Prior to the 1960s, several generations of American historians portrayed the U.S. involvement in the imperial ventures of the late 1800s and early 1900s as accidental divergences from a foreign policy that was otherwise based on neutrality and isolationism. Rather than recognizing American imperialism as a direct (if seemingly contradictory) result of the U.S. political and economic systems, these historians tended to describe these policies as accidental, or at worst, the result of a handful of scheming policy makers. Walter LaFeber of Cornell University stresses the primacy of economic factors, placing emphasis on the quest for foreign markets as a major stimulant to war and imperialism.

Historians have offered four general interpretations to explain [the] causes [of the Spanish-American War]. First, the war has been traced to a general impulse for war on the part of American public opinion. This interpretation has been illustrated in a famous cartoon showing President William McKinley, in the bonnet and dress of a little old lady, trying to sweep back huge waves marked Congress and “public opinion,” with a very small broom. The “yellow journalism” generated by the Hearst-Pulitzer rivalry supposedly both created and reflected this sentiment for war. A sophisticated and useful version of this interpretation has been advanced by Richard Hofstadter. Granting the importance of the Hearst-Pulitzer struggle, he has asked why these newspaper titans were able to exploit public opinion. Hofstadter has concluded that psychological dilemmas arising out of the depression of the 1890s made Americans react somewhat irrationally because they were uncertain, frightened, and consequently open to exploitation by men who would show them how to cure their frustrations through overseas adventures. In other words, the giddy minds of the 1890s could be quieted by foreign quarrels.

A second interpretation argues that the United States went to war for humanitarian reasons, that is, to free the Cubans of the horrors of Spanish policies and to give the Cubans democratic institutions. That this initial impulse resulted within ten months in an American protectorate over Cuba and Puerto Rico, annexation of the Philippines, and American participation in quarrels on the mainland of Asia itself, is explained as accidental, or, more familiarly, as done in a moment of “aberration” on the part of American policy-makers.

A third interpretation emphasizes the role of several Washington officials who advocated a “Large Policy” of conquering a vast colonial empire in the Caribbean and Western Pacific. By
shrewd maneuvering, these few imperialists pushed the vacillating McKinley and a confused nation into war. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, of Massachusetts, Captain Alfred T. Mahan, of the U.S. Navy, and Theodore Roosevelt, Assistant Secretary of the Navy in 1897-1898, are usually named as the leaders of the “Large Policy” contingent.

A fourth interpretation believes the economic drive carried the nation into war. This drive emanated from the rapid industrialization which characterized American society after the 1840s. The immediate link between this industrialization and the war of 1898 was the economic depression which afflicted the nation in the quarter-century after 1873. Particularly important were the 1893-1897 years when Americans endured the worst of the plunge. Government and business leaders, who were both intelligent and rational, believed an oversupply of goods created the depression. They finally accepted war as a means of opening overseas markets in order to alleviated domestic distress caused by the overproduction. For thirty years the economic interpretation dominated historians’ views of the war, but in 1936 Professor Julius Pratt conclusively demonstrated that business journals did not want war in the early months of 1898. He argued instead the “Large Policy” explanation, and from that time to the present, Professor Pratt’s interpretation had been pre-eminent in explaining the causes of the conflict. […]

The fourth interpretation has different implications. It argues that if the economic was the primary drive toward war, criticism of that war must begin not with irrational factors or flights of humanitarianism or a few stereotyped figures, but with the basic structure of the American system. […] Foreign policymakers are no more motivated by altruism than is the rest of the human race, but are instead involved in making a system function at home. […] When viewed within this matrix, the diplomatic events of the 1890s are no longer aberrations or the results of conspiracies and drift; American policymakers indeed grabbed greatness with both hands. As for accident or chance, they certainly exist in history, but become more meaningful when one begins with J.B. Bury’s definition of “chance:” “The valuable collision of two or more independent chains of causes.” The most fruitful approach to the war of 1898 might be from the inside out (from the domestic to the foreign), and by remembering that chance is “the valuable collision of two or more independent chains of causes.”

Three of these “chains” can be identified: the economic crisis of the 1890s which caused extensive and dangerous maladjustments in American society; the opportunities which suddenly opened in Asia after 1895 and in the Caribbean and the Pacific in 1898, opportunities which
officials began to view as poultices, if not cure-alls, for the illnesses at home; and a growing partnership between business and government which reached its nineteenth-century culmination in the person of William McKinley. In April 1898, these “chains” had a “valuable collision” and war resulted.

The formation of the first chain is the great success story of American history. Between 1850 and 1910 the average manufacturing plant in the country multiplied its capital thirty-nine times, its number of wage-earners nearly seven times and the value of its output by more than nineteen times. By the mid 1890s American iron and steel producers joked about their successful underselling of the vaunted British steel industry not only in world markets, but also in the vicinity of Birmingham, England, itself. The United States traded more in international markets than any nation except Great Britain.

But the most accelerated period of this development, 1873-1898, was actually twenty-five years of boom hidden in twenty-five years of bust. That quarter-century endured the longest and worst depression in the nation’s history. After brief and unsatisfactory recoveries in the mid-1880s and early 1890s, the economy reached bottom in 1893. Unparalleled social and economic disasters struck. One out of every six laborers was unemployed, with most of the remainder existing on substandard wages; not only weak firms but many companies with the best credit ratings were forced to close their doors; the unemployed slept in the streets; riots erupted in Brooklyn, California, and points in between, as in the calamitous Pullman Strike in Chicago; Coxey’s Army of broken farmers and unemployed laborers made their famous march on Washington; and the Secretary of State, Walter Quentin Gresham, remarked privately in 1894 that he saw “symptoms of revolution” appearing. Federal troops were dispatched to Chicago and other urban areas, including a cordon which guarded the Federal Treasury building in New York City.

Faced with the prospect of revolution and confronted with an economy that had almost ground to a stop, American businessmen and political officials faced alternative policies: they could attempt to re-examine and reorient the economic system, making radical modifications in the means of distribution and particularly the distribution of wealth; or they could look for new physical frontiers, following the historic tendency to increase production and then ferreting out new markets so the surplus, which the nation supposedly was unable to consume, could be sold elsewhere and Americans then put back to work on the production lines.
To the business and political communities, these were not actually alternatives at all. Neither of those communities has been known historically for political and social radicalism. Each sought security, not new political experiments. Some business firms tried to find such security by squashing competitors. Extremely few, however, searched for such policies as a federal income tax. [...] As a result, business and political leaders accepted the solution which was traditional, least threatening to their own power, and (apparently) required the least risk: new markets. Secretary of the Treasury John G. Carlisle summarized this conclusion in his public report of 1894: “The prosperity of our people, therefore, depends largely upon their ability to sell their surplus products in foreign markets at remunerative prices.”

This consensus included farmers and the labor movement among others, for these interests were no more ingenious in discovering new solutions than were businessmen. A few farmers and laborers murmured ominously about some kind [of] political and/or economic revolution, but Richard Hofstadter seems correct in suggesting that in a sense Populism was a reactionary rather than a radical movement. [...] [Farmers] continued searching for their own overseas markets, agreeing with the industrialist that the traditional method of discovering new outlets provided the key to prosperity, individualism, and status. [...] 

The first “chain of causes” was marked by a consensus on the need to find markets overseas. Fortunately for the advocates of this policy, another “chain,” quite complimentary to the first, began to form beyond American borders. By the mid-1890s, American merchants, missionaries, and ship captains had been profiting from Asian markets for more than a century. Between 1895 and 1900, however, the United States for the first time became a mover-and-pusher in Asian affairs.

In 1895 Japan defeated China in a brief struggle that now appears to be one of the most momentous episodes in the nineteenth century. The Japanese emerged as the major Asian power, the Chinese suddenly seemed to be incapable of defending their honor or existence, Chinese nationalism began its peculiar path to… and European powers which had long lusted after Asian markets now seized a golden opportunity. Russia, Germany, France and ultimately Great Britain initiated policies designed to carve China and Manchuria into spheres of influence. Within a period of months, the Asian mainland suddenly became the scene of international power politics at its worst and most explosive. [...]
Now, just at the moment when key interest groups agreed that overseas markets could be the salvation of the 1890s crisis, China was almost miraculously opening its doors to the glutted American factories and farms. United States trade with China jumped significantly after 1895, particularly in the critical area of manufactures; by 1899 manufactured products accounted for more than 90 per cent of the nation’s exports to the Chinese, a quadrupling of the amount sent in 1895.

The partnership between businessmen and politicians, in this case the McKinley administration, deserves emphasis, for if the businessman hoped to exploit Asian markets he required the aid of the politician. Americans could compete against British or Russian manufacturers in Asia, but they could not compete against, say, a Russian manufacturer who could turn to his government and through pressure exerted by that government on Chinese officials receive a prize railroad contract or banking concession. […]

William McKinley understood the need for such a partnership. He had grown to political maturity during the 1870s when, as one Congressman remarked, “The House of Representatives was like an auction room where more valuable considerations were disposed of under the speaker’s hammer than in any one place on earth.” […] Often characterized as a creature of his campaign manager Mark Hanna, or as having, in the famous but severely unjust words of Theodore Roosevelt, the backbone of a chocolate éclair, McKinley was… a master of men. McKinley was never pushed into a policy he did not want to accept. […]

In 1895 revolution had broken out in Cuba. By 1897 Americans were becoming increasingly belligerent on this issue for several reasons: more than $50,000,000 of United States investments on the island were endangered; Spaniards were treating some Cubans inhumanely; the best traditions of the Monroe Doctrine had long dictated that a European in the Caribbean was a sty in the eye of any red-blooded American; and, finally, a number of Americans, not only Lodge, Roosevelt, and Mahan, understood the strategic and political relationship of Cuba to a proposed isthmian canal. Such a canal would provide a short-cut to the west coast of Latin America as well as to the promised markets of Asia. […]

Some historians argue that McKinley entered the [Spanish-American] War in confusion and annexed the Philippines in a moment of aberration. […] Interpretations which depend upon mass opinion, humanitarianism, and “Large Policy” advocates do not satisfactorily explain the causes of the war. […] The United States, endured in the nineteenth century a history of
growing industrialism, supposedly closing physical frontiers, rapid urbanization, unequal distribution of wealth, and an overdependence upon export trade. These historical currents clashed in the 1890s. The result was chaos and fear, then war and empire.

In 1898 McKinley and the business community wanted peace, but they also sought benefits which only a war could provide. Viewed from [this] perspective… the Spanish-American conflict can no longer be viewed as only a “splendid little war.” It was a war to preserve the American system.

Questions
1. Summarize the four main arguments traditionally used to explain the United States’ involvement in the Spanish-American War?

2. How are the implications of the fourth argument (that imperialism was largely motivated by economic factors) different from the first three arguments?

3. According to LaFeber, what were the three “chains” of causes which collided to cause the Spanish-American War?

4. Why did American business people support a policy of imperialism?

5. How does LaFeber explain McKinley’s decision to ultimately go to war?