

# History of American Hegemony: USA as “Global Greatest Power”. From Alaska (1867) to Europe (1917)

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## Introduction

*It can be indicated from a historical viewpoint that the USA emerged on the stage of global (world) politics in 1867 (four years before Germany did the same in 1871 after the Franco–Prussian War of 1870–1871). Both these imperial states at the same time exerted extremely influential politics in the process of radical transformation of the modern world both in Europe and outside of the Old Continent. In 1867, Washington purchased Alaska from Russia (regardless of the claims that Russia just rented Alaska for 99 years), and in April 1917, the USA entered the Great War on the side of France and the UK (after the Russian February/March Revolution in 1917) and brought about a decisive defeat of the German Second Empire on the Western Front in the Autumn of 1918 making at the same time as a direct consequence itself the global greatest power.*

*The historical time from 1867 to 1917, was a period of extraordinary (up to that time) rivalries in international relations and global affairs. The point of global politics was, in fact, that Washington took full advantage of the time and global geopolitical situation. It has to be noticed that the USA’s wider geopolitical ambitions were manifested since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, the political and economic strife between northern and southern US states which went to the US 1861–1865 Civil War simply postponed further US geopolitical expansion. Nevertheless, after 1865, the geopolitical forward policy of Washington became re-driven, and industrialization and finance capitalism became superior factors compared to older types of the process of building global empires founded on commerce and territory acquisition.*

*Such a new type of US global imperialism practically started in the 1898 war against Spain*

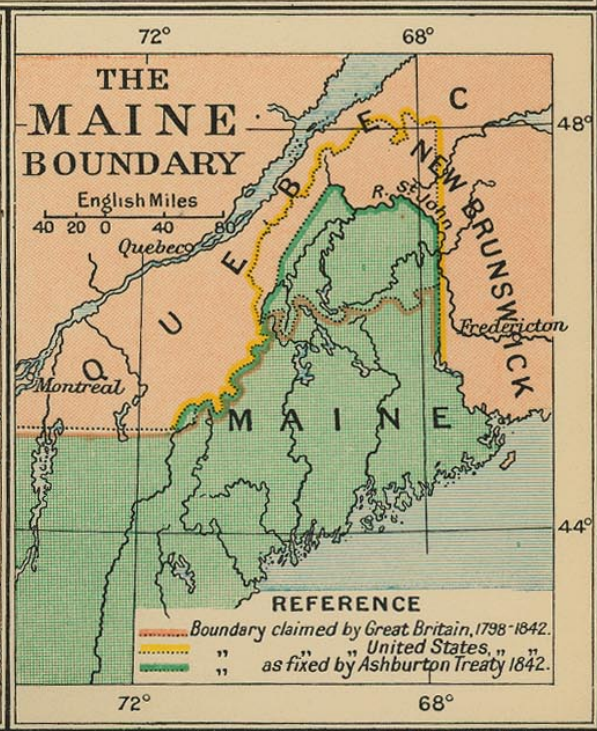
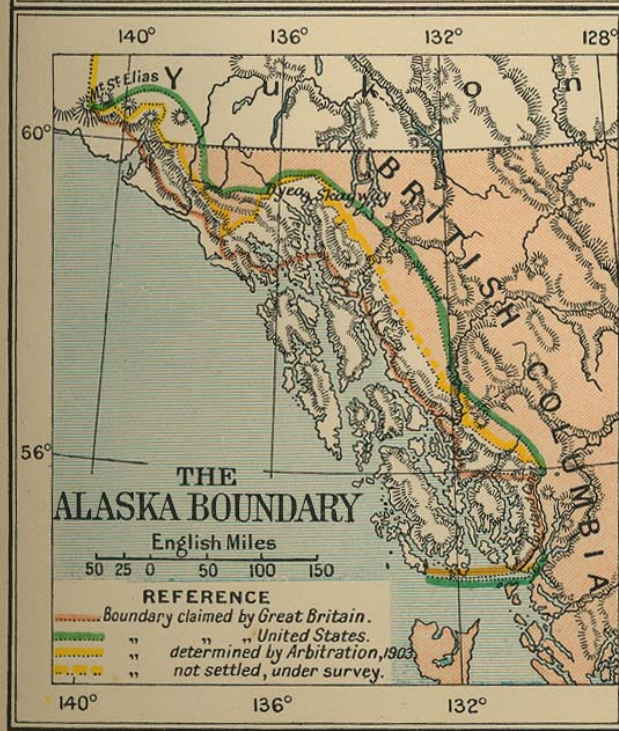
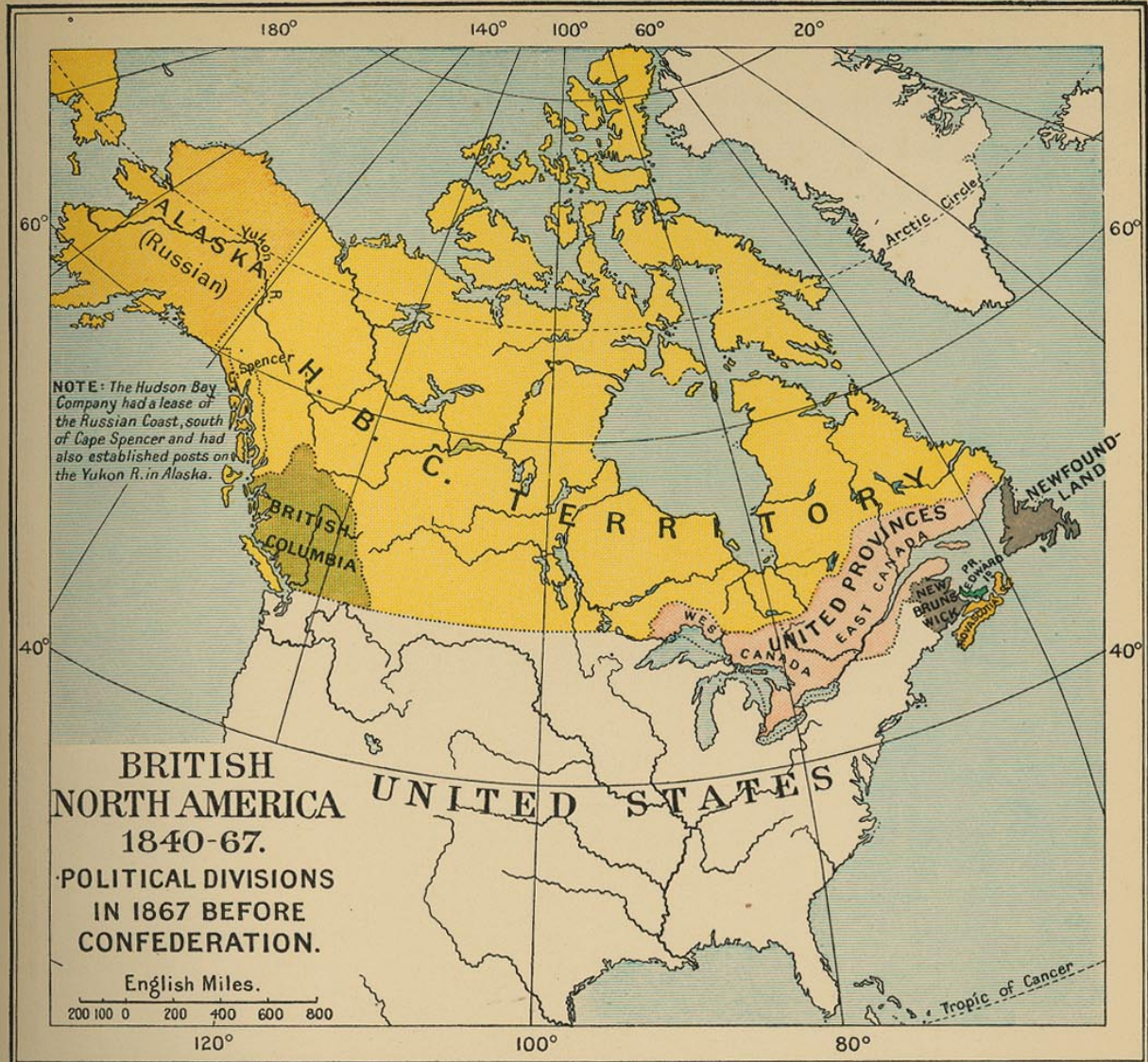
*(in fact, Spanish colonies). Many experts in US history and global politics will say that the year 1898 was, actually, a turning point year in US foreign policy when Washington started to push toward the creation of the global empire of the USA. Nonetheless, meanwhile, Washington was making more powerful its navy followed by occupation strategies of certain outposts before diplomatically claiming military supremacy in both the Pacific Ocean and Central America with the Caribbean Sea.*

## The US Expansion in the Pacific Ocean

The US colonial expansion in the area of the Pacific Ocean was attracted by the explorations of the British Captain James Cook. Therefore, the US sailors started navigation in 1784 via Cape Horn (Chile).

In 1867, it was the first clear move by Washington to resume its imperial policy after the Civil War when the USA acquired Alaska from Russia. It has to be understood that for the American geostrategic policy, Alaska was both the corridor to Canada (as a part of the USA) and the back door to Asia (in fact, Japan and China). The Washington administration, in fact, believed that North America, which was controlled by the UK (Canada), as encircled in such a way was going to be finally forced to join the USA.

Consequently, Canadian membership in the Union would realize the geopolitical dream of the USA as a continent-wide empire. The only practical obstacle, however, to the final implementation of such a design was that the Canadians themselves opposed such dreams: first by the federation in 1867 and second by the purchase of Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1869. The final end of the US imperial dream concerning Canada was in 1870 when Canada attracted Manitoba followed by British Columbia in 1871 (exactly during the 1870–1871 Franco-Prussian War) into the new Dominion (under the UK patronage) and therefore stopping the US northward geopolitical ambitions. The US–UK geopolitical tensions in (Anglo–Saxon–French) North America from the time of the US Civil War have been fixed by the 1871 Washington Treaty. After that, the US geopolitical ambitions could be directed elsewhere.



For Washington, Alaska was an appropriate bridge for the American penetration to the

northeastern portion of Asia (Siberia) especially taking into consideration the chain of Aleutian Islands stretching out toward Japan. Between British Canada and the USA, it was at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the so-called Alaska border dispute. In other words, the rush to the Klondike gold fields in 1897 brought this dispute near the stage of war. During the conflict, Canada feared the loss of its north-west territories to the USA. However, an anti-Canadian politically oriented tribunal with the UK judge holding the most decisive vote, favored the border line demanded by Washington in 1903. That was how US Alaska received the “appendix” up to Dixon Entrance.

However, since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Hawaiian Islands have been playing the focal springboard to Asia (Korea, Japan, China). There was a rivalry between the UK, France, and the USA which was kept until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American relations with the native Hawaiian Kingdom to be unsettled. Nevertheless, when the USA annexed Midway Island in 1867 (in the same year when purchased Alaska) Washington seriously moved ahead toward influence in the Orient of France and the UK.

The Hawaiian Islands were the next on the imperialistic list of Uncle Sam. The US geopolitical and economic interests controlled Hawaii by 1842, and Washington shared in the concessions exported from China by Britain.

It was a commercial treaty signed in 1875 which, in fact, made the Hawaiian Kingdom a virtual US protectorate (colony). Further, in 1887, Washington obtained Hawaiian Pearl Harbor as a coaling station and future naval base (the biggest in the Pacific Ocean). The annexation of the Hawaiian Islands entered its ultimate phase in 1893 when a certain group of sugar planters together with Honolulu business peoples supported by the US administration, overthrew the native Hawaiian monarchy (putsch) and established instead a puppet republic that served American national interests in the Pacific area.

The islands were formally annexed by the USA in 1898 with the start of the 1898 Spanish-American War (provoked by Washington). As a consequence of the war which Spain lost to America, Pacific Wake Island was annexed while Pacific Guam Island together with the Philippines was ceded to the USA. Therefore, a direct colonial transpacific line from California to the Philippines was established. Some years earlier, in 1878, the American foothold in the South Pacific was founded at Pago Pago in the Samoan group where the UK and Germany as well as have been present. Friction was solved by the 1899 treaty which partitioned the group of Samoan Islands into German Western Samoa and American Eastern Samoa. However, the Germans lost their part of the Samoan group in 1914 when the Great War started (neighboring Fiji Islands were in British possession since 1874).

The US Navy forcibly “opened” the Japanese Islands in 1854 and the Korean Peninsula in 1882 for economic (trade) relations with the USA followed by the US political, economic, financial, and cultural influence in the region. Washington obtained Pago Pago Bay (Samoa) in 1878 and then in 1898 followed the great annexation which enabled Washington to complete its “lifeline” to China.

It has to be stressed that concerning the Pacific Ocean, the focal achievement of the American expansion occurred as the consequence of the 1898 Spanish-American War: the Philippines and the Islands of Wake and Guam, which opened a direct penetration way to China and Southeast Asia, already the focus of international friction as the area for capital

investment and consequent economic-financial exploitation. The US bankers and businessmen have been directly supported by the US administration in their struggle for business in the region. It was a phrase that they would secure the “Open Door” to China for the purpose of securing great entrepreneurial (profit) opportunities both China and Southeast Asia were supposed to offer. It was a secret American policy in the year 1900 with the aim of getting a lease over Samsah Bay in the Fukien province of China (just opposite Formosa/Taiwan), but it became unsuccessful.

Nevertheless, the American colonial expansionism in Asia-Pacific at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century outpaced the Western European great powers in the scramble for imperialistic influence in the region. However, the American prime attention was focused on the region of Manchuria. There were US officials, like Willard Straight, who was consul-general in Mukden, who promoted the province of Manchuria as the “New West” of the USA (the “Old West” was a territory from Mt. Appalachian to California/Pacific). The “New West” in China had to be covered by railways owned and managed by the US entrepreneurs and government. Nonetheless, such and similar American colonial plans concerning Manchuria were blocked by both Japan and Russia as they divided the region between themselves by the two treaties in 1907 and 1910.

## The US Imperial Policy in Central America and the Caribbean Sea

Another crucial area of the colonial expansion of the USA since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was Central America (primarily Mexico) and the islands of the Caribbean Sea.

The US intervention in a Cuban insurrection against the Spanish colonial authorities led Washington to war with Spain in 1898 and to a protectorate over Puerto Rico in 1898 and Cuba in 1903. The Caribbean Sea and Central America experienced a series of US interventions from 1906 to 1934 (the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Nicaragua). Under US diplomatic pressure, Denmark was pressed to sell the Virgin Islands to the US in 1917. Meanwhile, the US expansionist policy southward of Rio Grande resulted in two abortive military interventions in Mexico in 1914 and 1916.

It has to be clearly understood that the US administration wrested the Mexican provinces of Texas, New Mexico, and California between 1846 and 1848. The rest of the Mexican provinces became annexed up to 1912. Consequently, around 60% of Mexican land was incorporated into the USA leaving only 40% as today’s independent state of Mexico (the United States of Mexico).

In Mexico, there were American land, mining, and oil companies that had been competing with West European geopolitical and financial-economic interests in the region, penetrating the country in the 1880s. However, all of them became checked by the 1911 Mexican Revolution, which promulgated a far-reaching program of anti-colonial nationalization of the Mexican economy. In order to protect American expansionist interests in Mexico, the 28<sup>th</sup> US President Thomas Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921) ordered two military interventions against Mexico. The first was an occupation army sent to Tampico and Veracruz in 1914. The second was a punitive expedition across the Rio Grande in 1916 entering the territories of Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Nuevo León. However, both of these military actions of aggression stimulated more profound resistance from the Mexican people and helped the start of a German political influence in Mexico which reached its peak in 1917.

As a consequence of the 1898 Spanish-American War, Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the USA followed by the conversion of Cuba into the US protectorate in 1903. The UK, like other West European powers, was very much interested in the affairs concerning the islands in the Caribbean Sea. However, London recognized the changed geopolitical situation in the area by the 1901 Hay-Pauncefote Treaty which gave the US a free hand of expansionism within both Central America and the Caribbean Sea. The essence of the agreement was, in fact, that the Panama Canal was built (functioning from 1914) but under the sole ownership and control of the USA (before the building of the canal, Washington detracted Panama from Colombia following the same pattern of the previous Hawaiian pro-American “colored” revolution).

Concerning the US colonial expansionist policy in both Central America and the Caribbean Sea, the ideological foundation for such imperial hegemony was the same: the 1823 Monroe Doctrine which clearly under the motto “America to Americans” promulgated the US imperialism in the area of Latin America (without West European interference) as implied an intention to treat Latin America as the exclusive US area of influence. Nevertheless, the 1861–1865 American Civil War temporarily postponed Washington’s imperial-expansionist policy in Latin America but the 1823 Monroe Doctrine was by no means put aside and forgotten.

It was the French geopolitical attempt to establish a colonial state (empire) in Mexico within the years of 1862–1867 which offered, in essence, starting work on the building of the Panama Canal but the French engineer, Ferdinand de Lesseps, builder of the Suez Canal, faced serious objections from the US. The point was that the Panama Canal was understood by Washington as “virtually a part of the coastline of the United States” as was stated in 1879 by the US 19<sup>th</sup> President Rutherford B. Hayes (1877–1881). Nevertheless, under the treaty with Panama (separated from Colombia) in 1903, the US leases the Panama Canal Zone in perpetuity. The zone is 10 miles wide and is bisected by the Canal which, unlike the Suez Canal, has locks.

In 1895, Washington interfered in the UK dispute with Venezuela over the border question and declared the USA “practically sovereign on this continent” (the words of the US Secretary of State Olney). The UK, however, dropped the argument. It was the policy of Colombia to meet the US expansionistic demands to build and exploit the Panama Canal (still on the territory of Colombia) that led to an insurrection in 1903 (inspired and supported by Washington like in the case of the Hawaiian Islands) that resulted in the forcible separation of Panama from Colombia. The US administration after the putsch guaranteed formal political independence of Panama but, in fact, the territory became an American colonial protectorate.

The historical period of the US dominance in the Caribbean Sea (since 1898) survived under several political difficulties until the end of WWII. During this time, Mexican resistance from 1934 to 1938 forced the US administration to imply a tactic to appease Latin America in order to struggle against the activities of Nazi Germany. At the same time, there were many US colonial interventionists in the affairs of Latin America including the Caribbean Sea area being covert or at least indirect, but working on the line of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine. However, for tactical reasons, they altered the original doctrine into the more flexible policy of “Good Neighbourhood”. However, after 1945, new political actors in Latin America and the Caribbean Sea came into force resulting in the receding of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine by the US administration.

## Final Words

*The Times* of London predicted, after the US's decisive military victory over the Spanish overseas empire in 1898, that the USA would consequently play a prominent role in global politics and world affairs primarily at the expense of the UK.

It was the 1898 Spanish-American War after which the US became a great global power. The war was rooted in the struggle for independence of the island of Cuba followed by Washington to realize the American global economic and imperial ambitions at the expense of the Spanish colonial possessions. Sympathetic to Cuban rebels whose second war of independence against the Spanish rule started in 1895, Washington (mis)used the very mysterious blowing up of the American battleship (false-flag), *Maine*, in Havana harbor as a formal pretext for the declaration of the war to Spain. The Spanish Navy suffered serious defeats in both Cuba and the Philippines. It was followed by the US expeditionary force (in which future US President Theodore Roosevelt served) defeated Spanish ground forces on the territory of the island of Cuba and in Puerto Rico. Spain finally surrendered at the end of 1898. Consequently, Puerto Rico was ceded to the US while Cuba became put under the American protectorate. Guam (the Pacific island) was as well as ceded to Washington while the Philippines were bought by the US for \$20 million. In essence, this war signified the emergence of the USA as one of the most powerful players in international relations of the time but at the same time the American dominant influence in the area of the Caribbean Sea.

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