The Imperial Cruise:A Secret History ofEmpire and War

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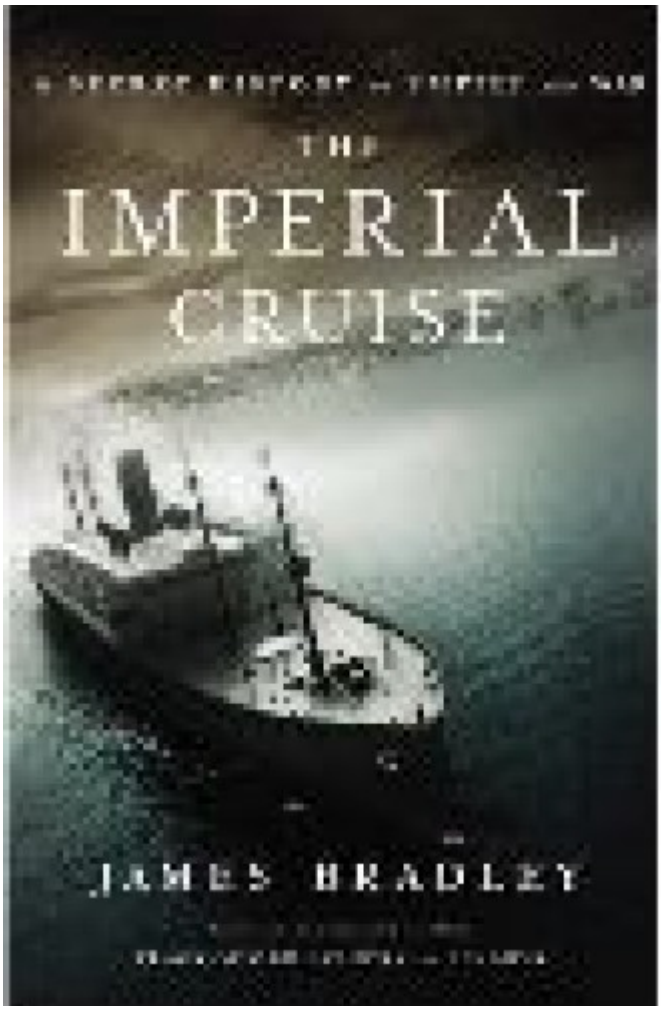
In Review



The Imperial Cruise: A Secret History of Empire and War

James Bradley
Little, Brown

There is some high irony in the fact that the United States has come to be commonly recognized as an empire (for good or ill) just as its imperial reach wanes in the face of the rise of China. This book offers, in a journalistic, gossipy style, a defining episode concerning the rise of the U.S. as an empire, an episode that builds on the Monroe Doctrine and the expansionist ideology of James K. Polk.

Bradley's narrative account is framed as a cruise that he labels imperial. It began on July 1, 1905, with a train ride from D.C. to San Francisco, then the travelers departed San Francisco on July 8. The party of "about eighty strong," led by Secretary of State William Howard Taft, included Alice Roosevelt, daughter of president Teddy Roosevelt; seven senators; 23 representatives, including Nicholas Longworth of Ohio, whom Alice Roosevelt was soon to marry; and assorted wives and aides. The purpose of the cruise, conducted as a gala party, was a tour of the Asian parts of the U.S. political-economic domain, including Honolulu, Tokyo, Manila, Hong Kong, Beijing and Seoul.

The tour was an act of diplomacy administered by "Big Bill," as Bradley mockingly refers to Taft; the substance of the act was to show the U.S. flag (along with its implied power) before Asian political leaders—among whom Taft, Alice Roosevelt and the others blithely assumed U.S. privilege, entitlement and superiority, while being completely tone-deaf about the effrontery of such conduct.

The cruise provided ample opportunity for Alice to be welcomed and feted as a princess and for Big Bill to strut while he repeatedly disregarded his Asian counterparts as though they were of no account. The real story of the book, however—the "secret" of the title—concerns President Roosevelt, his expansionist visions, his self-promotion, and the arrogant obtuseness that he practiced in secret. The accent of the book is on Western, white arrogance, so its quoted rhetoric teems with references to "Teutonic, Aryan, Anglo-Saxon" superiority, with commensurate denigrations of Asians, who were taken to be stupid and readily manipulated and exploited.

Roosevelt's presidency followed McKinley's and preceded Taft's. Goaded by Roosevelt, McKinley had only reluctantly undertaken the war against Spain for the "liberation" of Cuba, the war in which Roosevelt established himself as a Rough Rider; Bradley portrays Taft as an unthinking yes-man for Roosevelt who apparently actually believed the jingoistic rhetoric that had become common parlance. The

thesis of the book is that Roosevelt not only continued expansionist ideology, with a hat tip to Frederick Jackson Turner, but went well beyond Polk and Turner to carry expansion past the continental land mass and into Asian waters, convinced that it was the United States' destiny (Manifest Destiny!) to "follow the sun" clear to the East.

Bradley portrays Roosevelt as a public relations achievement who carefully choreographed his public image as a Western rancher on the Plains and as a Rough Rider (a phrase he took from Buffalo Bill Cody) by appearing in studio photos in tailored costumes and as a know-it-all who ran roughshod over intelligence and protocol to have his own way in the construction of a U.S. empire. The seeds for that presidential ambition, says Bradley, came from John Burgess, Roosevelt's law professor at Columbia University, who taught that "only white people could rule because the Teutons had created the idea of the state." Roosevelt continued throughout his life to assume that Asian people (and Asian leaders) were not competent to govern and that white rulers were required to make the world work.

Bradley briefly traces the familiar story of the conquest of Cuba: the trumped-up charge about the explosion of the *Maine* and the subsequent surrender of Spain, an act that included no indigenous Cubans in the process. But the focus is on Asia. Bradley gives us a brief narrative about the annexation of Hawaii—made possible by McKinley's pious capacity to interpret the seizure as help for a benighted people—and the story of the U.S. seizure of the Philippines. Assuming that the Filipinos could not manage their own revolution against Spain, the U.S. intruded and soon took the Philippines as a colony. A report from the time described Admiral Dewey's arrival in Manila: "Americans saw the white-haired Navy Military man as a paragon of American racial superiority, civilization and manhood." Astonishingly, Bradley offers a 1901 photo of "U.S. soldiers torturing a Filipino" with the "water cure"—what we now call waterboarding. Taft referred to the Filipinos as his "little brown brothers." Roosevelt imported 1,200 Filipinos to St. Louis for the 1904 World's Fair to exhibit them "as creatures closer to monkeys than human beings."

The biggest story Bradley tells concerns Roosevelt vis-à-vis Japan. For his own reasons Roosevelt decided that the Japanese were the exception in Asia. He conducted a long, secret engagement with Japan, making it his major ally in Asia. He was determined that Japan "should have Korea," but, Bradley judges, he was outfoxed and outmaneuvered by Japan. By 1905 Japan had defeated Russia and signed a treaty that gave Korea and Manchuria to Japan, laying the groundwork for

the Japanese empire in subsequent decades.

Roosevelt termed the Japanese “honorary Aryans” because he viewed them as more able than other Asians and therefore entitled to the territory of others that Roosevelt wanted them to have. Indeed, Roosevelt went so far as to secretly suggest that Japan should have an “Asian Monroe Doctrine” that would assert and ensure Japanese hegemony in the Pacific. The result was a triple alliance of the United States, Britain and Japan about which Bradley laconically comments: “At the behest of London and Washington, the Japanese military would expand into Korea and China to civilize Asia. Later generations would call it World War II.”

While Roosevelt championed Japan, China was commensurately treated as a primitive culture to be exploited and managed, to be granted no privilege or even dignity. Roosevelt stoutly insisted on an “open door” to China for Western exploitation, while steadfastly keeping the door to the West closed as far as China was concerned. Bradley judges that many of the great U.S. fortunes were, as a result, derived from opium trade from China.

Thus Roosevelt, in his clumsy, aggressive ignorance, sponsored the political map of Asia as it continues to operate, with many of its memories, wounds, hatreds and mistrusts manufactured and endorsed by U.S. arrogance. Bradley summarizes the situation this way:

> No analysis of Roosevelt’s worldview makes sense unless one first gazes through Teddy’s race lenses at his galaxy of Aryans, Teutons, Anglo-Saxons, wops, dagos, Huns, Chinks, Japs, and a distasteful assortment of Negroes. According to Roosevelt, China would crumble and the obedient Honorary Aryans would help the English and the Americans pick up the shards. Instead, he failed to recognize the 1905 spark of Chinese patriotism that would leap to 1911 and be a raging fire by 1949. . . . Over two hundred thousand Americans and millions of Asians died battling each other in places like Zamboanga, Iwo Jima, Incheon, and Khe Sanh.

Bradley draws a straight line from the Port Arthur treaty of 1905—which ceded Korea to Japan—to Pearl Harbor in 1941. He avers that it was Teddy Roosevelt, in his blatant, uninformed racism, who sowed the seeds of World War II in the Pacific. Having studied the *Flags of Our Fathers*, Bradley then goes farther, extending that straight line to Iraq. Sadly, the illusions that propelled Roosevelt continue to fund

distortions in U.S. popular opinion and policy. It requires no sleight of hand to write “Arab/Muslim” for “Asian.”

Roosevelt did it all in secret. But the saddest secret is the one we in the U.S. keep from ourselves: the secret of racist arrogance hidden under the cloak of moral urgency. McKinley practiced it; Niebuhr exposed it. We have not learned much beyond what Bradley calls the “masquerade of democracy”; perhaps, in the face of the emerging “Beijing consensus,” we will.