

SPECIAL REPORT

Disorder under heaven: The American lake**A brief history of America in the Pacific***How Manifest Destiny pushed west into the sea*

[Print edition](#) | [Special report](#)Apr 22nd 2017

FOR MOST OF its history, America has been isolationist. Those who now worry about it turning away from its ideals of free trade and an internationalist outlook may forget how recent they are, born out of cold-war necessity. By contrast, America's much older sense of its own exceptionalism was nurtured by turning consciously west, away from European monarchy, class and conflict. It was a "westerling" people to whom the *novus ordo seclorum* imprinted on every dollar bill applied. They first crossed the vast North American continent, and when they ran out of land, Manifest Destiny took to the sea, unrolling an expanding American frontier across the Pacific.

The discovery of gold in California in 1848 changed everything. Not only was the gold rush the first of California's many booms; it shifted global perspectives, spurring Karl Marx to start work on "Das Kapital" and rekindling hopes of long-distance commerce across the Pacific. American traders set off by sea, accompanied by missionaries, guano miners, planters and expeditionary forces. By the end of the 19th century the theories of Alfred Thayer Mahan, a great naval strategist who argued for decisive American sea power, had taken hold. Colonies, protectorates and incorporated territories soon followed.

Hawaii, with its superb port, Pearl Harbour, was the first Pacific territory to come under American sway; the kingdom was eventually annexed in 1898. That same year American forces seized the Philippines as part of a jingoistic war with Spain that had begun in Havana. After an easy victory over the Spanish in Manila, the Americans found themselves fighting a counter-insurgency against Filipinos seeking their own republic. The president of the day, William McKinley, was at a loss to know what to do with the new Philippine territories. But while praying for guidance one sleepless night, it came to him that America's mission was to "uplift and civilise and Christianise".

McKinley had stumbled into empire with "no more backbone than a chocolate éclair", as Theodore Roosevelt, a fan of muscular imperialism, put it. The muscular school soon took charge. "Benevolent assimilation" would supposedly raise Filipinos to a higher plane. The generals in the Philippine campaign had nearly all earned their spurs fighting native Americans. In the tropics they applied the same genocidal techniques of terror, atrocities and native reservations. In three years of fighting, between 200,000 and 700,000 men, women and children died as a consequence of American brutality.

After early victories, the campaign turned into quicksand (with haunting echoes in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq). In the southern Philippines, American troops were fighting Muslim insurgents long after the rest of the archipelago had been pacified—and American special forces are still in Mindanao today.

The American violence, and decades of condescending racism that followed, go some way towards explaining a vein of anti-Americanism that resurfaces from time to time in a country that also admires America. The two emotions live in the same Philippine breast, says Malcolm Cook of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore. The ill-feeling was evident in the early 1990s, when the senate voted to

eject American forces from Philippine bases; and, more recently, in President Rodrigo Duterte's sudden pivot to China last year, and in his labelling of President Barack Obama as a "son of a bitch".

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Most Americans are blithely unaware of the back story, viewing Mr Duterte's behaviour as astonishing ingratitude towards an ally that, until Philippine independence in 1946, had tried to pour its protégé's society into an American mould, and that had remained a close friend since. But near-ignorance about the essentially imperialising mission that brought America to the region in the first place

hardly helps an understanding of its position in Asia today. One lesson is that the case for a continued American presence in Asia has to be constantly remade.

This article appeared in the Special report section of the print edition under the headline "The American lake"

Disorder under heaven

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