chinese labor helped build the transcontinental railroad, it also sparked a racial backlash that led to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. While Americans at home protested Chinese immigration, they encouraged the Christianization of the country by U.S. missionaries.
If the United States was interested in economic expansion in China, it desired to annex Samoa and Hawaii. In Samoa, the United States was caught up in a three-power struggle with Great Britain and Germany. In 1885 and 1887, two crises erupted that threatened to create a war in the South Pacific. A timely typhoon in 1889 sunk German and American warships and prevented the outbreak of hostilities. Passions ultimately cooled in part due to German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck’s desire to avoid war. The three nations ultimately negotiated a division of the islands. Without a shot, the United States gained the strategic harbor of Pago Pago, foreshadowing later expansion into the Pacific.

Hawaii was seen by many Americans as a natural target for expansion. A reciprocity treaty with the United States in 1875 left the island kingdom a U.S. economic satellite. In 1889, U.S. Secretary of State James G. Blaine negotiated a treaty with the Hawaiian minister to the United States (an American working for U.S. business interests in Hawaii) that would have turned the islands into an American protectorate. The treaty died when the Hawaiian king rejected it, but American interest in the kingdom was hardly at an end. Besides economic interests, the United States feared that either Great Britain or Japan would seize control of the islands. In January 1893, a coup by U.S. business interests, backed by marines and sailors from USS Boston, overthrew the Hawaiian queen, Liliuokalani, and the U.S. consul declared the islands under U.S. protection. The new Grover Cleveland administration refused to consider U.S. annexation, but it was clear that Hawaii’s days as an independent nation were nearing an end. In 1898, the islands would become a U.S. territory.

American interest in Hawaii was driven by strategic and economic interests. From 1865 to 1897, economic imperialism drove U.S. foreign policy as U.S. businesses desired to open up new markets to American goods. The Gilded Age was a period where business interests came to control American politics, ushering in a period of unprecedented corruption where seemingly every political office was for sale to the highest bidder. Business and government worked together to expand U.S. exports. Great Britain dominated trade with Latin America, and both Republican and Democratic administrations wanted to open those markets to American goods and crops.

While the Monroe Doctrine proclaimed that the United States would not tolerate further European expansion in the Americas, U.S. leaders after the Civil War saw it as a justification to remove European influence in the area as well. Not until World War I, however, would the United States supplant Great Britain as the leading economic power in the region. American companies and investors actively pursued investment in Latin America. U.S. companies would by 1900 control the banana trade from Central America and turn countries like Guatemala and Nicaragua into corporate fiefdoms.

The United States by 1897 was poised for economic expansion, not only throughout the Americas but into Asia as well. This interest in China motivated in part the decision to keep the Philippines after the Spanish–American War. The United States by 1897 was on the verge of dramatic territorial and economic expansion overseas. If the country was not yet a world power, it was on the verge of being so.

Notes

2 The best overall study of U.S. foreign policy during this period is Robert L. Beisner, From the Old Diplomacy to the New, 1865–1900 (New York: Crowell, 1975).


4 For a complete history of the Johnson presidency, see Albert Castel, The Presidency of Andrew Johnson (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1979).


9 For a complete history of U.S.–Danish relations that ultimately led to the Virgin Islands being acquired by the United States in 1917, see Charles Tansill, The Purchase of the Danish West Indies (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1932).


12 The best one-volume biography of Grant is William McFeely, Grant (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1981), but while strong on his presidency, it is less than satisfactory on his military career. McFeely paints a very unsympathetic portrait of Grant. Also strong on his political career and a more favorable assessment of the man is Jean Edward Smith, Grant (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001). A popular history that can safely be ignored because of its superficiality is Geoffrey Perret, Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier and President (New York: Random House, 1997).

13 The only biography of Fish is Allan Nevins, Hamilton Fish: The Inner History of the Grant Administration (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1936). There is a pressing need for a modern study of Grant and Fish’s foreign policy.


16 Hamilton Fish diary, November 6, 1875. Library of Congress. For the role of the Cuban-American community during the war, see Gerald E. Poyo, *With All, and for the Good of All: The Emergence of Popular Nationalism in the Cuban Communities of the United States, 1848–1898* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989).

17 For the 1875 U.S. mediation offer, see Jay Sexton, “The United States, the Cuban Rebellion, and the Multilateral Initiative of 1875,” *Diplomatic History* 30 (Summer 2006): 335–365. There is no study of the 1869 offer.


19 “How should we fight Spain,” *The Nation*, 4 December, 1873, 864.


33 Blaine is one of the more fascinating characters in U.S. diplomatic history. For his influence, see Edward P. Crapol, *James G. Blaine: Architect of Empire* (Wilmington, DE: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000).


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