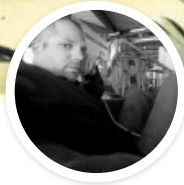


History

An Overview of The Age of Imperialism

by AJ Powell 4 Comments 12 min read

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After the removal of Napoleon III from power, the 1870's and following decades saw a shift in power, politics, and economic self-interests that embarked on conquests to conquer the world. Yet, when carefully considered, it all seems very familiar to the events of today. Here, it is important to ask, what issues can we learn from this period of the past that leadership(s) seem to be repeating today? This is an historical analysis of the an overview of the Age of Imperialism for the purpose of discovering such similarities, and we will start by asking two particular questions for which to guide the analysis:

1. Just what constituted the strength of a nation, and how is that strength portrayed to other nations?
2. Why is it important to understand how this history is relevant to our world today?

Now, these two questions are guides, and the reason is that, upon conclusion of our assessment, we will ask five entirely new questions:

1. Why is this important to history?
2. What lessons can we learn that apply to our advancement of “Leadership”?
3. How do you think you could apply those lessons to your own professional environment today?
4. Can you think of events in recent history that share similarities found within this analysis?
5. What are the effects?

In the wake of Napoleon’s failed march across Europe for the sake of power, the continent was left in turmoil throughout the years that followed. Prior to the 1870’s, many European nations showed more interest in consolidating power within their borders than they did in the expansion of acquired territory outside of the continent itself. During this period of time, the establishment of colonies, settlements, and holdings around the world were not always popular with the public, nor were they always the result of purposeful policy. As even the American Revolution had proven to many, the idea that governmental policy could be extended to colonies, and colonial existence could subsidize national interests, was impractical. So many maintained a sense of pessimism over the possibilities of expansionist investments and interest returns.

Indeed, by this point in history it had been centuries since Europe had seen a level or magnitude of accumulation of dependencies the likes of which Napoleon gathered. And in the decades after his fall, many began to ask popular questions to the nature of a nation’s power. Europe had been left to pick up the disastrous economic hardships that were created as a result of new political shifts. Entire markets had grown in excess, begging the need to find new sources of supply, industries created for the function of war and defense found little market as a draw-down proceeded within their own borders, and a large number of workers, professional soldiers, and manufacturers, found themselves displaced while trying to maintain a living. These people all saw the shared advantages of a national colonial enterprise, either directly or indirectly, as a means of economic gain. The 1870’s and ‘80’s were a dip in economic status that motivated change in those who once thought expansionism fruitless. Europe, it seemed, in the wake of destructive depression, had a new need for economic recovery, and the answer for many found motivation in imperial expansionism.

On the enterprise side of the fence, the 1870’s saw a return to economic nationalism in the form of protectionism. There was a fear that profitability in trade would eventually diminish unless certain levels of protection were made available. A growing number of industries saw the British model as an advantage to free trade by placing higher value on goods through the use of preferential treatment. However, another method existed that increased the odds of profitability, the acquisition of wealth through the remaining free areas of the world before protectionist powers could get their hands on them. Such acquisitions would set industries apart, allowing nearly unchecked growth and high yielding gains. Yet private sector motivations aside, states themselves had their own motivations growing from a different fear, how they looked to other nations.

Just what constituted the strength of a nation, and how is that strength portrayed to other nations? These questions influenced mutual suspicion and fear within states as they contemplated disasters, conflict, stability, and even respect. In the wake of the Franco-Prussian War, the significance of the idea of power had awakened within governments, leaving many to believe that respect among nations was the result of great states *acting* like great states, providing visual confirmation of their power and resources. Now, reputation was the most important idea to them, and many were anxious to demonstrate their power. Here to do we see the motivations of expansionism take root as a method of selfish appeasement over previous failures, and ego boosting to nationalistic pride. What had began as a notion of concern for a nation’s future, had thus turned into a private and public nationalistic race to acquire assets, before any other could, as a means to secure potential growth and provide a way to show strength. Popularity of imperialistic idealism’s grew, and soon public support would sway the motion of expeditious ventures funded by both states and private sectors alike.

Imperialistic policies found strong support towards public opinion, and as such, became popular among the working classes, as these were the economic groups who believed they stood to profit most from the idea. Feeding this thought, trade unions held a belief that expansionist efforts would create growth in trade and industry, which would then trickle down and benefit an entire economy – including all those employed within it – as a result. Taking sides with this argument, there were those within governments who – like Bernstein argued in Stuttgart, Germany in 1907 – believed that the possession of colonies was to the advantage of the European economy. Yet what finally drove governments to embark on quests of imperialistic policies was the discovery that the people themselves shared in the same beliefs. The masses were easily swayed as emotions of national pride made them susceptible to the appeals of imperialism. They too believed it to be of economic advantage. However, it is not as if all were impressed with the benefits of the idea, for some followed the sensationalism in reporting, and others condemned the actions of governments when wars and strife made the news.

By the 1870's expansionism was already a growing national policy. Disraeli, for example, sought to advance British positions in Egypt, as control over the Suez was important to the security of a key path to India. In South Africa, Disraeli's well-documented war against the Zulus staved off the incursions upon Cetewayo's rule, thus aiding in securing British influence in the area. In 1876, King Leopold II of Belgium, concerned with expanding European commerce within the center of the African continent, financed a series of expeditions by Henry Stanley into the Congo basin for the purpose of securing treaties with native chiefs for the exploitation of their territories. France, who launched the invasion of Tunis in 1881, now also became active on the north bank of the Congo and in the basin of the Ubangi River. Determined not to allow the French to take the lead, the Italians occupied Assab on the Red Sea coast a year later in 1882, then Massawa three years later. Finally, Germany entered the expansionist race by 1884, and occupied parts of South West Africa, Togoland, the Cameroons, and the territories in East Africa where Carl Peters had started negotiations with local chieftains.

The flood of expeditious efforts created competition between states that, which by 1884, was so intense that it was considered expedient to call an international conference on the now growing African problems. This meeting was held in Berlin from November of 1884 through February of 1885, and its purpose was to address the conflicting claims of Stanley's treaties contested by both Portugal and England. The conference ended with the International Association taking ownership of the largest part of the Congo basin, making it a neutral state that allowed free trade and a safe zone from slavery. What many did not readily realize, however, was that since Leopold II paid the Associations bills, this immediately made him sovereign over one of the richest areas of the world. Yet he cared not for the independence of Congo itself, regarding it as little more than a personal possession, and instead, by 1889, declared that the land be willed to Belgium upon his death.

The idea that the African continent was free rein open for grabs was only further enhanced with the facility of European trade stimulating activities. This was created through the reduction of international laws normally applied elsewhere, but lowered in standards across Africa. The convenient formula applied instead made it possible for any power to acquire territory simply through the use of an occupying force. This was seen as perfectly legal so long as said force provided notification to other European powers of their occupation and claim. As a result, almost complete division of the African continent had commenced as European expansionism spread over the following decade while carving out political boundaries without much, if any, consideration for pre-existing tribal borders. The results of such imperialistic efforts have since created a devastating array of cultural destruction and conflict the likes of which are still seen to this day.

Of course, it is not as if these agendas were all entirely for personal gain. While governments sought new territories for the purpose of nation building, and enterprise saw the opportunities for new market shares and profitable gains, there were many others still who jumped at the idea of adventure and exploration for unselfish reasons. The church, for example, saw expansionism as a means to spread missions further around the world, and in turn – despite the force of language – did provide the expansion of education. Scientists saw the idea as an opportunity to build upon a growing knowledge of the world. And even Explorers like Dr. David Livingstone spent 20 years working to gather evidence that proved the existence of slave trades in a humanitarian effort to end the vile act. To these individuals, imperialism was only a means to an end that provided them the necessary capability to carry out their works.

In the end, what we find is that imperialism itself was largely a national drive for economic recovery, a means for nations to prove power, and a distraction to internal woes. In the wake of the fall of Napoleon, we see an industry growth beyond its domestic capabilities, starved for the provision of supplies, and driven to accommodate a growing demand. Those professional soldiers leftover from the wars now needed a new income, and their skills made them highly qualified candidates for protection assets on expeditions. Newspapers and books came to glorify expansionist exploits in far away lands, and the writings and visions of wealth and adventure tantalizingly captured the public eye, distracting them from the mundaneness of home. Once new lands were acquired, they became key assets for national growth as production, harvesting, and mining of supplies, minerals, and goods streamed forth. And imperialism offered new opportunity for every person to seize a part of the national pride.

Unfortunately, the byproducts of imperialist efforts included wars, proxy conflicts, and cultural devastation. Imperialism itself was not confined to Africa either. Europeans spread their claims to the Pacific as well. The English took advantage of Australia and key islands that offered neutral passages to the continent. Others began rapidly plucking up smaller islands for use in mining operations and trading posts. New Guinea, the Celebes, Molucca, the Marshall Islands, the Carolines, the Marianas, Guam, Sipan, Tinian, Papua, the Solomon's, the Gilberts, Tahiti, the Society Islands, the Marquesas, and even the Tuamotu Archipelago were all swept up in European and United States occupational conquests. The United States, with its earlier acquisition of the Hawaiian Islands had now also confirmed its firm footing into Asia by taking over the Philippines, making the once quite nation a key player in the region.

Efforts in the Pacific did not leave out mainland Asia either. The British cared greatly for its assets in India, and was dedicated to protecting them from Russian advancements in the north, and French advancements through Indochina. French movements into the mainland's sparked wars with China from 1884 through 1885, ending with French penetration into what is today Laos. The consolidation of French control over Cambodia and Cochin China, countered by the British push into Burma, placed the kingdom of Siam squarely in the middle, and sparked a series of conflicting moves that ended in an Anglo-French agreement on non-interference. Even the British, with its capturing of Singapore, began wars with China from 1839 – 1841, and 1857 – 1858, forcing open the nation through Hong Kong and Kowloon, whereby their major influence in the region lasted into the 1890's when Russia and Japan entered the imperialistic initiative. Japan also took to war with China in 1893, ending with the occupation of Manchuria and the Korean peninsula. Much to the world's rude awakening, Japan would later decimate Russian forces at Port Arthur during the Russo-Japanese War in 1904.

Questions to Ponder:

1. Why is this important to history?
2. What lessons can we learn that apply to our advancement of "Leadership"?
3. How do you think you could apply those lessons to your own professional environment today?
4. Can you think of events in recent history that share similarities found within this analysis?
5. What are the effects?

Post YOUR replies in the **comments section below** so the community can discuss these thoughts openly.

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AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive analyst; public figure; researcher/writer; aviator; a certified advanced operational diver; professional instructor, trainer, mentor, and adviser; snowboarder; motorcycle rider; world traveler; he enjoys long distance endurance events, and much more.