

“The White Man’s Burden”: Kipling’s Hymn to U.S. Imperialism

In February 1899, British novelist and poet Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem entitled “The White Man’s Burden: The United States and The Philippine Islands.” In this poem, Kipling urged the U.S. to take up the “burden” of empire, as had Britain and other European nations. Published in the February, 1899 issue of *McClure’s Magazine*, the poem coincided with the beginning of the Philippine-American War and U.S. Senate ratification of the treaty that placed Puerto Rico, Guam, Cuba, and the Philippines under American control. Theodore Roosevelt, soon to become vice-president and then president, copied the poem and sent it to his friend, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, commenting that it was “rather poor poetry, but good sense from the expansion point of view.” Not everyone was as favorably impressed as Roosevelt. The racialized notion of the “White Man’s burden” became a euphemism for imperialism, and many anti-imperialists couched their opposition in reaction to the phrase.

Take up the White Man’s burden—
 Send forth the best ye breed—
 Go send your sons to exile
 To serve your captives' need
 To wait in heavy harness
 On fluttered folk and wild—
 Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
 Half devil and half child
 Take up the White Man’s burden
 In patience to abide
 To veil the threat of terror
 And check the show of pride;
 By open speech and simple
 An hundred times made plain
 To seek another’s profit
 And work another’s gain
 Take up the White Man’s burden—
 And reap his old reward:
 The blame of those ye better
 The hate of those ye guard—
 The cry of hosts ye humour
 (Ah slowly) to the light:
 "Why brought ye us from bondage,
 “Our loved Egyptian night?”
 Take up the White Man’s burden-
 Have done with childish days-
 The lightly proffered laurel,
 The easy, ungrudged praise.
 Comes now, to search your manhood
 Through all the thankless years,
 Cold-edged with dear-bought wisdom,
 The judgment of your peers!

Source: Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden: The United States & The Philippine Islands, 1899.” *Rudyard Kipling’s Verse: Definitive Edition* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1929).