

SOME EMPIRE WE ARE... by Si Frumkin

In 1960, bored with my textile business, I decided to earn a Master's degree in history. This was before computers, Internet, Google, fax and cell phones, - I had to spend countless hours in libraries looking at old documents and writing on a manual typewriter. My assignment was a paper on the reaction by the print media - the only kind they had in the 1840s - to the Mexican-American War.

I haven't thought much about the Mexican-American War (1845-1848) since then. In this I am probably in step with an overwhelming majority of my fellow Californians, as well as of the New Mexicans, and Texans who are Americans today because of the results of that 3-year conflict.

I was reminded of it a few weeks ago when we went to a performance by Evan Sayet, a very funny stand-up comedian. He did a monologue ridiculing the way our media, college professors and the European intellectual elite and their admirers go on and on about American imperialism and America's goal to create and enlarge the American empire.

"Look", he said, "if America was really imperialist it wouldn't go to weird places like Iraq or Somalia to have colonies there. It would grab the neighbors – Canada, Mexico – right? It wouldn't really be too hard. A few armored divisions, a little bombing and voila! The Stars and Stripes flying over both of them and we are investing billions in fixing the war damage. Why bother with the far away places in Africa or Asia?

"No, we never knew how to build empires. We still don't. California was a fluke, an aberration. We took it without really knowing what we were doing. We could have left it alone and today it would be a part of Mexico and they would be digging immigrant smuggling tunnels into Utah."

Funny? I thought so. But true. And then I thought about the research I had done on the war that made California American. I pulled out the badly typed, 47-year old term paper to take another look at it. And the comedian was right. Even 150 years ago we were not imperialist.

In case you are a little vague about that war – most people are - Texas started it. The Texans wanted to be independent of Mexico and when the Mexicans objected they rebelled. In March 1845, Texas petitioned and was officially annexed by the United States, a step that generated a lively debate among those who approved annexation of Texas and even California, and their opponents. There were a few local skirmishes, letters and declarations were exchanged, speeches were made in Congress, and eventually, in May 1846, war was declared. After several victorious battles, a few defeats, and finally the occupation of Mexico City by U.S. troops, America won.

The end of the war created a sharp public debate. Some wanted to annihilate Mexico as an independent nation, occupy it and eventually take it into the Union as a state.

“Many Mexicans are in favor of this solution and all Mexicans will benefit by the law and order we can give them” (*New York Globe*, 5/20/1847) and “Let Mexicans and Americans discuss occupation and annexation as a slogan and a goal, let them repeat it as a common theme and we shall soon see the Aztec and American Eagle clasping wings, and our Yankee boys swapping nick-knacks (*sic!*) with the Americanized Mexican Rancheros for Gold” (*Baltimore American*, 10/23/1847).

The opposing – anti-imperialist – point of view was also well represented. The *New Orleans Topic* (9/24/1847) was horrified that we would annex land simply because we happened to like it:

“A policy of aggression and national plunder would be the only result of this greedy attitude...they who urge annexation, will they then not annex all of South America and the West India Islands including the very barren and insignificant island of Cuba? Seriously, we entreat men to trouble themselves to think, to ask themselves where all this is to end, and see if disunity, bloodshed, anarchy and confusion are not to be what we are to receive in lieu of our great and glorious Union”.

On March 10, 1848, the treaty of peace was ratified. California and Texas eventually joined the Union – Mexico remained independent.

The anti-imperialists won the national debate. Imperialism as American policy was rejected then, and again and again, in the centuries to come.

Fifty years later, the “barren and insignificant island of Cuba” and the equally barren islands of the Philippines were freed of Spanish rule and eventually given independence.

One hundred years after the Mexican-American War, U.S. occupied and then left Western Europe, Japan and Korea. American blood was shed on behalf of freedom of foreigners who needed our help. American treasure, knowledge and support made sure that the countries of our allies and our enemies as well, would be rebuilt and restored. American power was used to protect them from a truly imperial superpower – the Soviet Union.

If America is an imperial power then it is a very inefficient one. It has not been able to create and exploit a single colony anywhere, except for Puerto Rico and a few other “insignificant” Pacific Islands that are heavily subsidized by us, have no history of internecine violence or dictatorial rule, and where the inhabitants pay no income tax.

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