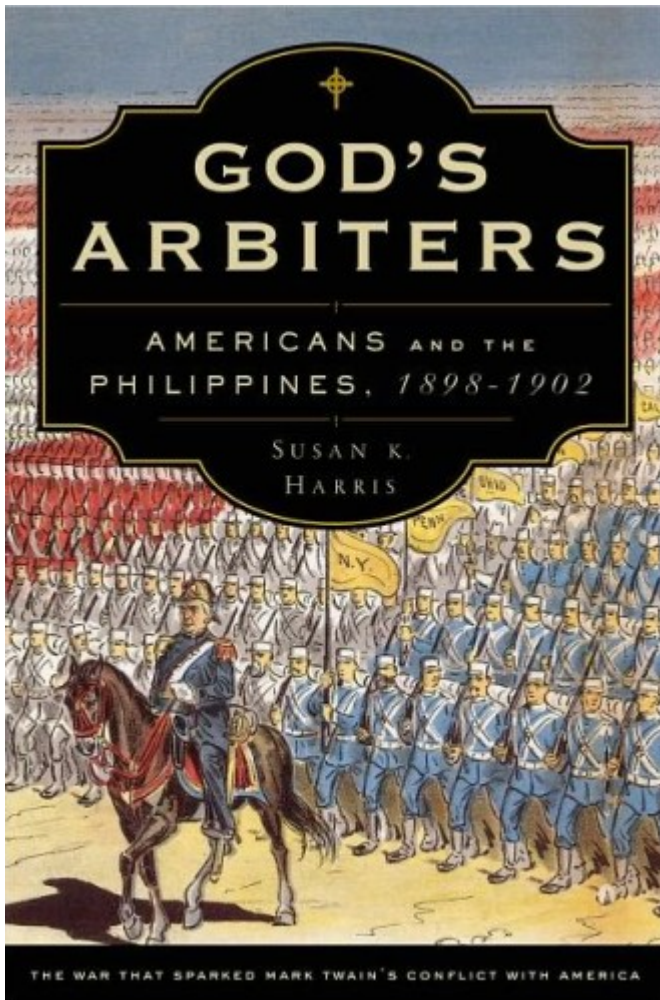


God's Arbiters, by Susan K. Harris

reviewed by [Harold K. Bush](#) in the [October 4, 2011](#) issue

In Review



God's Arbiters

By Susan K. Harris

Oxford University Press

Once upon a time, there was a large, wealthy and powerful country that wanted to help a smaller, struggling, powerless country find a pathway into a more stable,

democratic, freedom-loving and civilized future. The powerful nation believed that its ways were enlightened and progressive, motivated by the blessings and wisdom of Christendom; it considered the ways of the smaller nation superstitious, backward, unstable and violent.

Meanwhile, in smoky rooms removed from public inspection, certain wealthy leaders of industry pursued their own secret agendas—mainly the opening up of markets for expanding capitalist interests and the plundering of rich natural resources hidden away in the hinterlands of the much less technologically savvy nation, which they aimed to occupy and plunder. All these manipulations, of course, were masked by the propaganda of moral duty and "benevolent assimilation," terms much exploited at the time.

Does any of this sound familiar? I'm describing, perhaps surprisingly, the U.S. relationship with the Philippines just over a century ago. It involved the first of many major American interventions in Asia, during which atrocities and injustices took place under the banner of Christian civilization. Sadly, as Susan K. Harris points out in this intriguing study of America's rise as an imperial power, hardly any Americans today know about those events of yesteryear. The American annexation of the Philippines has been historically subsumed into the Spanish American War, which is itself nearly lost to the hazy selection processes of our collective memory. (The annexation of Hawaii at around the same time is another sad tale that nobody seems to know about.) When we think of these events at all, it still tends to be in terms of a "benevolent" intention to "uplift" and "Christianize" the "native" or "primitive" peoples—strategies that are still very much in play these days.

Most Americans reject the concept of American empire and know little or nothing about the nation's imperial traditions. Obstreperous polemicists who claim that the United States is historically a Christian nation ignore or deny the brutal political maneuverings of the past—including some, like the debacle of the Philippines, that were carried out specifically in the name of Christian mission and benevolence. President William McKinley claimed around the turn of the century, for instance, that the nation's goal was "to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them." Senator Albert Beveridge went further, claiming that the founders had intended that the United States become "the arbiter, under God, of the destinies of mankind." Good intentions, to be sure. But it is arrogant to claim that the United States should judge all nations as an arbiter, and as any number of recent volumes conclude, the concept of benevolent assimilation reeks of irony.

God's Arbiters reopens the closets concealing these dusty skeletons of our national past: it is an elaboration of the ideologies at work in the United States from roughly 1898 to 1902 that provided the means and motivation for imperial adventures undertaken under the banner of the Lord, as McKinley and many others asserted. Central beliefs and values called for an overlapping of religious and racial identities that has been a source of great confusion throughout U.S. history—and still is. One might think that Christian intellectuals would clarify this confusion and reject outright the idea that the United States is the site of the kingdom of God on earth. Instead, Christian leaders have often been the most vocal supporters of Christian-nation ideology. This despite the sheer heft of historical atrocities, not the least of which occurred in the Philippines, where promises were broken and treaties ignored and where women and children were murdered in the name of God and country.

Harris claims that for leaders of that era, *American* was basically code for white and Protestant—a debatable assertion that Harris backs up with much evidence: the political rhetoric of figures from McKinley to Beveridge, tinged with Anglo-Saxon supremacy; the sermons and editorials of outright racists like Thomas Dixon and a variety of more mainstream overseas missionaries; and history textbooks used by U.S. schoolchildren. Americans today are tired of hearing about racism, but very few understand the horrific depth of the problem, including the historical effects of what were mainstream Anglo-Saxon supremacist views.

God's Arbiters shows how religious bias, racial elitism and the ideology of American exceptionalism permeated those times from the top down. Filipinos were commonly depicted as a dark-skinned and primitive people, and their widespread embrace of Roman Catholicism was dismissed as pagan and superstitious, a clear sign of their immaturity as a race. The volume is handsomely illustrated with a variety of graphics as well, many of them political cartoons illustrating the sickening racial overtones of the nationalisms of that period.

Harris commences with a striking anecdote: Mark Twain, arriving back in the United States in October 1900 after several years abroad, announced in his first interview, "I am an anti-imperialist." Twain admitted that when he left American shores four years earlier, he had been a "red-hot imperialist. . . . I wanted the American eagle to go screaming into the Pacific." Why the dramatic change? Here Harris, author of two books and many articles on Mark Twain, is in top form. In her able telling, Twain was a man on a mission. He had become a critic of the very ideology to which he had long been captive: the grand narrative of American supremacy and conquest.

As horror and betrayal unfolded in the Philippines, Twain read widely about the events and decided that the America he believed in had betrayed its founding principles. He was particularly disturbed by the U.S. refusal to honor Philippine independence, by the dubious origins of the Battle of Manila Bay in 1899, by America's betrayal of the first elected Philippine president, Emilio Aguinaldo (the leader of the freedom movement, whom Twain considered a hero on the order of George Washington), and by the brutal installation of an American regime headed initially by William Howard Taft, later to become U.S. president. Twain was also inflamed by the irony of the U.S. dismissal of Aguinaldo's "declaration of independence," which presumably reflected America's dearest ideal. Twain's protest takes the form of a jeremiad; he is not a hater of America (as protesters are often caricatured), but a great lover of all that America can and should represent to the world.

Many other stories here will rouse the curiosity of literary scholars and cultural historians. Beveridge is one of the most interesting political leaders of our history, yet his name is largely forgotten. A wonderful yet brief section covers the humorous 1902 novel *Captain Jinks, Hero*, by Ernest Crosby, which satirizes the rhetoric of benevolence. Harris also analyzes the pietistic novel *In His Steps* (1896), by the minister Charles Sheldon, and such completely forgotten memoirs as those by Frank Steward and Mary H. Fee. All these texts, says Harris, are filled with the sinister undertones of American ideologies.

In her concluding comments, Harris proves once again that Mark Twain's observations were often uncanny in their prescience. Perhaps most telling was his use of the term *quagmire* to describe what was developing in the Philippines: it was "a quagmire from which each fresh step renders the difficulty of extraction immensely greater." Twain, says Harris, was the first and most important progenitor of a grand comic tradition critiquing American imperial arrogance, a tradition that is laced with satire and irony and leads directly to the likes of today's Onion publication and Jon Stewart.

For a very long time, Americans have resisted recognizing and confronting their imperial impulses and admitting to the massive footprints they've left here and there around the globe. Harris's timely study reveals that these footprints have deep historical and ideological roots.

Americans continue to justify the nation's military adventures by invoking God, progress and the "benevolent" desires of "God's arbiters," who have been appointed

to mediate the destinies of humankind and to bring light to a darkened world. Some things, evidently, never do change.