Episode 854: Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and the Birth of American Empire

Guest: Stephen Kinzer

WOODS: I've wanted to have you on for previous books, actually, and for some reason never got around to it, but I couldn't resist with this one I just told people about, *The True Flag*, because I've been a bit of a Teddy Roosevelt naysayer myself, and yet he is one of these beloved figures of left and right. As a matter of fact, when Bill Clinton was asked, "Who was your favorite Republican president?" he picked out Teddy Roosevelt. And I thought, Why wouldn't he? There are so many features of Teddy Roosevelt, whether it's his governing style or whatever or his views on foreign policy, it's no surprise to me that unfortunately he's held in his high regard. I feel the same way the Anti-Imperialist League felt in 1902, 1904, when they realized that history had just passed them by and America disagreed with them.

KINZER: That's really the story that I try to tell in this book. All of my books are voyages of discovery. I'm always looking for some really big story that had a decisive impact on history but that, for whatever reason, we've forgotten about or doesn't turn up in our history books. So the story that I discovered that's the center of this book, *The True Flag*, is that the decision the United States made more than a hundred years ago to begin projecting our military and coercive power beyond our own borders was not a decision that we made automatically or easily.

In fact, the entire United States was caught up in an enormous national debate over whether this was a good idea. The U.S. Senate debated it for 32 days. In the history of American foreign policy, this is really the mother of all debates. All the arguments for and against intervention that we've heard, whether we were arguing about Vietnam or Central America or Iraq, all start back then. And all the major political and intellectual figures in America took sides in this debate. Teddy Roosevelt certainly fit into that category.

So on the imperialist side, on the side in favor of U.S. expansion overseas in a military and coercive way, were essentially three main figures. I portray them as kind of a triumvirate. So Teddy Roosevelt was the public face of the expansionist project — and a hugely popular figure, of course, at the end of the 19th century. His message was amplified through the mighty megaphone of the William Randolph Hearst press. Hearst was the founder of what we then called yellow journalism. We now call it fake news. So he was a very important part of this fight, driving Americans wild with this fervor for war. And then the third figure, who was something like the Mephistopheles behind the scenes conceiving and directing this whole project was Roosevelt's best friend,

Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts. So between them, they formed quite a formidable troika.

WOODS: Indeed. And of course, as you're describing this, what interests me is the very fact that such a debate was held on such a momentous issue. It seems like if we have debates these days, they're on trivialities. The substance of the issue is usually already decided. We already know some intervention is going to take place; the question is are we going to starve the people or are we going to bomb them. And that's basically what we're left to sort out.

What interests me also about the book is I'm glad you pulled out another colorful figure, one of the most colorful figures that could actually stand up against Teddy Roosevelt in terms of the sheer force of his character: namely, Mark Twain. I think most people don't realize how many American literary figures and intellectuals were, as you say, actively engaged in this.

As a matter of fact, I recall — I have a PhD in history from Columbia University, and I was in my general exam just before starting the dissertation. And I'd better not mention her name, but there was a faculty member there who told me I was wrong when I said in my oral exams at Columbia that Andrew Carnegie had been anti-imperialist and spoken out on behalf of that cause. Now, that's easily demonstrable. The documents are readily available. But she was so caught in this cartoonish view of history that, well, he's an industrialist and I've been told my whole life that therefore he must be an imperialist. How wonderful that the real world is so much more colorful than that. Tell me about this colorful group of people who came together and created this Anti-Imperialist League.

KINZER: The whole idea that there was such a thing as the Anti-Imperialist League and that it had such huge influence over American life, with chapters all over the country, sending out hundreds of thousands of leaflets and newsletters and shaping political discourse in Washington, was something very new to me. So I'm trying to bring that whole episode back to life, and with it, the Anti-Imperialist League. So the Anti-Imperialist League. The anti-imperialists were a very interesting group. I mentioned that the imperialists had these three big figures, William Randolph Hearst, Teddy Roosevelt, and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge.

So who was on the other side? Well, Andrew Carnegie was one of the most bitter anti-imperialists. He wrote quite a potent article explaining his views, and one of his questions was, Since we had made it a crime while occupying the Philippines for Filipinos to advocate independence, how could we then hang our Declaration of Independence in the school rooms and teach this to them? And he ended his essay with a wonderful line. He wrote, "Tires the Republic so soon of its mission?" So Carnegie actually offered to pay the U.S. Treasury $20 million to buy the Philippines and then give them independence. So Carnegie would have been one of the main anti-imperialists, the richest man in America.

But people on the other side of the social divide also were on that side, including people that you wouldn't necessarily associate with Andrew Carnegie in other contexts. You had Jane Addams, the great social reformer. The principal labor leader of that period, Samuel Gompers, was a great anti-imperialist. So was Booker T.

Washington, the leading African American figure of that time period. You had the leader of the Democratic Party, William Jennings Bryan; the previous Democratic president, Grover Cleveland; the previous Republican president, Benjamin Harrison. One of the co-founders of the Republican Party, George Boutwell, governor of Massachusetts, was the president of the Anti-Imperialist League.

So you had quite a potent force. And then along with those public figures, you also had great intellectual and literary figures like William Graham Sumner and William James and, of course most spectacularly, Mark Twain. So you had really a group of titans on both sides. And I think anybody involved in this great debate over what kind of power the U.S. should project abroad can take inspiration from the titans that face off in this great battle.

WOODS: And this battle began originally over the Spanish-American War, but I think it really heated up after that when the disposition of the Philippines was being discussed. So I think that's what, given our limited time, I'd like to home in on. The Spanish-American War is a very limited affair. It doesn't take that long. It's not an epic battle the way the press portrayed it at the time. But what does become a lengthy and indeed epic battle is the guerrilla struggle that goes on with regard to the Philippines afterward. And now I wonder, does the Anti-Imperialist League strengthen as the Philippine question comes into focus? Does it become weaker? What is your sense of this?

KINZER: So the Spanish-American War, as you point out, was mainly about Cuba. The U.S. wanted to help Cuban rebels overthrow Spanish rule. Then our military strategists concluded, reasonably, that we needed to assure ourselves that since we were making war against Spain in Cuba that the Spanish naval fleet would not retaliate by attacking the U.S. mainland. So we had to figure out where the Spanish fleet was, and then we wanted to send a squadron to sink it. Well, we looked around the world and we found that the Spanish fleet was in a place that no American had ever heard of, and that was the Philippine islands. So we did dispatch a squadron there. It sank that naval fleet.

And then we suddenly had to ask ourselves, What about the Philippines now? This war was not about the Philippines, had nothing to do with the Philippines, but suddenly, Spanish power was gone. They had been the colonial power there for centuries. So we didn't know what to do. And immediately the urge came from Washington, led by Henry Cabot Lodge and quickly afterward by Roosevelt, we should take the Philippines. We should make them into a colony. We should begin expanding the way European countries did and take colonies and project our power even over people who don't want to be ruled by us.

At the end of 1898, the United States imposed a treaty on Spain, by which Spain had to give up all of its island territories. We assumed control over the Philippines, among others. And that treaty had to be ratified in the U.S. Senate. On the first day of that epic 32-day debate, one senator got up and said, "This is the greatest question that has ever been presented to the American people." And he was right. It was all about how America was going to behave in the world over the next century and more.

So this debate is enormous, and the Anti-Imperialist League drew tremendous support from the fact that for the first time in American history, U.S. soldiers were being sent to another country to shoot down people who honestly believed that they were fighting for their own independence. And that is what set off this epic debate: is it right for a country founded on the principle that all government takes its legitimacy from the consent of the governed to be pushing itself into countries where it hasn't been invited and trying to guide and shape those countries? It's a question we debated intensely then; we're still debating it.

And I must say, the one difference, even though the arguments are the same, is that the senators in those days were so much more articulate. To read the debates is really — I don't know if it's thrilling or depressing, to see how well spoken these senators were. Even the bad guys were brilliant. They're steeped in history. They know how to deliver classical oratory. So the arguments haven't really changed, but I think the quality of the people making them has declined.

WOODS: Yeah, no kidding. No kidding. That's one of the depressing things about being a historian, actually, is coming into contact with some of these primary sources. There's a guy associated with — one of the lesser-known figures in the Anti-Imperialist League, and you mention him in your book. And I know this is unfashionable, but I happen to be a fan of this guy: Edward Atkinson. And I wonder if you can tell people the story of Edward Atkinson and his leaflets and what he was trying to do.

KINZER: Edward Atkinson was a Boston lawyer and industrialist who became a very active leader in the Anti-Imperialist League, which was originally based in Boston. So he spent a good deal of his time during 1898 and 1899 editing a newsletter called *The Anti-Imperialist*. And you can still find copies of this online. So it was a compendium of outrages that were being committed in the Philippines, articles that had appeared in various newspapers about Filipino leaders, stories about the costs of our foreign wars — much the same kind of thing that you would see in newsletters or magazines protesting, for example, our current involvement in Iraq, assembling all sorts of arguments against the intervention and so forth.

So at one point, Atkinson decided that as a way to get publicity for his newsletter, which he was sending out to about 20,000 opinion makers, making him one of the first pioneers in direct mail propaganda lobbying, he would try to mail copies of a couple of these newsletters to the commanders of American forces in the Philippines. And so he was going to send his anti-Philippine war propaganda to the Philippines. And he wrote a letter to the Department of the Navy saying that he would like the address, please, of General Arthur MacArthur, Admiral George Dewey, and other principal American figures in the Philippines because he wanted to mail them some anti-war propaganda.

Upon receiving no reply, he decided to mail them himself, and he said he wanted to continue this process by mailing copies to all the soldiers fighting in the U.S. Army in the Philippines. Well, those newsletters were confiscated out of the U.S. mail, and the postmaster general declared them subversive. This naturally caused nationwide publicity over what was called the rape of the mail, and Atkinson was thrilled, of course. Requests for subscriptions poured into his office, and he had this great line afterwards in writing with delight to one of his friends about how successful this

project had been: I really think the president's cabinet is composed with people who have been taken from an asylum for imbeciles.

WOODS: [laughing] Yeah, we need more straight-talk like that about presidential cabinets. Let's pause to thank our sponsor.

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Let's get to T.R. himself. Let's try to be fair to the guy. On what grounds does he support this new type of interventionist foreign policy, particularly in the Pacific, where the U.S. is going to push its power out that way/ There was this whole theory in the 1890s that the U.S. was suffering from overproduction and the way to deal with that was to dump the excess on the Chinese market, and if you're going to do that, you need coaling stations and naval bases dotting the way from the U.S. throughout the Pacific to China. I'm not sure that's entirely what's on T.R.'s mind. I think that would have been rather beside the point.

KINZER: You're right; there were a variety of motivations for our decision to begin pressing our coercive power around the world. The economic one I think was important for some people, particularly for Henry Cabot Lodge. So was the strategic motive. The idea that grabbed Roosevelt and Lodge, among others, was that a great nation needed a great navy and that we would build this navy and make sure that we had countries subservient to us all over the world.

For T.R. in particular, I think the racial aspect of manifest destiny played a big role. Teddy Roosevelt really believed that only white people were capable of governing themselves. He had no patience for people who thought that countries not made up of white people could also be independent and have stable government. He famously said about the Native Americans, I wouldn't say that the only good Indian is a dead Indian, but I'd say nine out of ten are and I wouldn't inquire too carefully about the tenth. So Roosevelt definitely believed that people like Cubans and Filipinos were utterly incapable of governing themselves, and since he saw the world's races as kind of a pyramid of wisdom down to savagery, I think that made it a lot easier for him to justify his view that essentially Americans and other Europeans should rule everyone else in the world.

Now, historians often describe Teddy Roosevelt as having been bipolar. In a way, you could even take this argument over a period of years in a sense of his career. So he had a little bit of a bipolar career, in terms of intervention. He was probably the most fervent advocate in American history of grabbing other nations. When he became president in 1901 suddenly after the assassination of McKinley, there was speculation about when we would be invading Canada, what part of Mexico are we going to take, will we annex Guatemala or Nicaragua, are we going to be building colonies in China or taking slices of Africa? Teddy Roosevelt didn't do any of that. After his first intervention as president in which he took the Panama Canal, he never did it again. He moved on to other issues, like controlling big business and protecting the natural environment. So this great nation grabber didn't grab any more nations.

And I see a pattern — I use this at the end of my book when I talk about the intervention argument as it goes through the 21st centuries — that binds presidents

from Teddy Roosevelt all the way to Obama, and it is this: they start off their terms very enthusiastic about the idea of intervention. They want to use the American army wherever they can to make their way in the world. But after a while, they begin to see the limitations of this approach. They get the blowback. They begin to see the hostility that comes back to us, the expense, the trouble, the resentment. And towards the end of their terms, they calm down. We saw this with Obama, and you see it with most presidents since Teddy Roosevelt. So I think that's a great trend; we just wish, of course, that every president wouldn't have to learn it all over again and start up the whole war machine every time there's a new occupant in the White House.

WOODS: Yeah, no kidding. Now, on the other hand, after he was out of office, he did seem to be stomping his feet quite a bit when it came to World War I and Woodrow Wilson. It's not clear to me what T.R. actually wanted Wilson to do or what he would have done in Wilson's position. Would he have intervened over the *Lusitania*? It's not really clear.

KINZER: It's not clear. I think he probably would have wanted to intervene more quickly than Wilson, because Teddy Roosevelt — and I learned this from immersing myself in his letters — truly believed that war is the only manly activity —

WOODS: Yeah. Ugh.

KINZER: — for a person and for a nation. And if you're not at war, you're really nothing. I found one letter in which he says, "I should welcome almost any war, for I think this country needs one." I even found a letter which he writes to Henry Cabot Lodge, his best friend, speculating on whether there might not be some way that we could get the Germans to bomb and burn some cities on the east coast of the U.S. in order to get the Americans into a more militaristic mood so we'd pay more money to build up our navy. So he's always looking around the world for who to kill, who to fight, where to make a war, and therefore, the fact that a war had broken out in Europe which became World War I probably would have been irresistible to Teddy Roosevelt.

WOODS: All right, let's go back, 1890s. What interests me also is the story of Grover Cleveland and Hawaii. There was obviously activity — there were a lot of interests that wanted to see Hawaii annexed to the U.S., and people behind that thought this would be just no problem. And then Grover Cleveland gets elected, and he basically tells them to go jump in a lake, because he believes that the government in Hawaii is not representative and that shenanigans have been going on for the purpose of getting Hawaii annexed, and he doesn't want to have any part of it.

When McKinley presides over the annexation of Hawaii, Cleveland — now, this I learned from your book. I hadn't known that Cleveland privately basically said I'm embarrassed by this whole thing. Well, what was this whole thing that he would be embarrassed by?

KINZER: Those presidents after the Civil War towards the end of the 19th century all tend to run together in our minds. They think, you know, we remember that there was Garfield and there was Chester A. Arthur and there was Grover Cleveland and Benjamin Harrison. They're all kind of a blur. But you're right; Grover Cleveland is the

exception. He should stand out in that group. First of all, he was the only Democrat that was elected president between the Civil War and World War I, really, and that was only by accident since there was a division in the Republican Party.

So when Grover Cleveland became president, the coup in Hawaii had been already consummated. So that took place in January of '93. A group of white planters with the cooperation and encouragement of the U.S. government had overthrown the Hawaiian monarchy and declared themselves the new government of Hawaii. And since they had received encouragement directly from President Benjamin Harrison, they expected to be taken into the U.S. right away. That was the whole plan — so they wouldn't have to pay tariffs on their sugar exports, and that way they could get rich. This was the whole concept behind it.

So lo and behold, there was a change of administration in Washington, and by the time the Senate was ready to vote to take Hawaii in, Grover Cleveland was president and he pulled that bill off the Senate calendar. Suddenly he said, We don't want Hawaii; we never should have had that coup in the first place. That was illegitimate, and we're not taking Hawaii. In fact, he even tried to re-establish the rule of the deposed queen, without success. But in any case, as long as Cleveland was president, he refused to allow Hawaii to become even a territory of the U.S., much less a state.

It became an independent country for five years, and the whole rationale was it's not correct for the United States, which was born as a colony, to take other colonies. The United States, as Cleveland argued, was based on the principle that all legitimate government comes from the consent of the governed; therefore, the United States cannot impose itself on any other nation. This argument held until Cleveland lost the next election and then there was the change of president, and then we did decide with the Philippines right out there and the Spanish-American war underway that we should take Hawaii. So that became the first overseas territory that became part of the United States.

And interestingly enough, the day the House of Representatives voted to consummate the taking of Hawaii, June 15th, 1898, was also the day of the first Anti-Imperialist League meeting in American history at Faneuil Hall in Boston. And that meeting and that coincidence of those two things happening on that same day, that is the opening scene in *The True Flag*, my new book. I shape my narrative around that opening day. Congress is debating for the first time whether to take an overseas territory and make it part of the U.S.; at the same time, people are gathered in Boston to hear for the first time in public in American history, the anti-imperialist counter-message.

WOODS: I think the anti-imperialists felt that once it became public knowledge what was going on in the Philippines and the sheer brutality in which their fellow Americans had been involved and had been connived at that it would just be a matter of time before Americans, appealing to their own principles, would stand up and resist this. And instead, most Americans, frankly, yawned at it. It wasn't even a political issue. Nobody even cared. And I think a lot of disillusionment set in.

And I think that's how a lot of opponents of intervention have felt throughout the 20th century, that if we could just reach that real American core at the pit of the American soul, we can get them to see the errors of this. And eventually, maybe you do get

them to see the errors of a particular intervention for practical reasons, but they're ready to stand up and cheer on the airplane for everybody in the military, and they really do basically believe in Teddy Roosevelt today as much as they did then. And I think there's disillusionment among a lot of people today.

You say at the end of your book it's pretty darn late, but it's not necessarily too late for America with its foreign policy, and yet, if it weren't for a few very isolated and muted voices like the Pauls or maybe Dennis Kucinich, who's almost invisible now, we wouldn't even be having these debates. Bernie Sanders was supposed to be non-interventionist, but he hardly mentioned foreign policy at all. We don't even have a foreign policy debate here. So where is the lingering optimism that leads you to give that last sentence? Where does that come from?

KINZER: I think Americans have never really made up our minds about how we want to approach the world. We're actually not such good imperialists. We didn't go into the imperial business with intention the way the British or the Belgians or the Spanish did. It sort of fell into our lap. Americans have always been people that like to command and to win and to dominate, so we love the prospect of overseas adventure, but I still think there's a profound dichotomy in our soul. We really want to guide the world, because we feel we have so much good to give the world. On the other hand, we also want every country to be free to guide itself. Now, those are contradictory impulses. You can't believe both. They're opposite. But we still believe them both, even though they're contradictory. We are interventionists; we're also isolationists. We really haven't figured out whether it's the right thing for America to do, and that's why these debates keep coming up about, every time we intervene, whether this is the right thing to do.

I actually think that in this sense, President Trump reflects something about America. Every time he has made a statement against intervention and regime change, he's contradicted with some other tweet on the other side. So in sort of a crude way, I think he really does reflect this. I feel there really is a constituency out there for a more prudent and restrained foreign policy. It has not in the modern era had a political or intellectual force that's been able to make it congeal and bring it into its full potential in American life, but I think it is out there, and that's why I'm sitting here banging my spoon on the highchair.

WOODS: Well, I'm doing the same thing. You know, each in his own way, and maybe one of these days we'll really crack through. Well, the book is *The True Flag: Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and the Birth of American Empire*. I'm linking to it on today's show notes page, TomWoods.com/854. Of course you can pick it up at Amazon, as well as through StephenKinzer.com, my guest's website. Stephen Kinzer, best of luck with this book. It's very important. It is a story that needs to be read, and it's a story that's told, I think, without sentimentality. It's told with the brutal realism that the subject demands, and I'm grateful that you did it. Thank you.

KINZER: Great to be with you, thanks.