

## Optional Reading: Poetry and Politics — “The White Man’s Burden”

Before the era of television and talk radio, newspapers and magazines were the main forums of political debate in the United States. Editorials, political cartoons, letters to the editors, and even poems were the primary vehicles of opinion. Ironically, the piece of writing that most influenced the debate on American imperialism was written by an Englishman, Rudyard Kipling. Kipling, whose novels enjoyed enormous popularity in the English-speaking world, was a strong supporter of British imperialism and the superiority of Western culture. In early 1899, Kipling composed a poem titled “The White Man’s Burden” that reflected his views on imperialism and race.

As Kipling had intended, “The White Man’s Burden” made an impact on the debate over the Treaty of Paris of 1898. The poem appeared in *McClure’s Magazine* only days before the Senate voted on the treaty and gained immediate attention from U.S. policymakers. In the Senate, the poem was frequently quoted in defense of the treaty. After the treaty was approved, “The White Man’s Burden” continued to spark controversy. Anti-imperialists published numerous responses to the poem, typically in poetic verse. Political cartoonists drew dozens of cartoons based on the images suggested by Kipling. Newspapers printed hundreds of letters to the editor prompted by Kipling’s views. Seldom has a work of art become such a political lightning rod. Below is the poem in its entirety.

### *The White Man’s Burden*

by Rudyard Kipling

Take up the White Man’s burden  
Send forth the best ye breed  
Go, bind 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  
The savage wars of peace  
Fill full the mouth of Famine,  
And bid the sickness cease;  
And when your goal is nearest  
(The end for others sought)  
Watch sloth and heathen folly  
Bring all your hope to naught.

Take up the White Man’s burden  
No iron rule of kings,  
But toil of serf and sweeper  
The tale of common things.

The ports ye shall not enter,  
The roads ye shall not tread,  
Go, make them with your living  
And mark them with your dead.

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!) toward the light:  
“Why brought ye us from bondage,  
Our loved Egyptian night?”

Take up the White Man’s burden  
Ye dare not stoop to less  
Nor call too loud on Freedom  
To cloak your weariness.  
By all ye will or whisper,  
By all ye leave or do,  
The silent sullen peoples  
Shall weigh your God and you.

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.

Pages 36 to 38 present three of the many poems that were written in response to "The White Man's Burden." As you will see, each brings a different perspective to the anti-imperialist cause.

### ***What Is The White Man's Burden?***

by David Greene Haskins, Jr.

What is the White Man's Burden?  
O Bard of England, say!  
Who laid it on his shoulders?  
Who traced his bloody way?  
Who gave into his power  
The millions o'er the sea?  
Dar'st thou to say Jehovah  
Has framed such dread decree?

What though ye toil and pray for  
An end for others sought;  
Yet woe to him who enters  
On fields where ye have wrought.  
The Russian burden-bearer  
Ye face with shell and ball,  
What time he looks on India  
Across the Afgan's wall.

Ye veil the threat of terror  
With cannon's smoky breath,  
From whose grim mouths your captives  
Are blown to horrid death.  
The show of pride — ah! brothers,  
Would ye see, as others can,  
Your bearing toward the weaker,  
Ask them of Hindostan.

Is freedom in the tropics  
Less dear than in the North?  
Would Bunker Hill, in Asia,  
Lose all its patriot worth?  
May haughty Saxon armies  
Sweep through the Eastern world,  
To civilize or murder,  
With bloody flags unfurled?

Go, search the blessed Gospels,  
And find us, if ye can,  
The white man's special warrant  
To hunt his fellow-man.

Proclaim your new beatitude,  
"Blessed are ye who slay  
For love and for humanity  
The Arab or Malay."

Am I my brother's keeper,  
To keep with bolt and chain,  
To civilize with grape-shot;  
A missionary Cain?  
Nay, Heaven forbid! no keeper  
Our weaker brethren crave.  
The Malay is our brother:  
He may not be our slave.

Call back the conquering armies,  
Call back the battle-ships;  
Nor preach a bloody gospel  
With hypocritic lips.  
'Tis not our God who calls us  
To conquest o'er the sea;  
Nor this the voice that sounded  
From far-off Galilee.

Take up a holier burden,  
Bring love and help and peace  
Among these sullen peoples,  
And bid the battle cease.  
Go, in the name of Freedom,  
And Freedom's mighty Lord.  
Go! Bear the cross among them,  
And not the gleaming sword!

Fair Mother, thou canst send us  
A message nobler far.  
Bring Runnymede before us,  
And not the Dervish war.  
We honor all thy virtues:  
We dare not, e'en from thee,  
Accept this evil counsel,  
The Christian pirate's plea.