

With From the Old Diplomacy to the New, Robert Beisner looks at how American diplomacy changed from 1865 to 1900. Beisner argues that a paradigm shift characterizes this period, which included changes in foreign and domestic politics, economics, and military development. Gradual and incomplete in nature, at times politicians reverted to old habits. Once the shift began it did not stop, and thus greatly influenced United States foreign policy in the late nineteenth century. Many historians focus on the Spanish-American war and the annexation of the Philippines, all the while saying that incidents like these were aberrations in American history. Beisner readily points out that these were not isolated incidents. Instead, he sees a steady trend of American expansionism began to emerge in the late nineteenth century affecting places like Hawaii, Samoa, China, and the Philippines. American interest in an isthmus canal is an example as well.

For nearly a century, historians have discussed and debated on the emergence of the United States as a dominant figure in international relations. This scholarship, which dates back to the 1920s, is composed of the following schools: Progressive, anti-Beardian, the William's School, the May's School, the Field School, and the post-revisionist of the 1980s and 1990s.¹ Published in 1927, Rise of American Civilization by Charles and Mary Beard would represent the Progressive school of thought.² The Beards argued that the economy was the chief motivator for an American Empire. The nations resulting passions had little to do with a concern for Cuban liberty or a need to check European expansion in the hemisphere. Instead, it had everything to do with protecting America's investments and trade with Cuba. For the Beards, further American acquisitions provided even more proof that the business interests played a dominant factor in shaping America's national politics.³

Only a few historians would follow the Beards interpretation and others soon develop. The second school, the Anti-Beardians, argued that the business model did not adequately explain American imperialism, and that the real blame lied with other factors. In 1936, Samuel Flagg Bemis argued that imperialism represented a “great aberration” and that it was largely the result of the Spanish-American War. He felt that McKinley’s decision to annex the Philippines was “unplanned and an indication of his weakness and folly.”⁴ At this time, Julius W. Pratt was developing another anti-Berdian interpretation. In his work, Expansionists of 1898, Pratt argued that expansionism could be explained by looking at Social Darwinism and Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan’s declaration that sea power and the bases needed to maintain that sea power were necessary for national defense. It became ideologically based and not economic.⁵

The Williams school developed next, with its seminal work being William Appleman Williams’ 1959 book, The Tragedy of American Diplomacy. Although Williams never defined his work as revisionist or radical, scholars of both persuasions used his research and finding in their works. According to Williams, U.S. policy makers always made decisions based on domestic concerns, especially economic growth and class.⁶ At the same time, politicians always expressed an interest in global expansion. Roots of this lied in the legacy of the nations westward expansion. The closing of the frontier necessitated America’s need to look abroad for new markets for its products, a policy which would manifest itself in the “Open Door policy.”⁷ Williams continued to argue that the consequences of this imperialist policy were disastrous for foreign peoples, native Americans, and the idea of American democracy.⁸ In 1963, Walter LaFeber would expand upon Williams’ thesis with his The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansionism 1860-1898 and the Williams-LaFeber interpretation would find great popularity during the disillusionment of the 1960s and 1970s.⁹

Of course, not every one agreed with the Williams-LaFeber school of thought. For example, Ernest R. May, who in 1961 published Imperial Democracy. Mays argued that diplomatic problems abroad encouraged political leaders to turn some of their attention from domestic issues. May observed that “Some nations achieve greatness; the United States had greatness thrust upon it.” Eventually May’s theory concluded that over time public opinion shifted away from imperialism and toward an anticolonial sentiment. This shift occurred in part because of American observations of the British difficulties as the Boer War in South Africa continued.¹⁰

James A Field Jr. disagreed with all previously proposed theories and offered his own. He argued that Imperialism had been a byproduct of American Naval development. The building of a modern fleet to counter European expansionist desires in the Western Hemisphere created the need for naval bases abroad. Furthermore, it was only after Admiral Dewey’s victory in the Philippines, made possible by these advances in naval and communications technology, that Americans focused attention on the Far East.¹¹

The most recent school of thought is the post-revisionist scholarship. In the 1980s and 1990s it placed much needed focus on ideological and cultural factors, especially the role of race. Followers of this school generally saw the United States as an expanding power and not a “crusader for liberal democracy” as many had viewed it in the past.¹² Furthermore, this school pulls few punches when it comes to describing the negative elements of American imperialism.

Given these different schools of thought, one is able to place Beisner’s work in its proper context. Beisner argues that though many elements influenced the paradigm shift from the old diplomacy to the new. In addition, Beisner sees a variety of reasons for this the United States expansion. As such, one can place him with the post-revisionist school of thought. Beisner

divided his book into the following five parts: “Underlying Themes and Issues”, “Old Paradigm Policy”, “From the Old to the New Foreign Policy Paradigm”, “Early Years of the New Era”, and “War, Policy, and Imperialism at the end of the Century, 1897-1900.”

In the first section, “Underlying Themes and Issues”, Beisner identifies “six circumstantial and institutional givens,” which were, “conflict in Europe, economic developments, public opinion, the United States Senate, party politics, and the instruments of foreign affairs.”¹³ In addition, Beisner identifies four American traditions that he feels were influential-the American Mission, isolationism, the Monroe Doctrine, and the Open Door.”¹⁴

Throughout the book, Beisner promotes the idea that a shift occurred from an old to a new style of diplomacy. There is little doubt that this shift took place. Instead, what is at question is how this policy shifted. What factors motivated this transformation? Did political, social, economic or military influences affect this change? What issues comprised this shift? Beisner believes that by looking at the politics of the period between 1865 and 1900 one can identify not only how this shift occurred, but also the specific changes that took place.

In section two, Beisner looks at the politics of the old paradigm from the period of 1865-1889. During this period, America operated with an isolationist spirit. Generally noninterventionist, the United States acted passively in an ad hoc manner to outside events. Its small army and navy were not equipped for serious warfare, and its diplomats were “rank amateurs.” Beisner makes the claim that during this period “American officials all held to the core assumption of the Old Paradigm: that their nation was safe, her security was threatened nowhere by anyone.”¹⁵ This is not to say that the United States was completely isolated from foreign politics. Beisner points to two issues from which the United States could not escape, the *Alabama* Claims and the Maximilian government in Mexico.

During the Civil War, England committed a series of pro-Confederate actions that angered the United States. The most serious of these would be the construction of warships by English shipyards for the Confederate navy. America would protest this action and the sales of these ships would stop in 1863, but not before the *Alabama*, *Shenandoah*, *Florida*, and others put to sea. These raiders destroyed 250 Union ships, encouraged 700 other ships to switch to a British registry, and caused maritime insurance rates to increase. After the war, America demanded of \$4 billion in direct and indirect damages from the British.¹⁶ The very real prospect of an Anglo-American war arose as American jingoists demanded either payment or the seceding of Canada to the U.S. However, war was a possibility that both the English and the American Secretary of State Hamilton Fish wished to avoid. Eventually, an arbitration tribunal solved the dispute and ordered England to paid \$15.5 million in direct damages.¹⁷

Secondly, an international crisis in Mexico alarmed foreign policy lookers. During the United States Civil War, France took the opportunity to establish a puppet government under Ferdinand Maximilian, a Hapsburg prince. America never recognized this government and instead supported the rebels. The threat of armed intervention by U.S. forces immediately following the Civil War forced France to withdraw its troops, without which the Maximilian government quickly fell.

In addition to this, America's purchase of Alaska is another foray into the international world. Secretary of State William H. Seward secured the nation's purchase of Alaska for \$7.2 million in 1867. In addition, Seward searched in vain for locations to house American naval bases in the Caribbean; however, according to the author, these efforts are not representative of a unified policy. Instead, any efforts at expansionism at this time were isolated incidents.¹⁸

Due to the decrepit state of its armed forces, America was incapable of serious expansion after the Civil War. This began to change during the Arthur administration in the 1880s, under the guidance of the Secretary of the Navy William E. Chandler. Chandler founded the Naval War College, and the Office of Naval Intelligence. The Navy itself remained a small defensive force still outranked by the navies of eleven other countries in 1884.¹⁹

Diplomatically, America at this time advanced a discordant overseas policy. The U.S., for example, tried and failed to secure an interoceanic canal.²⁰ In addition, U.S. political involvement in Europe and Africa seemed non-existent at best. The only area in which America played any real role was Asia. The nation asserted itself in China, Japan, Korea, Samoa and Hawaii; however, even in these areas America could not compete with other powers. As Beisner states, “this stepped-up involvement took place, however, within the limits set by the Old Paradigm. American involvement was erratic and tentative; it was often amateurish and almost always initiated in the field rather than Washington.”²¹ In 1899, the United States and Germany divided the Samoan Islands between them, bringing to close a process that had begun in 1872. America also stepped up its involvement with Hawaii during this time, assuring its eventual annexation in 1898.²²

Although the U.S. dabbled with foreign affairs during the period from 1865-1889, these attempts did not represent a unified policy. As the result of a plethora of disorganized interests, state department officials took only hesitant and sporadic steps. This in contrast with the New Paradigm that came next.

In the third section, Beisner discusses the move from the old to the new foreign policy. This paradigm shift did not occur overnight and would shift as a response to many different

factors. Beisner focuses on three items that he feels contributed to this shift; the “Social Malaise,” “The Panic and Depression,” and “The Threat to Old Markets.”²³

The closing of the west combined with a booming population, due in large part to mass immigration of southern and eastern Europeans, characterizes the “Social Malaise”. The result was that many Americans felt their Anglo-German “race” was being diluted, and their “society was no longer moving along its preordained path to bigger and better things, but had somehow been cast adrift.”²⁴ Americans felt they needed a new area in which to expand since the “west” had officially closed.

The panic of 1893 would also be a factor as it intensified the “Social Malaise.” In addition, Americans began to see massive sales abroad to be a method of helping the lagging the economy.²⁵ This perceived need for exports would be of great importance for the third item.

European governments threatened America’s traditional markets by raising tariffs against American imports in both their own territories and their colonies. In addition, the European land grab in China threatened to close America out of those markets as well.²⁶ This lack of potential markets was a major problem to a nation that believed it needed to export more and more goods in order to survive.

Many changes had begun to take place in America. Some of these changes were technological in nature. Transoceanic telegraph cables now made possible constant contact between the government and its diplomats and military. In addition, new advances in military technology threatened America’s traditional sense of security, as well as making its military deficiencies painfully clear.²⁷

Of even more importance, a new generation of Americans developed to replace the Civil War generation. A spirit of nationalism, and imperialist thought imbued this new generation.

The concept of “Social Darwinism” influenced them as well. This concept further manifested itself into “Anglo-Saxonism,” which believed that Anglo-Saxons stood at the top of the evolutionary ladder. These concepts would make the ruling of colonies of “inferior peoples” much easier for Americans to accept. Popular journalism would only fan these fires by informing the American population for the first time of the existence of many of these places.²⁸

The New Paradigm was ideological as well as technological. Americans would come to believe that they truly were a world power, and their interests would expand to South America, China and the Philippines.²⁹ American foreign policy shifted at this time from being discordant and amateurish to organized and more professional. Political leaders became more and more willing to carry out actions with overwhelming public support if was in the country’s best interest.³⁰ Most importantly, though, the instruments that carried out the policies changed. For example, the new rank of ambassador, created in 1893. A reshaping of the military also took place. The army improved in quality because of more strenuous officer education, and by conducting periodic maneuvers. The navy also took great steps to modernize. Intelligence gathering gained importance and the navy ordered its first true battleship in 1890.³¹

In sections four and five, Breisner deals with the early years of the new era and with war, policy and imperialism at the end of the century. Between 1889 and 1897, Latin America dominated American foreign policy. Political leaders attempted to host a Pan-American conference between America and its southern neighbors; however, very little came from these meetings.³² A more serious incident arose with Chile when, while on shore leave, sailors from the U.S.S. *Baltimore* were assaulted in the city of Valparaiso. A drunken melee ensued in which two sailors died and seventeen others were badly hurt. This brawl nearly led to war between America and Chile. Chile averted war by apologizing and agreed to pay an indemnity for those

who had been hurt and killed. This indemnity was later set at \$75,000. In the background of the Valparaiso incident were increased tensions between America and England, who had great influence over the Chilean government.³³

America finally had the muscle to back up the Monroe Doctrine, and it was beginning to flex it. Three separate incidents that marked the presidency of Grover Cleveland make this clear. The first was America's involvement in Brazil's civil war of 1893. The U.S. supported the Brazilian government in their war against the rebels, going so far as to break the rebel blockade of Rio de Janeiro. American political leaders feared that Europe was sympathetic to the rebels cause and might even be providing aid; therefore, they viewed their actions as keeping with the spirit of the Monroe Doctrine.³⁴

The second incident occurred in Central America during 1894. In this instance, Nicaragua attempted to seize a Mikito Indian reservation under British protection. England moved forces to protect the area causing America to intervene. The British agreed to withdraw after America guaranteed protection of the Indians' rights. This allowed Nicaragua to absorb the territory.³⁵

The third incident took place in Venezuela and again involved England. In this instance, a border dispute arose between Venezuela and British Guiana. Both sides claimed a wide swath of land, which included the mouth of the Orinoco River and valuable gold fields. Citing the Monroe Doctrine, Cleveland insisted that America arbitrate the dispute, whether England wanted it to or not. In the end, England agreed to arbitration and arbitrators awarded it the lion's share of the territory.³⁶

The place where America exerted the most influence was Spanish Cuba. By 1895, Cuba had become a center of American investment. When a rebellion began there in 1895 American

businessmen had much to lose. The actions of the Spanish General Valeriano Weyler, who they labeled “the Butcher” for his harsh tactics, outraged many Americans. Cleveland’s administration threatened military intervention if Spain did not humanly end the rebellion and begin instituting reforms. However, before action took place McKinley won the presidency, otherwise Beisner points out that it could have easily been Cleveland who went to war with Spain.³⁷

The Spanish-American War and the Philippine-American War that followed is American Imperialism at its height. When William McKinley took office in 1897, tensions with Spain over Cuba had already reached their boiling point; however, McKinley did not immediately go to war. McKinley even offered his services as a mediator to end the Cuban rebellion.³⁸ Two incidents occurred that pushed America into war. The first was the intercepting a private letter of Spain’s Washington minister Enrique Dupuy de Lome. This letter, published in a New York newspaper on February 9th, called McKinley “weak and a bidder for the admiration of the crowd.” To compound the matter Spain’s apology over the incident was weak and belated.³⁹ Though insulting, this incident alone was not sufficient; however, six days after the de Lome letter came to light the Battleship *Maine* exploded in Havana Harbor with 260 Americans were killed in the explosion. Americans blamed the Spanish although the explosion was likely an accident. Despite the public demand for immediate action the McKinley administration held off on war for two more months.⁴⁰ Many historians have interpreted McKinley’s delay as him wanting to avoid the war. McKinley did not go into the Spanish-American War against his will. Like any good diplomat, he wanted to make sure that all avenues of peace were exhausted.

Part of the administration’s hesitation was due to the question of what was going to happen with Cuba after the war. The Teller Amendment took care of this issue by assuring that

the U.S. would not annex Cuba and its \$400 million debt. Instead, America gave Cuba protectorate status and retained control of Guantanamo Bay.⁴¹ America's victory over the Spanish not only gained the Cubans their independence, but also brought Puerto Rico and Guam into American control. Perhaps the biggest question, though, was what to do with the Philippine Islands.

Admiral Dewey's victory over the Spanish fleet in the Philippines, and the subsequent occupation of Manila by American forces, brought to light an unforeseen consequence of the war with Spain. Beisner makes the point that the McKinley administration had been aware of the Philippine Islands, as well as the insurrection that was going on there.⁴² What is not as clear is that the U.S. had a unified plan for the Philippines before the war's outbreak. Once there the administration moved quickly to take not only annex the main island of Luzon, but the whole archipelago.

A variety of reasons for the American annexation for the Philippines, ranging from a concept of "white man's burden" to the need for new markets for American goods. Whatever the reasons, by February 1899 the Filipino-American War began as the Filipino's shifted their struggle for independence from the Spanish to the Americans, and continued until 1902. America's first war of imperial expansion had brought it its first colonial war. A war in which 130,000 troops served, more than 4,000 killed and 2,800 wounded. Filipinos would suffer 18,000 combat casualties, with another 100,000 to 200,000 noncombatant deaths. Many of these were the result of American's burning villages, "reconcentration camps", disease and starvation.⁴³

Finally, Beisner discusses America's Open Door policy. This policy, the pinnacle of American imperial diplomacy, detailed how nations should handle their spheres of influence in

China. Beisner points out that these policies were not for the protection of the Chinese so much as they were a means of insuring fairly free trade between foreign powers. To a point, the U.S. was willing to back its China policy with force as American troops. Soldiers, including soldiers from the Philippines, proved pivotal in putting down the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. However, Beisner makes it clear that the open door policy would be an eventual failure because of America's unwillingness to use force against the competing colonial powers to maintain the open door.⁴⁴

One can see that a shift had occurred in American foreign policy. The Spanish-American War the subsequent Filipino-American War, and America's diplomatic involvement in Latin America and China would not have occurred during the 1860s and 1870s; however, by the 1880s and 1890s events like these were viewed as necessary. However, this new paradigm was not without its limits. The bloody Filipino-American War seriously checked American's desire for further colonial expansion, and America's diplomatic efforts in Europe would not keep pace with the interest shown in the Asia. As a whole America had changed forever, and the door was now open for the events of the 20th century.

¹ *Interpretations of American History: Patterns and Perspectives*, vol. 2, eds. Francis Couvares, Martha Saxton, Gerald N. Grob, George Billias, 103-113 (New York: The Free Press, 2000).

² Couvares, Saxton, Grob, Billias 102-103.

³ Couvares, Saxton, Grob, Billias 103.

⁴ Couvares, Saxton, Grob, Billias 103.

⁵ Couvares, Saxton, Grob, Billias 103-104.

⁶ Couvares, Saxton, Grob, Billias 104.

⁷ Couvares, Saxton, Grob, Billias 104-105.

⁸ Couvares, Saxton, Grob, Billias 105.

⁹ Couvares, Saxton, Grob, Billias 107.

¹⁰ Couvares, Saxton, Grob, Billias 108-109.

¹¹ Couvares, Saxton, Grob, Billias 110.

¹² Couvares, Saxton, Grob, Billias 112.

4. ¹³ Robert Beisner, *From the Old Diplomacy to the New: 1865-1900* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 1986), 3-

¹⁴ Beisner 4.

¹⁵ Beisner 37-38.

¹⁶ Beisner 38-40.

¹⁷ Beisner 41-42.

¹⁸ Beisner 46.

¹⁹ Beisner 58-59.

²⁰ Beisner 61.

²¹ Beisner 68.

²² Beisner 68.

²³ Beisner 74-77.

²⁴ Beisner 74.

²⁵ Beisner 76-77.

²⁶ Beisner 77.

²⁷ Beisner 79.

²⁸ Beisner 79-82, 84.

²⁹ Beisner 86.

³⁰ Beisner 86-87.

³¹ Beisner 90-91.

³² Beisner 98-100.

³³ Beisner 101-103.

³⁴ Beisner 107-108.

³⁵ Beisner 108-109.

³⁶ Beisner 109-112.

³⁷ Beisner 115-119.

³⁸ Beisner 123.

³⁹ Beisner 125.

⁴⁰ Beisner 125-126.

⁴¹ Beisner 133.

⁴² Beisner 134.

⁴³ Beisner 140-141.

⁴⁴ Beisner 147-148, 151.