Reading Focus

• What early steps did the United States take toward expansion in the Pacific?
• What were the causes of imperialism?
• How did the United States take over Samoa and Hawaii?
• How did Americans protect their trade with China?

Key Terms
- isolationism
- expansionism
- Treaty of Kanagawa
- annex
- imperialism
- racism
- Great White Fleet
- sphere of influence
- Open Door Policy
- Boxer Rebellion

Taking Notes
Copy the concept web below. As you read, fill in the blank ovals with information about United States involvement in the Pacific. Add as many ovals as you need.

Main Idea  At the end of the 1800s, the United States became a world power, acquiring new territories in the Pacific and the Caribbean.

Setting the Scene  A tiny fleet of American ships sailed slowly out of Key West, Florida. Most of the ships had been built years before. Some were made of wood. “Two modern vessels of war,” said a future admiral, “would have [destroyed us] in thirty minutes.”

In the mid-1870s, the United States Navy ranked twelfth in the world, behind Denmark and Chile. Then, the nation began to build up its navy. By 1896, there were more than 10,000 American sailors in uniform and the navy ranked fifth in the world, with steel-plated battleships powered by steam. The expansion of the navy was but one sign that the United States was becoming a world power.

Isolation and Expansion

In his Farewell Address, George Washington had advised the nation to have little to do with the political affairs of other nations. Later Presidents continued this policy of isolationism. Americans had no wish to be dragged into Europe’s frequent wars.

Early Expansion Yet, from its earliest existence, the American republic had also followed a policy of expansionism, or extending its national boundaries. Americans were constantly pressing westward across the continent.

At the same time, Americans conducted a lively foreign trade. Merchant ships carried American goods to Europe, as well as to Asian nations such as China. The island nation of Japan, however, refused to open its doors to American trade.

The Opening of Japan  Fearing outsiders, Japanese rulers had cut themselves off from the world in the 1600s. They expelled all westerners. Only a few Dutch merchants were permitted to trade once a year at the port of Nagasaki. Any foreign sailors who were wrecked on the shores of Japan were not allowed to leave.
Americans wanted Japan to open its ports to trade, as well as to help shipwrecked sailors. To achieve these goals, President Millard Fillmore sent Commodore Matthew Perry to Japan. Perry entered Tokyo Bay with four warships in July 1853. The Japanese had never seen steam-powered ships.

Japanese rulers ordered the Americans to leave. Before departing, though, Perry presented Japanese officials with a letter from President Fillmore. It asked the Japanese to open trading relations with the United States. Perry said he would return the following year for an answer.

Perry returned in February 1854, this time with seven warships. Impressed by this show of strength, the Japanese emperor signed the Treaty of Kanagawa. In the treaty, Japan accepted demands to help shipwrecked sailors. It also opened two ports to American trade.

Perry’s visit launched trade between Japan and the West. It also made the Japanese aware of the power of the western industrial nations. Japan soon set out to become a modern industrial nation itself, with the United States as one of its models.

**Seward Looks to the Pacific**

American interest in Asia and the Pacific continued. In the 1860s, Secretary of State William Seward wanted the United States to dominate trade in the Pacific. In 1867, he persuaded Congress to annex, or take over, Midway Island, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The island became part of the United States. Seward also made a bold deal to buy the vast territory of Alaska from Russia.

**The Land Deal of the Century** Seward saw Alaska as an important stepping stone for increasing United States trade in Asia and the Pacific. For their part, the Russians were eager to get rid of the territory, which was too far away to govern effectively.

One night in 1867, Seward was playing cards. Suddenly, he was interrupted by a message from the Russian ambassador. The czar, or emperor, of Russia was willing to sell Alaska to the United States for $7.2 million. Seward agreed to buy the land then and there.

“But your Department is closed,” said the ambassador.

“Never mind that,” Seward replied. “Before midnight you will find me at the Department, which will be open and ready for business.”

Next morning, Seward completed the deal. The cost came to 2 cents an acre. The purchase of Alaska increased the area of the United States by almost one fifth.

**"Seward’s Folly"** At the time, the purchase seemed foolish. Most Americans thought of Alaska as a barren land of icy mountains and...
When the Alaska gold rush began, fortune seekers had to travel on foot. The journey became easier when the White Pass and Yukon Railroad opened. Construction began at Skagway, Alaska, in 1898. Today, you can ride a train along the same narrow trail that once carried gold seekers and supplies.

Virtual Field Trip

Frozen fish. They mockingly called the new territory “Seward’s Ice Box” and referred to the purchase as “Seward’s Folly.”

Minds changed in the 1890s, after prospectors found gold in Alaska. Miners rushed to the new territory as they had once rushed to California. Since then, Seward’s vision of Alaska as a valuable territory has proved correct. The lowlands of southern Alaska are well suited to farming. The land is also rich in timber, copper, petroleum, and natural gas. In 1959, Alaska became the forty-ninth state.

Imperialism
The period between 1870 and 1914 has often been called the Age of Imperialism. Imperialism is the policy of powerful countries seeking to control the economic and political affairs of weaker countries or regions. Between 1870 and 1914, European nations, such as Britain, Germany, and France, seized control of almost the entire continent of Africa and much of southern Asia. During this period, the United States and Japan also became imperial powers.

Why Imperialism? There were several reasons for the growth of imperialism. First, the industrial nations of Europe needed raw materials and new markets. European factories used raw materials from Africa and Asia to manufacture goods. Some of these goods would then be sold in Africa and Asia.

A second factor that shaped imperialism was racism, or the belief that one race is superior to another. Many Europeans felt that
they had a duty to spread their religion and culture to people whom they considered to be less civilized. British writer Rudyard Kipling called this responsibility "the white man's burden." Such thinking ignored the fact that Africans and Asians already had rich cultures of their own.

A third cause was competition. When a European country colonized an area, it often closed the markets of that area to other countries. A European nation might take over an area just to keep rival nations out.

**Americans Seek Empire** Americans could not ignore Europe's race for colonies. By the 1890s, the United States was a world leader in both industry and agriculture. American factories turned out huge amounts of steel and other goods. American farms grew bumper crops of corn, wheat, and cotton. The nation was growing rapidly, and arguments in favor of expansion held great appeal.

Many people believed that the American economy would collapse unless the United States gained new foreign markets. Albert Beveridge of Indiana summed up the arguments for such commercial expansion:

"Today we are raising more than we can consume. Today we are making more than we can use. Today our industrial society is congested; there are more workers than there is work. . . . Therefore we must find new markets for our produce, new occupations for our capital, new work for our labor."

—Albert Beveridge, quoted in Beveridge and the Progressive Era (Bowers)

Expansionists also argued that Americans had a right and a duty to spread western culture. Josiah Strong, a Congregational minister, declared that Americans were "divinely commissioned" to bring democracy and Christianity "down upon Mexico, down upon Central and South America, out upon the islands of the sea."

Other expansionists stressed the need to make up for the vanishing frontier. For 100 years, the economy had boomed, as Americans settled the West. The 1890 census said, however, that the frontier was gone. People in crowded eastern cities had no new land to settle. The solution, said some, was to take new land overseas.

**A New Navy** One leading supporter of American imperialism was naval captain Alfred Mahan. In an influential 1890 book, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, Mahan argued that the prosperity of the United States depended on foreign trade. Furthermore, he said, a bigger navy was needed to protect American merchant ships. "When a question arises of control over distant regions," Mahan wrote, "it must ultimately be decided by naval power."

In Mahan's view, the United States could not expand its navy unless it controlled naval bases throughout the world. Mahan was especially interested in acquiring harbors in the Caribbean and the Pacific as links to Latin America and Asia.
Even before Mahan’s appeal, Congress had begun to enlarge and modernize the navy. By 1900, a powerful American navy was ready for action. Its steam-powered ships were called the Great White Fleet because their steel hulls were all painted white.

**Rivalry Over Samoa**

As naval power grew, the United States showed increasing interest in Samoa, a chain of islands in the South Pacific. Samoa had a fine harbor that could serve as a naval base and commercial port.

Germany and Great Britain also realized the value of the harbor. As the three nations competed for control, a military clash seemed likely. In 1889, German ships fired upon Samoan villages that were friendly to the Americans. For months, German and American sailors eyed each other nervously from their warships. Then, with tensions at their highest, a powerful storm sank ships of both countries. The disaster helped ease the crisis.

Later, the three nations arranged a peaceful settlement. The United States and Germany divided Samoa, while Britain received territories elsewhere in the Pacific. The United States had demonstrated that it would assert its power in the Pacific Ocean.

**Taking Over Hawaii**

Another Pacific territory that had long interested the United States was Hawaii. Hawaii is a chain of eight large islands and more than 100 smaller islands. Hawaii’s rich soil, warm climate, and plentiful rainfall allow farmers to grow crops all year round.
Westerners first learned about Hawaii in 1778. A British sea captain, James Cook, dropped anchor in the islands on his way to China. In the early 1800s, American ships bound for China began stopping in Hawaii, and a few American sailors and traders settled there.

**Missionaries and Planters** In 1820, American missionaries began arriving in Hawaii. They were eager to convert the Hawaiians to Christianity. The missionaries and other Americans became valued advisers to the rulers of Hawaii. Americans helped write Hawaii's first constitution in 1840.

By the mid-1800s, Americans had set up large sugar plantations in Hawaii. Needing cheap labor, the planters imported thousands of workers from China, Korea, the Philippines, and Japan. By 1900, one fourth of Hawaii's population had been born in Japan.

As the sugar industry grew, so did the wealth and political power of American planters. In 1887, they forced the Hawaiian king, Kalakaua, to accept a new constitution. It reduced royal power and increased the planters' influence.

**Planters Rebel** Kalakaua died in 1891. The new queen, Liliuokalani (lih lee oo oh kah LAH nee), cherished Hawaiian independence. Rejecting the new constitution, she sought to reduce the influence and privileges of planters and foreign merchants.

In 1893, the American planters rebelled against the queen's attempt to limit their power. The American ambassador called for United States marines to land on Hawaii and protect American lives. In fact, the marines helped topple the queen. Faced with American guns, Liliuokalani gave up her throne:

"I yield to the superior force of the United States of America. . . . To avoid any collision of armed forces and perhaps the loss of life, I do this under protest, and impelled by said force, yield my authority."

—Liliuokalani, letter to the United States government, 1893

**Annexing Hawaii** With Liliuokalani gone, the planters quickly set up a republic and asked the United States to annex Hawaii. A debate raged in Congress for months. President Grover Cleveland blocked moves to take over the islands. "Our interference in the Hawaiian Revolution of 1893 was disgraceful," he later said.

Congress finally annexed Hawaii in 1898, after Cleveland left office. Two years later, Hawaii became a United States territory. In 1959, Hawaii became the fiftieth state.

**Protecting Trade With China**

Despite its new footholds in the Pacific, the United States was a latecomer to the race for Pacific and Asian territory. Britain, Germany, Japan, and other industrial nations were already competing for colonies in Asia. The rivalry was especially fierce in China.

Once the most advanced empire in the world, China had been weakened by years of civil war. In addition, China had refused to industrialize in the 1800s. It was unable to fight off industrial nations seeking profits from its vast resources and markets.
The Open Door In the late 1800s, Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and Japan carved spheres of influence in China. A sphere of influence was an area, usually around a seaport, where a nation had special trading privileges. Each nation made laws for its own citizens in its own sphere.

The United States was eager to gain a share of the China trade. However, Secretary of State John Hay feared that the imperial powers would cut China off to American merchants. To prevent this, Hay sent a letter in 1899 to all the nations that had spheres of influence in China. He urged them to keep an "open door" in China permitting any nation to trade in the spheres of others. Reluctantly, the imperialist powers accepted the Open Door Policy.

The Boxers Rebel Many Chinese resented foreign influence. Some formed a secret society called the Righteous Fists of Harmony, or Boxers. In 1900, the Boxers attacked westerners, whom they called "foreign devils," all over China. More than 200 foreigners were killed. Hundreds of others were trapped in Beijing, the Chinese capital.

Foreign governments quickly organized an international army that included 2,500 Americans. Armed with modern weapons, they fought their way into Beijing. They freed the trapped foreigners and crushed the uprising.

Several nations saw the Boxer Rebellion as an excuse to seize more land in China. Secretary of State Hay sent another Open Door letter, urging all nations to respect China's independence. Britain, France, and Germany officially accepted Hay's letter. Fearing war, Japan and Russia quietly observed Hay's policy. Hay's Open Door letters showed that, to defend its interests, the United States was ready to take a larger role in world affairs.