**The Boxer Rebellion**

**Spheres of Influence**



Canton, China: seawall and harbor crowded with sampans, c. 1895

[Background of Ch'ing   
(Qing) Dynasty](http://factsanddetails.com/china.php?itemid=57)

Maps of China:   
[Large one](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/china.gif)  
[Smaller maps of China](http://www.immigration-usa.com/maps/china_map.html)  
[Another small map](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/cia01/china_sm01.jpg)

Throughout the nineteenth century, China's emperors had watched as foreigners encroached further and further upon their land. Time and again, foreigners forced China to make humiliating concessions. Foreign regiments, armed with modern weapons, consistently defeated entire imperial armies. Now, as a new century was about to begin, Tsu Hsi, empress dowager of the Ch'ing Dynasty, searched for a way to rid her empire of foreign parasites.



John Hay

Text of John Hay's   
[First Open Door Note](http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/documents/1876-1900/john-hay-to-andrew-d-white-first-open-door-note-september-6-1899.php)

Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, and Russia all claimed exclusive trading rights to certain parts of China. They were dividing China into "spheres of influence." Some even claimed to own the territory within their spheres. By acquiring the Philippines, the United States became an Asian power too. Now, with a strong base of operations just 400 miles from China, American businesses hoped to take advantage of China's vast resources. The foreign spheres of influence, however, threatened their ambitions.

So while the empress was hoping to close China to foreigners, Americans were looking for a way in. John Hay, now Secretary of State, had an idea. Since public opinion, strained by the Philippines war, would never support the use of force, he decided to negotiate. He sent letters to all the foreign powers and suggested an "Open Door" policy in China. This policy would guarantee equal trading rights for all and prevent one nation from discriminating against another within its sphere.

The nations replied that they liked the concept of the Open Door, but that they could not support or enforce it. Hay's plan had been politely rejected. Nevertheless Hay announced that since all of the powers had accepted the Open Door in principle, the United States considered their agreement "final and definitive."

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**Fists of Righteous Harmony**

While the outside powers bickered over who would control China, Tsu Hsi issued an imperial message to all the Chinese provinces.



Empress Dowager   
Tsu Hsi

The present situation is becoming daily more difficult. The various Powers cast upon us looks of tiger-like voracity, hustling each other to be first to seize our innermost territories. . . . Should the strong enemies become aggressive and press us to consent to things we can never accept, we have no alternative but to rely upon the justice of our cause. . . . If our . . . hundreds of millions of inhabitants . . . would prove their loyalty to their emperor and love of their country, what is there to fear from any invader? Let us not think about making peace.

In northern Shandong province, a devastating drought was pushing people to the edge of starvation. Few people there were thinking about making peace. A secret society, known as the Fists of Righteous Harmony, attracted thousands of followers. Foreigners called members of this society "Boxers" because they practiced martial arts. The Boxers also believed that they had a magical power, and that foreign bullets could not harm them. Millions of "spirit soldiers," they said, would soon rise from the dead and join their cause.



A "Boxer" in 1900

Their cause, at first, was to overthrow the imperial Ch'ing government and expel all "foreign devils" from China. The crafty empress, however, saw a way to use the Boxers. Through her ministers, she began to encourage the Boxers. Soon a new slogan—"Support the Ch'ing; destroy the foreigner!"—appeared upon the Boxers' banner.

In the early months of 1900, thousands of Boxers roamed the countryside. They attacked Christian missions, slaughtering foreign missionaries and Chinese converts. Then they moved toward the cities, attracting more and more followers as they came. Nervous foreign ministers insisted that the Chinese government stop the Boxers. From inside the Forbidden City, the empress told the diplomats that her troops would soon crush the "rebellion." Meanwhile, she did nothing as the Boxers entered the capital.

Foreign diplomats, their families, and staff lived in a compound just outside the Forbidden City's walls in the heart of Beijing. Working together, they threw up hasty defenses, and with a small force of military personnel, they faced the Boxer onslaught. One American described the scene as 20,000 Boxers

advanced in a solid mass and carried standards of red and white cloth. Their yells were deafening, while the roar of gongs, drums and horns sounded like thunder. . . . They waved their swords and stamped on the ground with their feet. They wore red turbans, sashes, and garters over blue cloth. [When] they were only twenty yards from our gate, . . . three volleys from the rifles of our sailors left more than fifty dead upon the ground.



Artillery of International   
Relief Force to   
Beijing, 1900

[Concise Political History   
of China,](http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts/chinhist.html)including more   
about the Empress   
Dowager and   
the Boxer Rebellion   
(Scroll about halfway   
down the page to   
get to the section   
about Tsu Hsi.)

The Boxers fell back but soon returned. Surrounded, the foreigners could neither escape nor send for help. For almost two months, they withstood fierce attacks and bombardment. Things began to look hopeless. Seventy-six defenders lay dead, and many more were wounded. Ammunition, food, and medical supplies were almost gone. Then, shortly before dawn, loud explosions rocked the city. Weary defenders staggered to the barricades, expecting a final, overpowering Boxer attack. But as a column of armed men approached them, they began to cheer. Help had arrived at last.

After a month of no news from their diplomats, the foreign powers had grown worried. They assembled an international relief force of soldiers and sailors from eight countries. The United States, eager to rescue its ministers and to assert its presence in China, sent a contingent of 2,500 sailors and marines. After rescuing another besieged delegation in Tientsin, the international force marched to Beijing, fighting Boxers and imperial soldiers along the way.

The international troops looted the capital and even ransacked the Forbidden City. Disguised as a peasant, the empress dowager escaped the city in a cart. She returned to the Forbidden City a year later, but the power of the Ch'ing dynasty was destroyed forever.

Because it had participated in the campaign, the United States participated in the settlement that followed. Hay called for an expanded "Open Door," not only within the spheres of influence, but in all parts of China. He also recommended that the powers preserve China's territory and its government. Other powers agreed, and the Open Door policy allowed foreign access to China's market until World War II closed it once again.

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**The Panama Canal**

**President Roosevelt**



Panama Canal: Culebra Cut, c. 1910-1920

see [President McKinley   
speaking](javascript:SE_images('imperialism_mckinley.html');) at the   
Pan-American Exposition

The popular acclaim that carried Teddy Roosevelt to the governorship of New York didn't stop there. In 1900, Republicans nominated Teddy as President McKinley's running mate. McKinley won a second term, and Teddy was sworn in as vice-president. Six months later, an assassin's bullet killed McKinley. At age 42, Theodore Roosevelt became the nation's youngest president.

Teddy Roosevelt's   
[Inaugural Address](http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres42.html)

Maps of Panama:   
[Access to information and   
maps about Panama](http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/map/map-day/2008/05/02)

[Large relief map](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas/panama_relief.jpg)

Roosevelt assumed the office with the same vigor with which he charged up Kettle Hill. A long believer in Captain Mahan's theory of sea power, Roosevelt began to revitalize the navy. Now that America's empire stretched from the Caribbean across the Pacific, the old idea of a canal between the two oceans took on new urgency. Mahan had predicted that "the canal will become a strategic center of the most vital importance," and Teddy agreed.

"The canal," Roosevelt said, "was by far the most important action I took in foreign affairs during the time I was President. When nobody could or would exercise efficient authority, I exercised it."

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**Joining the Waters**



Abandoned French   
machinery in Panama,   
c. 1910-1914

In 1878 Ferdinand de Lesseps, the French engineer who built the Suez Canal, began to dig a canal across the Isthmus of Panama, which was then part of Colombia. Tropical disease and engineering problems halted construction on the canal, but a French business (the New Panama Canal Company) still held the rights to the project. Roosevelt agreed to pay $40 million for the rights, and he began to negotiate with Colombia for control of the land. He offered $10 million for a fifty-mile strip across the isthmus. Colombia refused.

"We were dealing with a government of irresponsible bandits," Roosevelt stormed. "I was prepared to . . . at once occupy the Isthmus anyhow, and proceed to dig the canal. But I deemed it likely that there would be a revolution in Panama soon."

Teddy was right. The chief engineer of the New Panama Canal Company organized a local revolt. Roosevelt immediately sent the battleship *Nashville* and a detachment of marines to Panama to support the new government. The rebels gladly accepted Roosevelt's $10 million offer, and they gave the United States complete control of a ten-mile wide canal zone.

Biographical info about   
[Osmund Osmundsen,](http://www.mindspring.com/~artanderson/index.html) a   
Norwegian immigrant who   
worked as a ship rigger   
during the building of   
the canal. Includes   
historical photos

Roosevelt ordered army engineers to start digging. Thousands of workers sweated in the malarial heat. They tore up jungles and cut down mountains. Insects thrived in muddy, stagnant pools. "Mosquitoes get so thick you get a mouthful with every breath," a worker complained. The mosquitoes also carried yellow fever, and many fell victim to the deadly disease before Dr. William Gorgas found a way to stop it.



Steam shovels digging   
the Panama Canal

Some Americans did not approve of Roosevelt's behavior. "There was much accusation about my having acted in an 'unconstitutional' manner," Teddy shrugged. "I took the isthmus, started the canal, and then left Congress—not to debate the canal, but to debate me. . . . While the debate goes on, the canal does too; and they are welcome to debate me as long as they wish, provided that we can go on with the canal."

Smithsonian Institution's   
["Make the Dirt Fly"](http://www.sil.si.edu/Exhibitions/Make-the-Dirt-Fly/)   
Panama Canal exhibition

[TR Papers](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/trhtml/trhome.html) at the   
Library of Congress

Work did go on. Despite lethal landslides, workers with dynamite and clumsy steam shovels cut their way across a continent. They built a railroad, three sets of concrete locks, and a huge artificial lake. Nine years later the freighter *Ancon*entered the new channel. Hundreds of construction workers hopped aboard for the historic ride. A shiny towing locomotive pulled the *Ancon* into the first lock. Bands played and crowds cheered as the ship slipped into the Pacific.

Roosevelt liked to repeat an old African saying: "Speak softly, and carry a big stick. You will go far." In Panama, Teddy proved to the world that he was willing to use his big navy as a stick to further American interests.

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**U.S. Intervention in Latin America**

**Teddy's Legacy**



Main business street, Domingo City, San Domingo, c. 1901. The Dominican   
Republic was another site of U.S. intervention in the early 1900s.

[Time line](http://faculty.chass.ncsu.edu/griffin/ps543/Timeline%20of%20US-Latin%20American%20Relations%20since%201823.htm) of U.S.   
intervention in   
Latin America

The Monroe Doctrine:

[Text](http://www.ushistory.org/documents/monroe.htm) (plus some   
background information)

[Brief analysis](http://history.state.gov/milestones/1801-1829/Monroe) of doctrine

[Roosevelt Corollary](http://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/RooseveltandMonroeDoctrine)

Between the end of the Spanish-American War and the dawn of the Great Depression, the United States sent troops to Latin American countries thirty-two times. It used the Roosevelt Corollary, or addition, to the Monroe Doctrine to justify intervention. In the corollary, Teddy Roosevelt proclaimed that the United States, because it was a "civilized nation," had the right to stop "chronic wrongdoing" throughout the Western Hemisphere.

"Any country whose people conduct themselves well can count upon our hearty friendship," he said. "Chronic wrongdoing, however, . . . may force the United States to exercise an international police power." Teddy didn't hesitate to use this "police power" to strengthen his country, but he was always careful not to upset the balance of world power.

William Howard Taft, former governor of the Philippines, followed Roosevelt into the White House. Taft believed in economic expansion, and he introduced a policy called "dollar diplomacy." This policy used diplomacy to advance and protect American businesses in other countries. Taft employed Roosevelt's corollary in Nicaragua and other Latin American countries to protect American investments.

Maps of Nicaragua:

[Large map](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas/nicaragua.gif)

[Smaller map](http://www.merriam-webster.com/cgi-bin/nytmaps.pl?nicaragua)of   
Nicaragua with   
geographical facts

Another[map](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/nicaragua)



"Commodore"   
Cornelius Vanderbilt

More about [William   
Walker,](http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist1/walker.html) including a   
picture

American businesses had been active in Nicaragua since the 1850s. The lush country attracted American fruit growers and mining companies. Others believed that Nicaragua offered the best site for a canal, and they invested in land. Cornelius Vanderbilt started a company that transported passengers between New York and San Francisco via the Nicaraguan jungle. Shortly after Commodore Perry opened Japan, Vanderbilt plotted to take control of Nicaragua.

With Vanderbilt's help, a young adventurer named William Walker set out with fifty-seven followers to conquer Nicaragua. A short, freckled man with sharp green eyes, Walker formed an alliance with a group of local rebels and defeated the Nicaraguan forces. He proclaimed himself "commander in chief," and soon thousands of Americans rushed into the country. Many Americans wanted the United States to assume direct control of Nicaragua. The government, however, was afraid to upset the fragile balance between "free" and "slave" territories.

Walker eventually quarreled with Vanderbilt about the transit company, and soon another revolution drove him from power. In 1860 Walker died before a firing squad. American economic involvement in Nicaragua lived on.

[Foreign Intervention in   
Nicaragua, 1850-68](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+ni0017))   
(Library of Congress)   
[(Index)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/nitoc.html#ni0000)

More about [Adolfo Diaz.](http://lal.tulane.edu/collections/manuscripts/diaz)

General information   
about Nicaragua:

[Nicaragua Profile](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+ni0004))  
(Library of Congress)

[Background Notes:   
Nicaragua](http://www.state.gov/www/background_notes/nicar_0009_bgn.html)

Nicaraguans confidently expected the canal, and they gladly accepted loans and payments based on its eventual construction. By 1909 the United States-Nicaraguan Concession was largest American company in Nicaragua. That year the Concession's chief legal counsel, Philander C. Knox, resigned to become Taft's Secretary of State. When Nicaragua's ruler cancelled an agreement with one American business and threatened the Concession, the company organized another revolution. Adolfo Diaz, a Concession employee, became the new president. Taft quickly recognized the Diaz government.

When still another revolt threatened Diaz, Taft invoked the corollary and ordered American marines to suppress the rebellion. Then he and Knox worked out a plan to collect the money that Nicaragua owed to foreign investors. Under the plan, American banks took control of Nicaragua's customs collection. They applied the money they collected directly to the country's debt. The marines remained in Nicaragua's capital to serve as "international police" and prevent any further revolts. Except for a short period in 1925, they stayed for 21 years.

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**The End of an Era**

The two decades that sandwiched the turning of the century enclosed a turning point in American history. Despite George Washington's advice to the contrary, the years saw American interests scatter across the globe. America had flexed its muscles, and the world had cowered. But the ease with which America gained its new possessions obscured the responsibilities that came with them. Dollar diplomacy would soon drag a reluctant America into the muddy trenches of the Western Front. The "Open Door" welcomed a series of squabbles that later erupted in a mushroom cloud. But few in that innocent era could foresee such extraordinary events. Most believed that America was simply following its natural order, its destiny.