Roosevelt and the Morality of Power

Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, although they disagreed on many issues, both believed that, by the beginning of this century, it was time for the United States to take its place on the stage of world power. They were both convinced that the United States should use whatever power necessary to see that their vision of democracy and justice triumphed around the globe. This lecture discusses the roots of American imperialism and how the personal beliefs of Roosevelt and Wilson shaped the nation's foreign affairs.

Some questions to keep in mind:

1. How did the Spanish-American War change America's role in international affairs?
2. How did the Spanish-American War change America's attitudes about its own affairs?
3. How did the Spanish American War embody the political, social and economic philosophy/attitude of the era?
4. How can morality, ethics and warfare be connected during the era?

Recall three general propositions on war:

1. War is the extension of a nation's diplomacy by other than peaceful means
2. For whatever reasons a nation enters a war, that war changes the relationship of its citizens with each other and with the national government
3. The rhetoric that justifies or opposes a war reveals a great deal about the way the people of a nation thinks about themselves

In addition, there are three major points on foreign policy that we will discuss in greater detail in terms of Roosevelt and Wilson:

1. A consistent foreign policy is relatively impossible in a democracy
2. Americans tend to use moralistic rhetoric to justify war
3. United States foreign policy is usually a reflection of domestic policy

I. "A Splendid Little War"

A. The event that first brought the United States to the stage of world power was the Spanish-American War of 1898.

B. Proponents of this brief incursion called it the "splendid little war." Kindled by a crisis in Spanish-American relations, the war began as an intervention by the United States on behalf of Cuba.

1. By some accounts, nearly 100,000 Cuban civilians had died under the brutal rule of the Spanish military between 1896 and 1898.
3. Taken together with America's growing imperialist tendencies and fervent anti-Spanish sentiment, the event which provoked the war was the explosion of the battleship *U.S.S. Maine* in Havana Harbor in 1898,
   a)"the consequence, it now seems, of spontaneous combustion in one of its magazines, not because of a Spanish or Cuban mine).
b) Nonetheless, many Americans blamed Spain for the loss of its battleship and were more than happy when the nation went to war against the Spanish.

c) The war itself lasted only four months, from mid-April to mid-August 1898.

i. Some of its memorable events include the charge of the Rough Riders in Cuba and the Battle of Manila Bay in the Philippines, when Admiral George Dewey allegedly gave the command: "You may fire when you are ready, Gridley."

II. Results of the Spanish-American War

A. The United States easily and swiftly won the war and this outcome left a lasting legacy on both domestic and foreign policy.

1. The United States became more like European countries
2. The nation was no longer a republic equal in all of its parts
3. America's quick victory had lasting psychological effects on many people

B. United States became more like European countries

1. In the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, the United States became a world power, acquiring the territories of Cuba, Guam, the Philippines, Wake Island, and Puerto Rico.
2. Suddenly, the nation, a former British colony, had colonies of its own, which sparked criticism from anti-imperialists.
3. President McKinley had to find some way, some moral argument, to justify to the American public why the United States had taken foreign territories
   a) Return the islands to Spain
   b) Sell the islands to a European power
   c) Leave them to govern themselves
   d) Keep them under American control - ultimately, he justified his decision to exercise the fourth option with the following logic:

   "There was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and to uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace to do the very best we could by them as our fellow men for whom Christ also died."

4. The new territories also had great strategic and economic value.

   a) They provided key outposts for the United States navy, new markets for American goods, and access to Asia for trade with China. President McKinley, however, played down these reasons in favor of the moral justifications.

III. No longer a republic equal in all of its parts

A. The acquisition of these territories brought about a dramatic change in the very concept of equality for people living under the American flag.
1. People began to raise an entirely new question: what constitutional rights do the indigenous peoples of the new territories have? Anti-imperialists protested the acquisition of new territories, but not only out of concern for the rights of the islanders.

2. In many cases, anti-imperialists were staunchly anti-immigrant as well. The anti-imperialists filed suit against the federal government and a series of cases made their way to the Supreme Court, where the justices decided them together as the "Insular Cases" in 1901. (The word 'insular,' along with 'insulation' and 'insulin,' comes from the Latin 'insula,' island.)

3. The Court ruled that the Constitution need not apply equally to the populations of the territories. In the end, the Court's decision enabled the United States to withhold certain rights from the Filipinos, the Hawaiians, or the Puerto Ricans.

IV. Created a psychological effect on many people

A. Two modes of thought about America's future were at the core of public rhetoric of the day: optimism and fatalism.

1. These terms are not necessarily mutually exclusive; people can give themselves up to fate (fatalism) and still hope that things will change for the better (optimism).

2. The fatalist view was most evident in the evolution of the term "manifest destiny."

   a) In the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, manifest destiny meant that not even Americans themselves could stand in the way of America's growing power and influence throughout the world.

   b) It was not only America's destiny, but its duty to expand its power and moral authority.

   c) Many of the nation's leading politicians and intellectuals, including novelists such as Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, and Frank Norris, articulated a fatalistic worldview at the time. In his novel, *The Octopus* (1901), which examines wheat farming in California and the exploitation of farmers by corporations, Norris writes about individuals who were at the mercy of larger forces:

   "Men were mere nothings. Force only existed. Force that brought men into the world, force that crowded them out of it to make way for future generations."

B. On the flip side of the coin was optimism.

1. Popular newspapers, as well as ministers in their sermons, preached that progress was possible, that the strength of the United States would continue to grow.

   a) America's easy victory in the Spanish-American War was further proof that Providence still smiled on the nation. The fusion of fatalism and optimism is best illustrated in a book entitled *The Americanization of the World or The Trend of the Twentieth Century* (1901), by William T. Stead. Stead was a British journalist who had spent a lot of time in America.

      i. In his book, he predicted the gradual Americanization of the world, particularly the spread and influence of American thought and culture. Stead felt that this trend was inevitable and that it would be futile for the European powers to resist it. He wrote
"The advent of the United States of America as the greatest of the world's powers is the greatest political, social, and commercial phenomenon of our times."

V. The presidential administrations of the time.

A. Theodore Roosevelt was President of the United States from 1901 to 1909. He was a moralist at heart, but, at the same time, he was a realist and a masterful politician who understood what the American people would and would not accept from their political leaders.

B. We can make two generalizations about the basis of Roosevelt's foreign policy:
   1. Sought in international affairs the same goals he sought in domestic American affairs
   2. Constantly stressed two related principles:
      a) A quest for order and efficiency
      b) A faith in power
         i. Roosevelt was fond of quoting a West African proverb: "Walk softly and carry a big stick, and you will go far." This sums up his quest for order and efficiency and his faith in government power to back up this order and efficiency. Roosevelt's practices led to the term "Big Stick Diplomacy"—international negotiations backed by the threat of force.

C. Order and Efficiency Domestic- Roosevelt sought orderly, well-defined relationships among various segments of society. These included:
   1. The maximum degree of personal freedom for the individual
   2. Competitive opportunities for businessmen and industrialists
   3. Federal government setting the tone and direction of national life
      a) Roosevelt viewed the presidency as a "bully pulpit" from which he could preach these three points.
      b) He also saw a clearly defined hierarchy in the government and an almost organic unity in society. Society was a body made up of arms, legs, and other parts. The President of the United States, according to Roosevelt, was the brain. In a 1903 speech, he talked about this national unity, about the interdependence of the various parts of the American "body:"

      "The welfare of each of us is dependent fundamentally upon the welfare of all of us. It is essential that we recognize this community of interest."

D. Order and Efficiency Foreign- He viewed the nations of the world divided into three groups:
   1. A few great and wealthy powers (the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and Japan)
   2. The smaller civilized states of Europe (the Scandinavian countries and Italy)
3. Lesser nations and states (those of Asia, Africa, and Latin America)

   a) According to T. R., there was a constant struggle within this hierarchy and force set apart the successful nations from the unsuccessful. The great powers were the upholders of order. While it may be regrettable that the great powers had to flex their military muscle to dominate smaller powers, such action was necessary to uphold the world order through their "international police duty."

E. Faith in Power- great nation's of the world needed to use their economic and military power to maintain order around the globe. He was determined that the United States would remain one of these great nations. To this end, he preached "preparedness" and "righteousness."

1. "Preparedness"--The United States must have a foundation of physical strength: a large population, strong industries, and preserved and protected natural resources.

   a) Roosevelt also called for the strengthening of the people's moral fiber; Americans had to be willing to sacrifice and to fight for their country.

   b) The United States must be prepared militarily, must build a powerful army and navy. To prove this point, Roosevelt, as Commander in Chief, showed off the United States Navy on a cruise around the world in 1907, despite protests from Congress.

2."Righteousness"--Roosevelt judged other nations on the same criteria he used to judge individuals: righteousness and morality.

   a) He tended to equate righteousness with order, believing that the great powers of the world, and especially the United States, should act with self-restraint while pursuing their own goals and never use force for anything other than righteous causes. In a 1914 speech on the topic of "Warlike Power: The Prerequisite for the Preservation of Social Values" Roosevelt said:

   "War, like peace, is properly a means to an end: righteousness. Neither war nor peace in itself is righteous. Righteousness, when triumphant, brings peace."

   "It is certain that the only way successfully to oppose the Might which is the servant of Wrong is by means of the Might that is the servant of Right."--Theodore Roosevelt

   b) The Panama Canal- TR’s beliefs in action