

# IMPERIALISM IS NOT THE AMERICAN WAY

BY WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN

*At the dawn of the 20th century, when "[t]he old horse got too slow for Uncle Sam" (as the Judge cartoon which is our cover illustration this month so quaintly put it), one of the most vociferous critics of the newly burgeoning U.S. internationalism (soon to be called "gunboat diplomacy") was populist figure William Jennings Bryan, known as "the Great Commoner."*

A former member of Congress from Nebraska, Bryan was the Democratic Party's presidential candidate in 1896, 1900 and 1908, and although he achieved a national following and was practically a legend in his own time, he never occupied the Oval Office. Appointed secretary of state by Woodrow Wilson in 1912, Bryan resigned that post in disgust when it became clear that the Wilson administration, dominated by international money interests, was determined to bring the United States into the war then raging in Europe.

The big national issue during Bryan's 1896 presidential campaign against Republican William McKinley was the issue of money. However, four years later, when McKinley sought reelection, once again facing Bryan as his challenger, the big national issue had turned to imperialism.

What follows is an abbreviated excerpt from Bryan's speech on the subject of imperialism that he delivered during the heat of the 1900 campaign. In fact, Bryan's point of view on the subject hardly differs from the modern-day populist viewpoint on globalism and, in many respects, echoes many of the points that Pat Buchanan is making today in his own bid for the presidency.

Those who would have this nation enter upon a career of empire must consider not only the effect of imperialism on the Filipinos, but they must also calculate its effects upon our own nation. We cannot repudiate the principle of self-



William Jennings Bryan, "the Great Commoner," lived from 1860 to 1925. His fierce denunciations of American empire-building at the turn of the 20th century would prove to be still as valid, inspiring and cutting today as they were then. Some of his views on American imperialism remain the standard for Constitutionalists and non-interventionists today. In 1912 he helped Woodrow Wilson become president and was rewarded with the office of secretary of state, but he quit that position when he broke with Wilson over U.S. policy following the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Above, he accepts his third Democratic nomination for the presidency on the steps of the Nebraska Capitol, 1908.



government in the Philippines without weakening that principle here.

Lincoln said that the safety of this nation was not in its fleets, its armies or its forts, but in the spirit which prizes liberty in the heritage of all men, in all lands, everywhere. And he warned his countrymen that they could not destroy this spirit without planting the seeds of despotism at their own doors.

Even now we are beginning to see the paralyzing influence of imperialism. Heretofore this nation has been prompt to express its sympathy with those who were fighting for civil liberty. While our sphere of activity has been limited to the Western Hemisphere, our sympathies have not been bounded by the seas. We have felt it due to ourselves and to the world, as well as to those who were struggling for the right to govern themselves, to proclaim the interest which our people have, from the date of their own independence, felt in every context between human rights and arbitrary power.

Three-quarters of a century ago, when our nation was small, the strug-

gles of Greece aroused our people, and Webster and Clay gave eloquent expression to the universal desire for Grecian independence. In 1898 all parties manifested a lively interest in the success of the Cubans.

**B**ut now when a war is in progress in South Africa, which must result in an extension of the monarchical idea or in the triumph of a republic, the advocates of imperialism in this country dare not say a word in behalf of the Boers . . .

Our opponents, conscious of the weakness of their cause, seek to confuse imperialism with expansion, and have even dared to claim Jefferson as a supporter of their policy. [But] Jefferson spoke so freely and used language with such precision that no one can be ignorant of his views. On one occasion he declared: "If there be one principle more deeply rooted than any other in the mind of every American, it is that we should have nothing to do with conquest." And again he said: "Conquest is not in our principles; it is inconsistent

with out government."

Imperialism would be profitable to the army contractors; it would be profitable to the ship owners who would carry live soldiers to the Philippines and bring dead soldiers back; it would be profitable to those who would seize upon the franchises; and it would be profitable to the officials whose salaries would be fixed here and paid over there; but to the farmer, to the laboring man and to the vast majority of those engaged in other occupations it would bring expenditure without return and risk without reward . . .

If there is poison in the blood of the hand, it will ultimately reach the heart. It is equally true that forcible Christianity, if planted under the American flag in the far-away Orient, will sooner or later be transplanted upon American soil . . .

Imperialism finds no warrant in the Bible. The command, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," has no Gatling gun attachment. *And was not written by MARK! Added much later!* ♦

## TBR HISTORY QUIZ

**1** What is the proportion of Palestinian Arabs who are considered to be Christian?

- (a) 10 percent; (b) 25 percent; or (c) 40 percent.

**2** In what year was marijuana criminalized in the United States?

**3** What is an "Althing"? (a) A two-headed Viking battle ax. (b) The Danish heir to the throne. (c) The Icelandic parliament.

**4** What was the "Gerousa"?

- (a) Francisco Franco's favorite stallion. (b) The Spartan senate. (c) The hill-top fortress of Harald Hadraada.



**5** Eamon De Valera (pictured left) was a leader of the Easter Rebellion of 1916, first president of the Irish Republican government, and then first premier of Eire under the constitution of

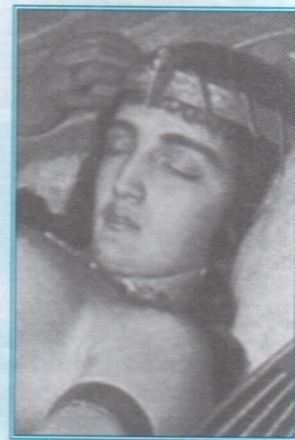
1937. "Dev," as he was called, was half Irish and half what?

- (a) Italian; (b) Portuguese; (c) Spanish; (d) Romanian.

**6** Famed populist poet Ezra Pound's alma mater.

**7** What was Cleopatra's (right) ethnic background?

**8** What was the year of the fall of the Chinese Manchu Dynasty?



**ANSWERS** 1. (b) 25 percent (TBR, Jan. 1997). 2. 1937 (TBR June 1997). 3. (c), the Icelandic parliament (TBR Oct. 1997). 4. (b) The Spartan senate (TBR, Jan. 1995). 5. (c) His father was a Spanish artist, Vivion De Valera. (TBR, Sept. 1995). De Valera's mother, Catherine Coll, was a servant in New York City when he was born October 14, 1882. She had fled her family's one-room, mud-walled cottage in County Limerick in 1879, as famine again loomed over Ireland. Later she married Charles Wheelright, a coachman in the household of Lenox, Massachusetts cottagers where she was then employed as a domestic. Coincidentally, Jenny Jerome, the mother of De Valera's longtime adversary Winston Churchill, also spent time in Lenox, as a student at Mrs. Sedgwick's school for girls. 6. Hamilton College (TBR, July 1995). 7. Greek (actually Macedonian, to be precise) (TBR, Nov. 1995). 8. 1911 (TBR, Aug. 1997).