

# The Birth of the American Empire as Seen Through Political Cartoons (1896-1905)

## Objectives

This exercise seeks to interpret and analyze the symbolic contents of six political cartoons published in the United States during the juncture and aftermath of the Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War. Cartoons such as these are important historical documents that allow us to understand the political opinions of the artists who produced them and the editorial messages that they tried to convey to influence public opinion. These cartoons also allow us to identify the symbols used to represent the peoples of the countries affected by the war: the United States, Spain, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and others. Many of these symbols reflect deep-seated attitudes that, to some extent, still prevail a century later. Irony marks some of the cartoons; they include a surface message alongside an often contrasting underlying goal.

These cartoons are reprinted from the book *Latin America in Caricature* by John J. Johnson, which provides a broader treatment of representations of Latin America in editorial cartoons of the United States press. A Spanish language version of this exercise appeared in my book *Historia de Puerto Rico: Cuaderno de ejercicios y actividades*.

## Preparation

As preparation for this exercise, students should be familiar with a basic chronology of events, including the beginning of the Cuban insurrection in 1895, the entry of the United States into the conflict in 1898, and the end of the U.S. military occupation of Cuba in 1902. They should also be familiar with the various theaters of the war and the different post-war trajectories of the various insular territories.

The instructor may want to make transparencies or handouts of the six cartoons that will be used for the class discussion. The following questions may be used as a guide for the discussion.

## Discussion Questions

A. What roles has the artist assigned to each of the countries in Cartoon 1? What symbolic elements does he use to characterize each of the three countries? In what direction is the artist hoping to influence public opinion in the context of 1896?

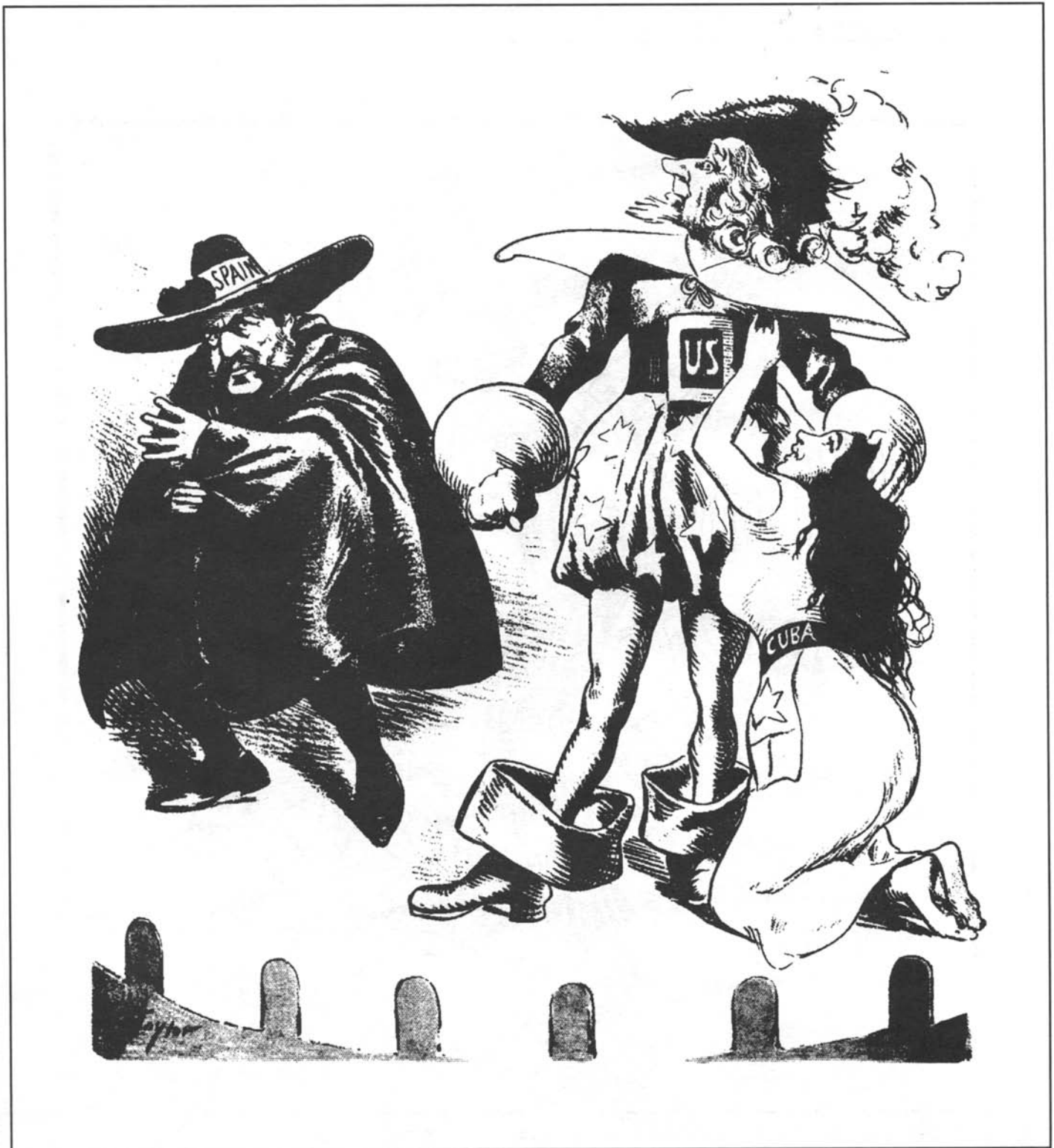
B. Cartoons 2 and 3 date to 1898, shortly after the end of the war. What symbols are used to represent the various nations involved in the unfolding drama of the birth of the American empire? What is the significance of these symbols and how do they contrast with the portrayal of Cuba in Cartoons 1 and 4? Compare the ostensible editorial intentions behind Cartoons 2 and 3. Is there a contrasting underlying message in Cartoon 3? Explain.

C. In Cartoon 4, as well as in Cartoon 1, a woman represents Cuba. What is the significance of this symbol? What is the significance of Cuba being represented as white and attractive or voluptuous? Explain the apparent intention of the artist producing Cartoon 4 in the context of 1901, when the Spanish troops had left Cuba and the United States continued its military occupation of the island.

D. Cartoon 5 represents Cuba entering its second year of independence. How is Cuba characterized? What do you suppose is the artist's attitude toward the possibility of Cuba being annexed as a state of the United States? What symbols does the artist use to represent stability, order, prosperity?

E. Cartoon 6 dates to 1905 and purports to contrast Cuba and Puerto Rico after Spanish colonialism. What symbols are used to create the contrast? Note the racial representation of both islands. What is the historical context behind these seemingly opposite outcomes?

# CARTOON 1



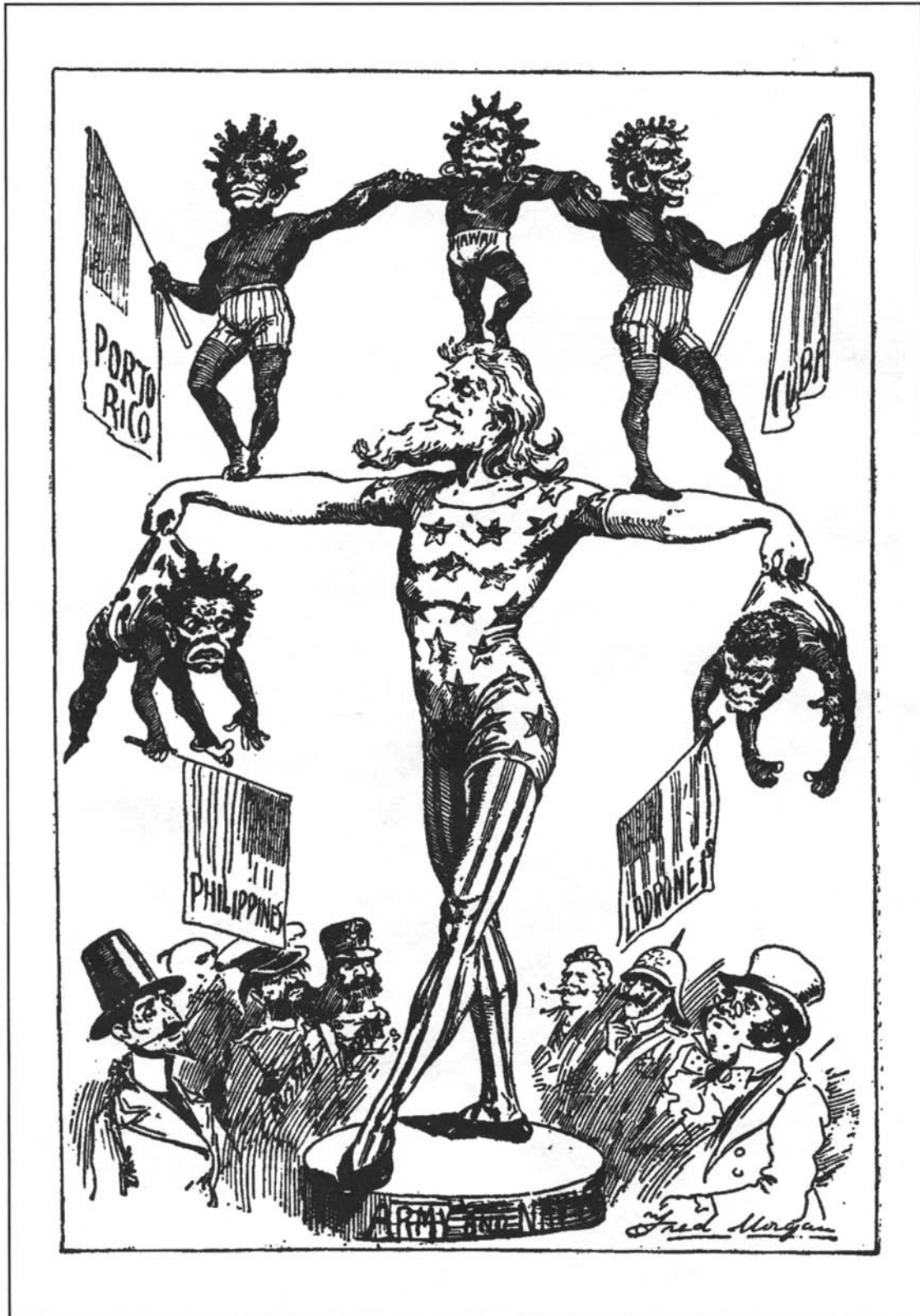
Cartoon 1. The Cuban Melodrama. THE NOBLE HERO (to the HEAVY VILLAIN): "Stand back, there, gol darn ye!—If you force this thing to a fifth act, remember that's where I git in my work!" (C. Jay Taylor, *Puck*, 3 June 1896.)

CARTOON2



Cartoon 2. How Some Apprehensive People Picture Uncle Sam after the War. (*Detroit News*, 1898.)

CARTOON 3



Cartoon 3. JOHN BULL: "It's really most extraordinary what training will do. Why, only the other day I thought that man unable to support himself." (Fred Morgan, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1898.)

CARTOON 4



Cartoon 4. Miss Cuba Receives an Invitation. MISS COLUMBIA (to her fair neighbor): "Won't you join the stars and be my forty-sixth?" (Chicago Record-Herald, 1901.)

CARTOON 5



Cartoon 5. After the First Mile. (W. L. Evans, *Cleveland Leader*, 1903.)

CARTOON 6



Cartoon 6. UNCLE SAM TO PORTO RICO: "And to think that bad boy came near being your brother!" (Chicago Inter Ocean, 1905.)