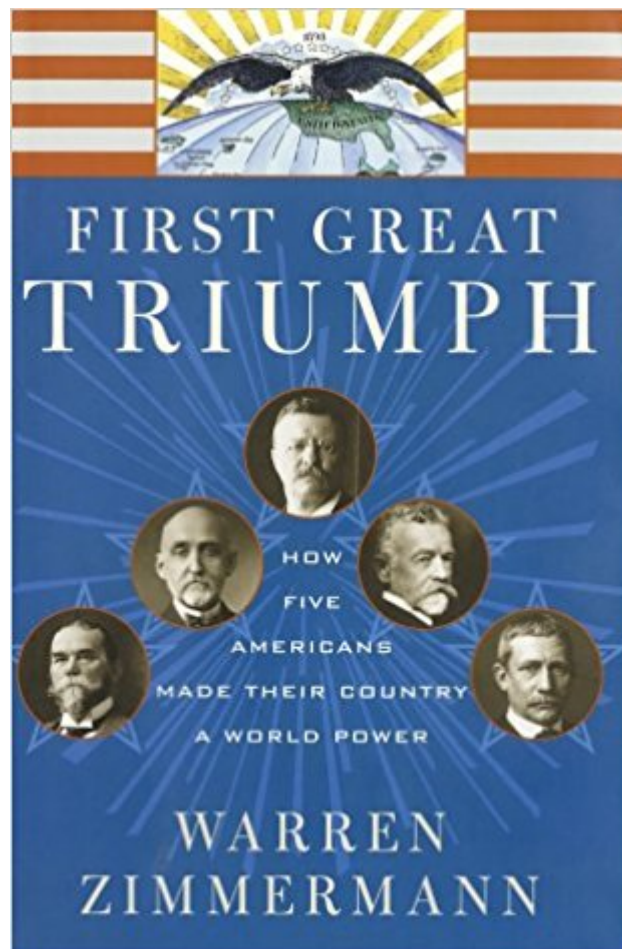




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First Great Triumph: How Five Americans Made Their Country A World Power



Synopsis

“We were sure that we would win, that we should score the first great triumph in a mighty world-movement.” Theodore Roosevelt, 1904 Americans like to think they have no imperial past. In fact, the United States became an imperial nation within five short years a century ago (1898-1903), exploding onto the international scene with the conquest of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, and (indirectly) Panama. How did the nation become a player in world politics so suddenly—and what inspired the move toward imperialism in the first place? The renowned diplomat and writer Warren Zimmermann seeks answers in the lives and relationships of five remarkable figures: the hyper-energetic Theodore Roosevelt, the ascetic naval strategist Alfred T. Mahan, the bigoted and wily Henry Cabot Lodge, the self-doubting moderate Secretary of State John Hay, and the hard-edged corporate lawyer turned colonial administrator Elihu Root. Faced with difficult choices, these extraordinary men, all close friends, instituted new political and diplomatic policies with intermittent audacity, arrogance, generosity, paternalism, and vision. Zimmermann’s discerning account of these five men also examines the ways they exploited the readiness of the American people to support a surge of expansion overseas. He makes it clear why no discussion of America’s international responsibilities today can be complete without understanding how the United States claimed its global powers a century ago.

Book Information

Hardcover: 576 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1st edition (October 21, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374179395

ISBN-13: 978-0374179397

Product Dimensions: 9.2 x 6.3 x 1.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 27 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #538,904 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #189 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Reference & Collections #5445 in Books > History > Military > United States #5751 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > United States

Customer Reviews

Like Louis Menand’s *The Metaphysical Club*, Zimmermann’s account takes its readers deep into a small, captivating circle of figures instrumental in shaping American thought and history: in this

case, the five men most responsible for making the United States a major player on the international stage at the start of the 20th century. The key players are Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge (Republican senator from Massachusetts), John Hay (enigmatic secretary of state to McKinley and TR), Elihu Root (hard-edged New York corporate attorney, later to serve as a gruffly paternalistic colonial administrator), and naval strategist Admiral Alfred T. Mahan. Mahan, perhaps the least well-known of the five, emerges as the group's touchstone. An ardent admirer of the standing British fleet and the British colonial system it helped police, Mahan believed the United States should institute similar military might to help administer an American world view. He aggressively lobbied for the establishment and maintenance of a large, well-funded navy and for strict enforcement of the Monroe Doctrine, with U.S. domination of such strategically important outposts as Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Guam. In this fascinating and engaging account, Zimmermann (*Origins of Catastrophe: Yugoslavia and Its Destroyers*), a former U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia), does a brilliant job of showing how Mahan's views enabled the United States to bootstrap up to the status of world colonial power within the short space of just five years, from 1898 to 1903. Illus. not seen by PW. (Oct.) Forecast: The readers who made *The Metaphysical Club* and *Theodore Rex* bestsellers are the ideal audience for this outstanding history; if they learn of the book, expect healthy sales. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

America's preeminence as a superpower has its roots in how corporate lawyer Elihu Root, naval strategist Alfred T. Mahan, U.S. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Secretary of State John Hay, and politician Theodore Roosevelt led the nation in articulating and shaping American imperialism. A career diplomat and a former ambassador to Yugoslavia, Zimmermann (*Columbia Univ. and Johns Hopkins; Origins of a Catastrophe*) argues that the "consequences right up to today" of American expansionism between the 1880s and 1910s "owes a great deal to" the five fathers of modern American imperialism. Part one comprises the biographies of these architects of an aggressive imperialist policy, and part two narrates mainly the war against Spain and TR's presidency. Zimmermann admirably presents complex individuals and their extremely complex historical era in a manner accessible to the layperson. This readable, richly detailed, scholarly work, based on primary and secondary sources, is rewarding to readers who want more than an introductory historical treatment of the origins of today's American foreign policy. Highly recommended for academic and public libraries. Charles L. Lumpkins, Pennsylvania State Univ., State College Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This book is an ambitious work which not only combines biography and history, but which depicts the biographies of 5 people intertwined in a sweeping and important period of American history. To the author's credit, he succeeds in weaving this all together in a highly coherent and insightful manner which does justice to and provides fair analysis on its subjects and historical period. This book is rooted in an extensive and rich bibliography, and the author's background as a diplomat provides keen perspective on the international relations of the period's events. I would give this book 4.5 stars if I could, but I enjoyed it so much I round it up. There are some very minor flaws which, if corrected in a second edition, would result in self-contained perfection. First, there are a couple grammatical errors in the early chapters (ex, "a friend of Roosevelt's" should be "a friend of Roosevelt"), which the editor should have corrected. The second issue is the author, who succeeds in writing highly-cited analysis, makes flippant, uncited, and incorrect remarks about 19th century robber baron Jay Gould, who modern historians have shown to be no more evil and no more altruistic than any other baron from his era (again for the editor to catch). The third problem is, in the conclusion of the book, the author soils what is a timeless analysis on timeless subject matter with references to fleeting issues which took place at the time of his writing, around 2003, which, particularly in hindsight, pale in importance, influence and relevance to the grand themes and events he dedicates 500 pages to discussing. This book is serious subject matter for a serious reader; it begins with the life stories of Theodore Roosevelt, Alfred Mahan, Elihu Root, Henry Cabot Lodge and John Hay before picking up momentum with a narrative of the context and events of 1898 and beyond. However, the care the author takes to be as brief and focused as possible comes across and is well done, and the 500 pages it takes to tell this story is a testament to the subject matter's ginormous scope. I highly recommend this work for an interested student of this period in American history.

I chose this book to better grasp the history of US foreign policy in order to understand the problems faced by this country and the world today. Mr. Zimmerman provides an excellent resource demonstrating the introduction of human rights and the human condition into US policies along with the glaring contradictions of the social conscience of the day. There is no sugar coating of the bitter and senseless injustices committed on behalf of the expansionist and imperialist aims, nor are these abuses justified by Mr. Zimmerman in historical interpretation, but explained in terms of how historical leaders justified their own thinking. In addition, the reader is presented with the birth of the US as a world power and the problems faced in addressing the often conflicting goals of "dynamic" democracy and "static" stability in its growing sphere of influence. The book offers a historical

foundation for understanding the necessity of a strong Executive Branch in consistent and coherent foreign policy while the world is still adjusting to the vacuum of the collapse of the Soviet Union and facing the challenges economic globalization.

Fantastic book. Well written, and I like the style of telling each of the five mini-biographies separately then moving to show how they all combined to have such an impact on world events.

This book presents a clear and concise overview of how the United States "had" to transform itself into a world power. The five men that Zimmermann brings to us are rather flawed in their own way as individuals, as are most great leaders, but, collectively they formed a remarkable alliance that resulted in the birth of a superpower. Anyone that desires to learn more about how a military, and indeed a nation's foreign policy, can be transformed should read "First Great Triumph", for it surely was that. The synergy that was gained, as a result of these five very different individuals somehow uniting, could not have come at a better time in our history.

This is a great book about a little known and less studied period of American history---- the time between the Spanish American War and WW1. It also deals with some great American statesman who didn't become president. This was a time in history that America began to emerge as a legitimate world power. The building of the navy and development of modern Naval war tactics under Alfred Mahan is greatly discussed. In my study of American history three more names kept coming up regularly in this period: Henry Cabot Lodge, John Hay and Elihu Root. All three men had long distinguished careers in the senate and various cabinet positions and all three men were involved in decisions that lead America through the Spanish American War, dealing with the territories we acquired from that war and how America finally came to be the world power it was meant to be

This is a superb synthesis by a seasoned foreign service officer. The prose is crisp and engaging and the historical analysis is sound -- occasionally profound. I was a bit skeptical about his "history by biography" approach to the subject, tying the implementation of American imperialism to a small cohort surrounding Theodore Roosevelt, but in the end I became a believer. My only quibble is that Zimmermann tends to go about subjects only tangentially related to this era and subject.

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