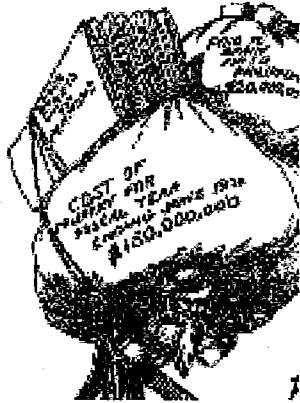


"The White Man's Burden" and Its Critics

By Jim Zwick



Published in *McClure's Magazine* in February of 1899, Rudyard Kipling's poem, "The White Man's Burden," appeared at a critical moment in the debate about imperialism within the United States. The Philippine-American War began on February 4 and two days later the U.S. Senate ratified the Treaty of Paris that officially ended the Spanish-American War, ceded Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines to the United States, and placed Cuba under U.S. control. Although Kipling's poem mixed exhortation to empire with sober warnings of the costs involved, imperialists within the United States latched onto the phrase "white man's burden" as a euphemism for imperialism that seemed to justify the policy as a noble enterprise. Anti-imperialists quickly responded with parodies of the poem. They focused on the new warfare in the Philippines, the hypocrisy of claiming moral sanction for a policy they argued originated from greed for military power and commercial markets, continuing racial and gender inequality at home, and the special "burden" of imperialism to the working people of the United States. The poem was not quickly forgotten. In 1901, after two years of devastating warfare in the Philippines, Mark Twain remarked: "The White Man's Burden has been sung. Who will sing the Brown Man's?" In December of 1903, C. E. D. Phelps used a parody of the poem to criticize the U.S. acquisition of the Panama Canal Zone. The "white man's burden" concept was also revived in later discussions of U.S. interventions in the Americas and during World War I. Kipling's poem, two racial images interpreting its meaning in the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Cuba, an example of its use in contemporary advertising, and more than fifty anti-imperialist responses are included here.

Modern History Sourcebook: Rudyard Kipling, The White Man's Burden, 1899

This famous poem, written by Britain's imperial poet, was a response to the American take over of the Phillipines after the Spanish-American War.

Take up the White Man's burden--
Send forth the best ye breed--
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild--
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.

Take up the White Man's burden--
In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror
And check the show of pride;
By open speech and simple,
An hundred times made plain
To seek another's profit,
And work another's gain.

Take up the White Man's burden--
The savage wars of peace--
Fill full the mouth of Famine
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
The end for others sought,
Watch sloth and heathen Folly
Bring all your hopes to nought.

Take up the White Man's burden--
No tawdry rule of kings,
But toil of serf and sweeper--
The tale of common things.
The ports ye shall not enter,
The roads ye shall not tread,
Go mark them with your living,
And mark them with your dead.

Take up the White Man's burden--
And reap his old reward:
The blame of those ye better,
The hate of those ye guard--
The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah, slowly!) toward the light--
"Why brought he us from bondage,
Our loved Egyptian night?"

Take up the White Man's burden--
Ye dare not stoop to less--
Nor call too loud on Freedom
To cloke your weariness;
By all ye cry or whisper,
By all ye leave or do,
The silent, sullen peoples
Shall weigh your gods and you.

Take up the White Man's burden--
Have done with childish days--
The lightly proffered laurel,
The easy, ungrudged praise.
Comes now, to search your manhood
Through all the thankless years
Cold, edged with dear-bought wisdom,
The judgment of your peers!