

Dutch Governor van Heemstra of Suriname: humanitarian or imperialist?

Running Head

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"The White Man's Burden has been sung. Who will sing the Brown Man's?"

—Mark Twain, "The Stupendous Procession"

The grave impact hundreds of years Dutch colonialism and slavery had on the socioeconomic situation and health of the Surinamese is not reflected in Steensma and colleague's "Stamp vignette on medical science" about the Dutch colonial governor of Suriname, A. van Heemstra.^{1,2} Designated a "humanitarian" by Steensma et al., van Heemstra was hired by the Dutch queen Wilhelmina to enforce the Dutch oppression upon the Surinamese population from 1921 to 1928, during the heydays of European imperialism. By then, the Dutch had occupied the land uninterruptedly for hundreds of years, since the Treaty of Breda in 1667.³ This treaty ended the Anglo-Dutch imperialistic wars of the 17th century in a commercial agreement based on the principle of *uti possidetis* —(continue to possess) as you possess. This entailed England's retention of New Netherland, including New Amsterdam, which was renamed New York, while the area of Suriname as well as the African West coastal fortresses involved in the Dutch trade in enslaved Africans were assigned to the United Netherlands. The policy of the Dutch was exploit enslaved Africans, and even after the abolition of slavery in 1863, to extend authority over the Surinamese for Dutch economic gain, leaving the local population in an impoverished state, and in poor health. Van Heemstra headed this oppressive system in Suriname as the governor to the Dutch queen. One of his first rulings, immediately after he arrived in Suriname in 1921, was to reduce the independency of the local African population whose ancestors had escaped enslavement. It might be argued that van Heemstra strived for economic growth, but he did so through facilitating imperialistic companies to use the countries' resources.² The paper of

Steensma and colleagues classically portrays van Heemstra as to act upon this “white man’s burden” to rescue the poor black.⁴ But van Heemstra was an active supporter of colonialism and imperialism who rather enhanced the “black man’s burden” (Figure).⁵ Had van Heemstra been a humanitarian, he would have declined to move to a country overseas to reinforce the social, political, and economic subjection of people of color by the Dutch colonial powers.

References

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Figure

The White (?) Man's Burden



Figure Legend

“The White (?) Man’s Burden” by William H. Walker. Strained Asian and African men carry the weight of Uncle Sam, John Bull, Kaiser Wilhelm, and a Napoleonesque character. Front cover, Life Magazine 1899 (33), March 16, by William H. Walker. Source: William H. Walker Cartoon Collection, Princeton University Library.