LIE #2

THE MEXICAN AND SPANISH-AMERICAN WARS WERE IMPERIALIST EFFORTS DRUMMED UP BY "CORPORATE INTERESTS"

Ordering troops to the Rio Grande, into territory inhabited by Mexicans, was clearly a provocation. . . . [The Mexican War] was a war of the American elite against the Mexican elite. . . .

—Howard Zinn, A People's History of the United States

Beyond dominating domestic politics, the corporate elite influenced U.S. foreign policy . . . by contributing to surging expansionist pressures. . . . [El]ite calls for international assertiveness sparked a war between the United States and Spain in 1898.

—Paul S. Boyer et al., The Enduring Vision

In the end, the "splendid little war" [with Spain] came as a result of less lofty ambitions: empire, trade, glory.

—James West Davidson et al., Nation of Nations

The Mexican War and the Spanish-American War allow sufficient wiggle room for liberal historians to have it both ways. On the one hand, there was strong opposition to each war, allowing critics to brandish quotations from antiwar sources as the "true" sentiment of America. In each case, no small amount of sentiment was racially based. In the case of the Mexican War, Northerners did not want to add new slave territories to the Union, and in the case of the Spanish-American War, many critics feared an influx of "brown
acknowledging the Rio Grande as Texas’s southern border, and in return receiving $15 million (or about $313 million in 2006 dollars) and an assumption of another $3.25 million ($68 million in 2006 dollars) of debts Mexico owed to U.S. citizens.

Opposition to the Mexican War had come less from moral positions against violence in particular than from concerns about expansion benefiting slave states. Activists such as the jailed writer Henry David Thoreau and Whig legislator Abraham Lincoln saw the hands of the “slave power” in the conflict, while many American Catholics were hesitant to fight another Catholic nation. Lincoln, of course, demanded to know the exact spot where blood was shed in the incident leading to war.

In both cases, however, critics obsessed with American “imperialism” ignored the eagerness with which our foes entered the wars. In both cases, the enemy forces were expected to win handily. Even Boyer’s Enduring Vision admits, “Most European observers expected Mexico to win the war. Its army was four times the size of the American forces, and it was fighting on home ground.” As I explained in America’s Victories: Why the U.S. Wins Wars, virtually every foe U.S. forces have encountered has underestimated our military: in 1775, a British surgeon described the colonial militia as “a drunken, canty, lying, praying, hypocritical rabble without order, subjection, discipline, or cleanliness,” and in 1812, another Englishman, watching regular U.S. infantry drill, portrayed their exercises as “loose and slovenly.” Mexican leaders’ opinions of the American military were similarly low, promising their own troops that U.S. forces were “totally unfit to operate beyond their [own] borders.” After he was reinstated as president, dictator Antonio López de Santa Anna promised to capture Washington, D.C., and Mexican newspapers such as La Voz del Pueblo exclaimed, “We have more than enough strength to make war... victory will perch upon our banners.” The London Times predicted any American invasion of Mexico would fail, as U.S. troops could not “resist artillery and cavalry... [and were not] amenable to discipline.” Both the Paris Globe and England’s Britannia prophesied ruin for any offensive action by the United States, with the latter claiming the American military was “fit for nothing but to fight Indians.” Fortunately for the British, they never had to deal with Geronimo or Crazy Horse, or they might have had a different assessment!

When it came to the Spanish-American War, Spain’s diplomatic affronts were described as “blunders,” not deliberate provocations: “The Spaniards seemed to be their own worst enemies,” wrote Irwin Unger, no doubt much like the misunderstood German dictator some forty years later. Even when our enemies were hell-bent on fighting, it seems the historians have a hard time celebrating any kind of American victory. Making a Nation tells students that Spain, “rather than surrender to the Filipinos... surrendered to the Americans on August 13, 1898.” The authors do manage to record the critical battle of Manila Bay—two pages earlier, separating the cause and effect of Spanish defeat and surrender and making it appear that the Filipino rebels, not Commodore George Dewey’s superior naval squadron, whipped the mighty empire of Spain. The authors treated Dewey’s astounding feat (not losing a single man to enemy fire while utterly destroying the Spanish flotilla) as an accident, noting, “The country went wild with relief and triumph.” Perhaps Americans had been reading all those foreign papers that predicted the Spaniards would throttle the upstart U.S. fleet.

The belligerence of Mexico and Spain aside, the historians have all but concluded the United States was only after conquest. Boyer’s textbook features a picture of the tall hat called the shako worn by U.S. troops, “adorned with decorative plates showing the eagle spreading its wings, the symbol of Manifest Destiny.” It couldn’t be that the U.S. Army merely adopted for its hats the national symbol, the eagle? (One wonders what the textbook writers would have dreamed up had Benjamin Franklin’s suggestion of the turkey as the national symbol been adopted.) The fact that the United States in two wars voluntarily gave up more territory than many empires ever possessed seems to be of no import to the proponents of the “American Empire” view.

Certainly, the United States did retain some territories—Hawaii, for example—but the Philippines were given independence, then the U.S. Navy acceded to the wishes of the government and withdrew altogether in the 1990s. Other areas occupied and held by American forces (often as the only source of order and, yes, civilization) were likewise returned to their native owners. All of this was done while the United States was in a position of strength, which was unprecedented in world history. Britain left India and her African colonies when she could no longer hold them. The Soviet Union released Latvia, Lithuania, the Ukraine, and other captive nations when communism imploded. There is a genuine story to celebrate when it comes to America’s wars abroad, but the historians are too obsessed with “imperialism” to tell it.