

Kipling's The White Man's Burden and its afterlives.

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Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" and Its Afterlives

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"The White Man's Burden has been sung. Who will sing the Brown Man's?"

—Mark Twain, "The Stupendous Procession"

In November 1898, Rudyard Kipling sent his poem "The White Man's Burden" to his friend Theodore Roosevelt, who had just been elected Governor of New York.¹ Kipling's aim was to encourage the American government to take over the Philippines, one of the territorial prizes of the Spanish-American War, and rule it with the same energy, honor, and beneficence that, he believed, characterized British rule over the nonwhite populations of India and Africa. In September he had written to Roosevelt: "Now go in and put all the weight of your influence into hanging on permanently to the whole Philippines. America has gone and stuck a pickaxe into the foundations of a rotten house and she is morally bound to build the house over again from the foundations or have it fall about her ears."²

"The White Man's Burden" repeated this advice, adding a more abstract message about the white race's superiority and responsibility to the Filipinos and the other nonwhite peoples of the world. Sending Kipling's verses on to Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Roosevelt opined that it was "poor poetry," but that it made "good sense from the expansion standpoint." Lodge responded that it was "better poetry than you say," while apparently agreeing about its "standpoint."³ Only later, in February 1899, was the poem published simultaneously in the London *Times* and *McClure's Magazine* in the U.S.⁴

Few poems have been more frequently cited, criticized, and satirized than "The White Man's Burden." It has served as a lightning rod for both the supporters and the opponents of imperialism, as well as of racism and white supremacy. After reviewing the main context of **[End Page 172]** Kipling's poem—America's colonization of the Philippines—I examine

some of the uses to which "The White Man's Burden" has been put from 1898 to the present. As Henry Labouchère's 1899 poem "The Brown Man's Burden" attests, parodies and citations began to appear almost immediately. "The Black Man's Burden" was the title of many parodies and more serious poems in the African-American press. While the Philippines was still an American colony, Edmund Morel's 1920 book *The Black Man's Burden* stood Kipling's message on its head by arguing the case against empire, and other works with similar titles criticized racism in the U.S. between the World Wars.

Until recently, most works that invoke Kipling's poem have been parodic or critical in some fashion. But in response to America's "new imperialism" in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, there have been a number of attempts to refurbish Kipling and "The White Man's Burden." Thus, for the title of his prizewinning book, *The Savage Wars of Peace* (2002), Max Boot chose a line from the poem, which he cites more fully and with explicit approval in the text itself. Though Boot and other current proponents of American imperialism deny or ignore this obvious fact, Kipling's poem strongly suggests that imperialism and racism are inseparable. "Whatever the avowed justification," writes Peter Keating, "there can be no doubt that the poem is profoundly racist in sentiment."⁵ Perhaps with Kipling in mind (she cites him later in the empire portion of her famous study of totalitarianism), Hannah Arendt writes that imperialism "would have necessitated the invention of racism as the only possible ... excuse for its deeds, even if no race-thinking had ever existed in the civilized world."⁶ Unless one wears a white blindfold while reading it, Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" makes the question of the relationship between imperialism and racism inescapable.

* * *

Whether or not Kipling's poem had any influence on public opinion, it is...

Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" and Its Afterlives

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PATRICK BRANTLINGER
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