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Imperialism and National Identity in the 1890s

American imperialism was part of a surge of colonialism that washed over the world in the late nineteenth century, a wave of territorial expansion that differed quantitatively and qualitatively from countless earlier instances of empire-building. Traditional empires, however vast, had always run into limits of one sort or another, but this imperial flood tide was global in amplitude. By 1878, paced by the fantastic expansion of the British empire, Europe and its former settler colonies controlled 67 percent of the earth's surface; by 1914, 84 percent – some 57 million squares miles in all. The most dramatic example of this outburst was the partitioning, by the 1890s, of nine-tenths of Africa, which only a few years earlier had been a mysterious and largely unexplored “dark continent,” but significant chunks of Asia were absorbed as well. Only in 1920 did the tide peak as the remnants of the Ottoman empire were parceled out among the victors in the wake of the First World War. With the exception of the western hemisphere, most of the world was under European control.¹ As a result of this explosion of western power, according to one historian, “the world was united into a single interacting whole as never before.”²

Qualitatively, too, this outbreak of imperialism was unlike its historical predecessors. The European states were able to project their power by converting industrial technology and

science into a new kind of war-making capacity that non-industrial societies could not hope to match. It was more than a matter of military power, however. The British political writer Walter Bagehot explained that “[western] power is not external only; it is also internal.”³ Because power inhered in the institutions and ideologies of the westerners, they brought with them not only their military might, but a radically new way of life associated with the industrial revolution. The result, as Theodore Roosevelt noted, was “not merely a political, but an ethnic conquest.”⁴ The expansion of what westerners called “civilization” conquered hearts and minds as well as territory, thereby producing ruptures in traditional societies between those who clung to tradition and those who succumbed to the many temptations and pressures to adopt modern ways. Imperialism as a global phenomenon thus exhibited an unprecedented diffusion of both power and culture.

Looked at from afar, the ingredients of American imperialism appeared to resemble those that made up the European experience. The United States possessed the same technological and scientific superiority that made the European conquests relatively painless. Pretty much the same kinds of special interest groups were at work behind the scenes. And, as in Europe, where the introduction of mass suffrage gave public opinion greater weight in foreign affairs, empire had some popular appeal. Nevertheless, American imperialism was not simply a copy of the European original. America’s imperial surge came late, at the high-water mark of the global tide, was more limited in its territorial sweep, and broke up more quickly on the rocks of history than its European counterpart. On the ideological side, significant differences of outlook between the United States and Europe made American imperialism a much more unsettling and problematical undertaking than it had been for the Old World powers.

Imperialism, like crime (or any human endeavor, for that matter), requires means, motive, and opportunity. In the 1880s, the United States acquired some significant new military capabilities when Congress, which was looking for ways to use up some large budget surpluses, splurged on a modern steel

navy. The Civil War navy, which at its zenith had been one of the world's most imposing fleets, went to rot following Lee's surrender at Appomattox. Had it been preserved, it would have been quickly outmoded in any case by a revolution in naval architecture that replaced wooden-hulled sailing vessels with a new breed of steel warships – heavily armored, powered by coal-burning boilers, and equipped with powerful new rifled cannons set in deck turrets. By starting afresh and relying upon the latest technology, the United States navy leapfrogged many other fleets to become number three in the world by 1900. But this up-to-date navy was intended primarily for defensive use in North American waters. There was no indication at the time of its construction that it was intended for use in support of anything as far-reaching as a program of imperialism.⁵

It was not long before opportunities for overseas expansion presented themselves. The first opening came courtesy of the McKinley tariff of 1890, which raised American duties on imports to their highest rates ever. Imported sugar was an exception, but its inclusion on the free list was accompanied by an arrangement to compensate domestic beet sugar producers by paying them a bounty of 2 cents per pound. The passage of this tariff bill had important consequences in Hawaii, an independent chain of tropical islands some 3,000 miles west of California. By putting Hawaiian sugar at a competitive disadvantage in the all-important American market, the McKinley tariff caused a depression in the islands and set off a chain of events that raised the question of annexation.

In January 1893 the white planter elite, much of it descended from New England missionary stock, organized a *coup d'état* against the native queen Liliuokalani in the hope that quick annexation to the United States would follow. Hawaii had lived in the economic sunlight of the US for some time thanks to commercial treaties that tied it to the American economy. Formal annexation, the planters reasoned, would restore the privileged access to US markets that the McKinley tariff had taken away. A sympathetic and enterprising American minister in Honolulu, John L. Stevens, expecting quick annexation,

conspired with the revolutionaries by landing American marines, hoisting the American flag, and declaring Hawaii a protectorate of the United States. Two weeks later, a treaty of annexation was signed with the new Hawaiian republic.

News of the “revolution” roused considerable sentiment for annexation within the country, but the annexationists failed to reckon with the incoming Democratic president, Grover Cleveland, in whose lap the problem was dumped. Cleveland, who was by conviction an adherent of the Cobden–Bright liberal school of free trade which viewed empire more as an economic burden than an addition to national wealth, refused to be swept away by pro-annexationist excitement. Instead, he withdrew the treaty and authorized an investigation which concluded that the revolution had been a shameful affair orchestrated by a small, special interest group. Going along with the conspiracy, said *The New York Times*, would “sully the honor and blacken the name of the United States.” In any case, the United States had no need to annex Hawaii. With the rights to build a naval base at Pearl Harbor buttressing its commercial presence, it was well understood, as one official had put it, that “commercially speaking,” the Hawaiian islands were “almost an American possession.” Thus, for the time being, the Hawaiian republic was on its own.

If Hawaii demonstrated the absence of a consensus on overseas expansion, another foreign-policy crisis that exploded shortly thereafter revealed the existence of a deep hostility to the idea of European imperialism in the western hemisphere. The Venezuela crisis of 1895 erupted, quite unexpectedly, from a long-simmering boundary dispute between Venezuela and British Guyana, the British colony directly to the east. Thanks to the recent discovery of gold in the region, the source of the Orinoco river, which was the key to determining the boundary, had become a lively subject of contention between the British and the Venezuelans. Quite unexpectedly, the United States intervened in the crisis, telling both parties that if the boundary were not settled through arbitration, the US would run the line itself. America’s right to impose this solution was justified, according to Cleveland’s secretary of state, Richard

Olney, by the fact that “today the United States is practically sovereign on this continent and its fiat is law” – language that Olney later admitted was “undoubtedly of the bumptious order.”⁶

Quickly dubbed the “Olney Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine, the Cleveland administration’s action was prompted by an opposition to the diplomacy of imperialism. The only region of the world thus far untouched by the wave of European empire-building was the western hemisphere. Olney proposed to keep it that way by making clear that the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which had unilaterally declared colonization in the hemisphere to be at an end, would now be vigorously enforced, unilaterally if need be. As Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (soon to become a leading expansionist) explained, “if Britain can extend her territory in South America without remonstrance from us, every other European power can do the same, and in a short time you will see South America parceled out as Africa has been.”⁷ In his annual message to Congress in December 1895, Cleveland warned: “This is the precise action which President Monroe declared to be ‘dangerous to our peace and safety’.” Thus, in the Olney Corollary the United States was announcing its commitment to an assertive hemispheric anti-imperialism on the very eve of its own imperial debut.

By throwing cold water in the face of Great Britain, Olney’s action had excited much favorable public approval. It did not strain the imagination to foresee that the “free security” long enjoyed by the United States in the Caribbean region might, if precautions failed to be taken, end up in a dangerous European-style balance of power. In appealing to this sense of hemispheric privilege, a lobbyist hired by the Venezuelan government to influence American opinion shrewdly titled a pamphlet “British Aggressions in Venezuela, or the Monroe Doctrine on Trial.” Though much irritated by what seemed an unprovoked display of American assertiveness, the British Foreign Office under Lord Salisbury chose wisely to play down the affair. More pressing problems in Europe with an ambitious Germany and in South Africa with the rebellious Boers

convinced the British to submit the dispute to arbitration, as the Americans wished.

The Hawaiian episode and the Venezuela crisis demonstrated that overseas expansion and the diplomacy of imperialism were by no means universally attractive. But they did point up the emergence of an important new phenomenon that would have to be reckoned with in the years to come: an active and excitable public opinion. With the occasional exception of special interest groups, such as the American Irish and their hatred of all things British, public opinion normally did not play a large role in foreign policy – indeed, US foreign relations had for some time been so placid that there was little to be excited about. During the 1890s, however, a charged public opinion became an important source of the political energy that propelled the nation to empire.

Arousal of the people was made easier by the newly aggressive communications media. Access to overseas news had been improved by the laying of underseas telegraph cables and by the creation of global news-gathering organizations like the Associated Press and the United Press. A sensationalist “yellow press,” seeking to increase daily circulation, found foreign affairs to be an ideal source of provocative headlines. Trying to account for the public uproar in the wake of the Venezuela crisis, Harvard President Charles W. Eliot remarked that:

there has been brought forcibly to our notice a phenomenon new in our country, and perhaps in the world – namely, the formidable inflammability of our multitudinous population, in consequence of the recent development of telegraph, telephone, and bi-daily press . . . our population is more inflammable than it used to be, because of the increased use in comparatively recent years of these great inventions.⁸

This was neither the first nor the last oracular comment about the unsettling impact of modern mass media and communications technology on public opinion in foreign policy. But newspaper technology and breathless coverage of events alone, while significant, fail to account for the “inflammability” of this new mass opinion. In the same way that matches need combustible material, a sensationalist press needs a susceptible

public. As it happened, the public's sensitivity to foreign-policy developments was heightened by a number of identity issues that emerged in the 1890s. In conjunction with new opportunities that emerged out of the Spanish-American War, these identity concerns would provide the hitherto missing motive for empire.

Cuba and the Domestic Identity Crisis of the 1890s

Although American imperialism was the principal outcome of the Spanish-American War of 1898, it is important to keep in mind that it was not an anticipated result of that conflict. Because few people, if any, foresaw a colonial future in Asia emerging out of the conflict with Spain, the causes of the Spanish-American War need to be disentangled from the rationales for empire that appeared only subsequently. Initially, Americans could not see beyond the conflict with Spain; only after they had scaled that peak did the summit of imperialism come unexpectedly into their range of vision. But American military successes did not force the United States to press forward and clamber up the pinnacle of empire as well. That would be a separate decision, made for a different set of reasons.

Any explanation of why the United States acquired an empire from Spain needs to deal with one overwhelming truth: America's security and its vital interests were not at risk.⁹ Neither economic needs nor external dangers compelled the nation to go to war with Spain or to go imperial in the 1890s.¹⁰ To be sure, historians have turned over some rocks and found scurrying beneath various special interests that supported colonial expansion – especially that familiar but incongruous threesome of businessmen, missionaries, and military lobbyists – but they did not play a decisive role.¹¹ And even if, for the sake of argument, one were to concede that they had been responsible, that would only underline the point that imperialism was not determined by inescapable compulsions of *national* interest.¹² Either way, whether one views it from the standpoint of the national interest or of narrow interest groups,

imperialism was not a make-or-break question of national existence.

The absence of concrete interests or structural determinants did not mean that there was no compelling basis for an imperialist foreign policy. On the contrary, subjective worries about self-definition and identity provided more than enough energy and motivation for the imperialist outburst. Social scientists agree that “people will fight to assert or protect who they are as readily as they will to save their standard of living or their property rights.”¹³ Identity issues, in contrast to concerns for national security, focus on less tangible, but nevertheless vital, internal questions of self-definition and external problems of “fit” in the world of nation-states. Identity matters because it orients a nation to the international environment and predisposes it to behave in certain ways.

An identity crisis is a period of disorientation in which values and relationships once taken for granted are thrown into question. Questions of self-adjustment that bedevil individuals caught up in an identity crisis like “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong?” also beset societies that begin to doubt the principles that shape the national character and guide relations with the outside world. In reflecting upon the nation’s social psychology at the turn of the century, William James sensed the pervasive presence of such self-doubt when he wrote about “fear regarding ourselves now taking the place of the ancient fear of the enemy.”¹⁴ If the nation’s existence was not in question in the 1890s, its essence was, to the extent that the concern for identity far outweighed the pursuit of hard interests.

A number of congenital weaknesses made the nation particularly susceptible to identity crises. The USA was, first of all, an ideologically created state that depended on ideas to justify its existence. Legitimacy had always been defined ideologically and through public opinion rather than through custom or reliance on absolutist symbols of sovereignty. As the Civil War had shown, these core ideas could become the object of fratricidal contention. Even though the need to grapple with the problems of industrialization had stimulated the growth of the national government after the Civil War, the

US remained a weak state that had difficulty in maintaining order in times of crisis.¹⁵ While this soft political and administrative chassis made the United States less rigid and brittle than other societies, it also made for some unstable handling in periods of ideological transition.

Circumstances exacerbated this built-in frailty. The United States in the 1890s was thrown off balance by a combination of events that brought into question the coherence of American society and its ability to function effectively. The most obvious and serious problem was the depression of 1893. The plight of farmers in particular, aggravated by a continuing decline in prices for agricultural goods for the better part of two decades, led to a burgeoning third-party movement. Seeking relief through price inflation, the recently formed People's Party or Populists called for an expansion of the money supply by making silver legal tender and allowing for its unlimited coinage. Besides challenging the sacred cow of the gold standard, the agrarian radicals advocated other startling measures, including federal ownership of all transportation and communication lines, a graduated federal income tax, and direct election of all US senators.

This rural political ferment posed some unsettling ideological problems. In the popular mythology of democracy, yeoman farmers were supposed to be the nation's cultural backbone, the basic source of its civic and moral values. But here they were, acting in some contradictory and quite unsettling ways. On the one hand, they were fire-breathing radicals apparently hell-bent on disrupting the established order. On the other, they seemed quixotically bent on preventing the country from becoming a modern urban, industrial society. By 1896, when much of the Populist political agenda was adopted by the Democratic Party under the leadership of William Jennings Bryan, the divisive chasm of party politics had opened wider than at any time since the Civil War.

The situation in the industrial cities was no less turbulent as labor strife often verged on outright class warfare. In 1892, a strike at the Carnegie steel plant outside Pittsburgh resulted in seven killed when strikers engaged in battle with Pinkerton

detectives hired by the company. Federal troops had to be dispatched to the silver mines in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, following an outbreak of violence between miners and strike-breakers. Most spectacular of all was the nationwide boycott of Pullman railway cars by the American Railway Union in 1894, which threatened to paralyze the nation's transportation system. This action was broken up by federal troops, which were ordered by President Cleveland to safeguard the mails and interstate commerce, and by the federal courts, which issued an injunction against the union prohibiting behavior that was said to violate the Sherman Antitrust Act.

Immigration created yet another set of worries about the national character. Congress had enacted oriental exclusion legislation in 1882 in response to protests from the west over the influx of Chinese, who only a few years earlier had been encouraged to immigrate to provide cheap labor for the construction of the transcontinental railway system. By the 1890s, the focus of concern shifted eastward in response to immigration from southern and eastern Europe. It was not so much the volume of immigration, which actually declined from the numbers posted in the 1880s, as the character of the new entrants that concerned old-line Americans. Often illiterate and ethnically and religiously different from the country's dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestant stock, these new immigrants generated worries about the country's core values in the future. A vigorous anti-immigration movement sprang up in an attempt to raise the drawbridge against further newcomers.

The tide of eastern European immigration merely added to the racial and cultural insecurities that were already besetting the country. In the South, the Populists were making common cause politically with black farmers. Despite the military victory of the unionist principle in the Civil War and the end of congressional reconstruction in 1877, North and South were still very different regions that lacked a common sense of nationalism. It was clear that the nearly mortal wound of the Civil War, the most grave identity crisis of all, had not yet healed. Indeed, the scab was picked off each election by the Republican Party, whose orators resorted to "waving the

bloody shirt” as a reminder to the many Union veterans and families of fallen soldiers of the treachery of southern Democrats.

Somehow, this unstable social atmosphere produced a storm of hyper-aggressive nationalist public opinion known as jingoism. Jingoism was no stranger to American politics in the past, but rarely if ever does it appear to have blown through Washington with the kind of hurricane force that it mustered in the 1890s. To ask what motivated this excitable hyper-patriotism is to inquire into the murky depths of mass psychology, which in the absence of modern public opinion surveys and experimental methods of social science is not easy to plumb in retrospect. Even today, with state-of-the-art methods of public opinion polling at our disposal, connecting psychological dispositions with distant political events is a problematical task.

Nevertheless, analysis of the political rhetoric used in connection with the Cuban crisis suggests strongly that gender concerns, specifically a concern with masculinity, provided a powerful motivation. According to one historian, many American males felt threatened by the inroads of feminism. Many men who had suffered a body blow to their self-esteem in the depression of 1893, when their identity as family providers had been called into question, were now also being challenged on the political front by the growing strength of the suffrage movement. As some anti-suffragists put it, “the transfer of power from the military to the unmilitary sex involves a change in the character of the nation. It involves in short, national emasculation.” Concerns of this sort may have contributed to the rise of the jingoes, people who “regarded war as an opportunity to develop such ‘soldierly’ attributes as strength, honor, and a fraternal spirit among men.”¹⁶

Less speculative is the role played by language, which is, after all, a form of behavior. Without a doubt, the language of American politics was preoccupied with manhood. “Honor,” in particular, was a powerful concern of the jingoes. When newly elected President William McKinley failed to act assertively enough to suit them, his manhood was thrown into ques-

tion. Theodore Roosevelt's classic insult, his reference to McKinley having "no more backbone than a chocolate éclair," epitomized a good deal of newspaper criticism of the president's cautious handling of foreign policy. Whether or not anxieties associated with the changes in male and female roles produced by industrialization were specifically responsible in this case, it seems likely that the need to assert vicariously one's manhood was a powerful motivational factor in the crisis. We know that machismo can be a source of violence among individual males in a broad range of group contexts. There is no reason to think that the masculine rhetoric of international relations, whatever its source, is any less potent in stirring aggressive feelings.¹⁷

In the case of the nation's elites, the connections between identity concerns and foreign policy are more readily established. Assaulted by radicals from below, they were also afflicted by deep misgivings about the changes taking place in the nation's values. One of the most outspoken members of the patrician set was Theodore Roosevelt, a rising political star, who lamented the disappearance of the classical republican virtues of civic mindedness and heroic self-sacrifice and their replacement by a new business morality that appeared to put individual selfishness and pecuniary gain above all else. The spectacularly sumptuous life-styles of this wealthy new business class, which exceeded in many cases those of the decadent European nobility, were a reproach to the ideals of unpretentious wealth and commitment to the common good by which people like Roosevelt lived. Though they still profited from the social cachet of a long pedigree, people of his kind were being replaced on the social ladder by the rapacious and self-indulgent new breed of businessman.

Many liberals called this progress, but Roosevelt saw it as degeneration or decadence. The values that had made the country great and would continue to be necessary for the future maintenance of greatness were now being forsaken in favor of lives of indolence and self-indulgence. "The really high civilizations," thundered Roosevelt, "must themselves supply the antidote to the self-indulgence and love of ease which they

tend to produce.”¹⁸ For Roosevelt, it was clear that war, the exercise of the martial virtues, was an essential ingredient of national self-renewal. In a speech at the Naval War College in 1897, he told the audience that the “fight well fought, the life honorably lived, the death bravely met . . . count for more in building a high and fine temper in a nation than any possible success in the stock market.”¹⁹

At a time when nationalism was on the rise throughout the world, this tangle of problems made it increasingly difficult for the United States to define itself as a nation, or what one historian has called an “imagined community.”²⁰ The nation appeared to be coming apart at the seams as a result of all these tensions, with no common agreement on how to stitch it back together. In response, some sought to preserve the nation’s essence, some hoped to redefine it, while others looked beyond the nation’s borders for solutions. It would be going too far to assert that these assorted identity concerns led inevitably to war with Spain. But they did contribute to a build-up of anxieties and jingoist emotion that could easily be ignited by events and further inflamed by opportunistic political decisions.

As is so often the case with individuals and societies that face formidable internal problems, a sense of purposeful cohesion, however fleeting and insubstantial, was purchased at the expense of outsiders. Unfortunately, identity formation through negation, self-validation through denial of the worth of the other, is a pathological form of behavior for which foreign policy often provides an attractive outlet. This appears to be the kind of sensibility that R. A. Alger described to Henry Cabot Lodge in 1895, when he noted that “[foreign policy] more than anything else, touches the public pulse of today.”²¹

It took a rebellion against Spanish rule in Cuba that broke out in February 1895 to put the match to this combustible mixture of public resentments. As in Hawaii, American tariff policy played a part in stimulating revolutionary unrest. The Wilson–Gorman tariff of 1894, by restoring the duty on sugar, cut into Cuba’s sugar exports to the US and depressed the island’s agricultural economy. But this insurrection was only

the last in a series of revolts, the most serious of which was a 10-year insurrection that had finally been squelched in 1877. Under the field leadership of General Máximo Gómez, the rebels resorted to guerrilla warfare, avoiding direct confrontations with Spanish troops while destroying sugar plantations and wreaking as much economic havoc as possible. Although this revolt was not unlike earlier outbreaks of unrest in Cuba, it is indicative of the change in American thinking that the United States chose not to exercise the self-restraint that the Grant administration had managed to muster two decades earlier. As the violence intensified, the feeling grew that the United States had to do something.

But why? What exactly was at stake for the United States in Cuba? US investments on the island totaled about 50 million dollars. Admittedly, American investors in Cuban sugar and Spanish securities were suffering losses from the rebellion. But the protection of these endangered economic interests did not point clearly toward intervention, and even if one assumes that they did, special interests have yet to be discovered pulling strings behind the scenes. Though some American businesses were suffering from the unsettled conditions in Cuba, others stood to be hurt even more by a war. Probably the best solution from a business standpoint would have been for Spain to quash this rebellion as firmly as it had suppressed previous uprisings.²² From a broader perspective, few people of any ideological stripe looked to war as a means of stimulating economic expansion abroad as a remedy for the economic depression. The American economy could best be revived by domestic measures like changes in tariff policy and monetary legislation.

Following this reasoning, and fearful that a war would jeopardize a budding revival of industry, the American financial and business community favored a Spanish restoration of order. Political spokesmen for big business, such as Senators Mark Hanna, Nelson W. Aldrich, and Orville H. Platt, counseled caution. In keeping with this circumspect pro-business reasoning, the Cleveland administration, which frankly admitted the nation's "large pecuniary stake in the fortunes

of Cuba,” pursued a policy favorable to Madrid by refusing to recognize the belligerency of the Cuban rebels. Recognition would have made the United States technically neutral in the struggle, but politically it would have placed the insurgents and the Spanish on the same footing.

In the absence of powerful pecuniary compulsions, it was not surprising, as one historian has noted, that “hot-blooded interventionists like Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge decried ‘the money power’ and the cautious McKinley as the major obstacles to war.”²³ “We will have this war for Cuba despite the timidity of the commercial interests,” promised TR in a speech.²⁴ At the height of the excitement, following the sinking of the battleship *USS Maine*, the New York press lambasted “the eminently porcine citizens who – for dollars in the money-grubbing sty . . . consider the starvation of . . . innocent men, women and children and the murder of 250 American sailors . . . of less importance than a fall of two points in a price of stocks.” Peace, said one historian, “had become a symbol of obedience to avarice.”²⁵

Rather incongruously, sordid jingoism was allied to saintlier humanitarian calls for intervention. The pro-interventionist uproar began in 1896, following the arrival in Cuba of General Valeriano Weyler as governor and captain-general. Weyler quickly adopted a *reconcentrado* policy that was designed to deny the *insurrectos* their base of popular support in the countryside. Cubans were ordered to assemble in towns occupied by Spanish troops or else be treated as rebels. By concentrating mostly women and children in towns and villages with inadequate food supplies and terrible sanitary conditions, Weyler created human cesspools of disease that caused large numbers of Cuban civilians to perish. Havana province alone counted more than 50,000 dead. A report by a presidential investigator in June 1897 found Cuba “wrapped in the stillness of death and the silence of desolation.”

As reports of the island’s misery began to come in, Cuba became a party issue, with Bryan Democrats in particular clamoring for action. Feeling the heat from radicals on his left, in April 1896 Cleveland offered to mediate an end to the

struggle by suggesting autonomy for Cuba, an offer that Spain declined. By December, in response to congressional rumblings about using force if need be to settle the matter, he warned Madrid that Spanish sovereignty might be superseded by “higher obligations, which we can hardly hesitate to discharge.” Given the intensity of public sentiment, the Republicans could not afford to be left behind. Unfortunately for them, the newly elected president was the cautious William McKinley. Once in office, the joke making the rounds was: “Why is McKinley’s mind like a bed? Because it has to be made up for him every time he wants to use it.”

Although McKinley opposed any “jingo nonsense,” there is no doubt that he began to feel the heat, as influentials in his own party began to exert pressure on him to take action. Lodge warned him of a political calamity if nothing were done:

If the war in Cuba drags on through the summer with nothing done we shall go down to the greatest defeat ever known . . . I know that it is easily and properly said that to bring on or even to threaten war for political reasons is a crime & I quite agree. But to sacrifice a great party & bring free silver upon the country for a wrong policy is hardly less odious.²⁶

Prominent New York attorney Elihu Root argued similarly that a failure to act in Cuba would have disastrous domestic consequences: “Fruitless attempts to hold back or retard the momentum of the people bent upon war would result in the destruction of the President’s power and influence, in depriving the country of its natural leader, in the destruction of the president’s party, in the elevation of the Silver Democracy to power.”²⁷ Politically, then, confronting Spain over Cuba was a way for the Republican Party to blunt an alarming challenge from radical forces on the political left.

At first, McKinley urged Spain to grant Cuba autonomy or independence, with the understanding that if the Spanish did not soon solve the problem one way or another, the United States would. A new liberal ministry in Madrid did grant autonomy to the island in December 1897, but by this time it was too little too late, as the rebels were determined to settle for nothing less than independence. In the United States, too,

time worked against a peaceful resolution. McKinley's domestic space for maneuver disappeared altogether as contingencies – chance, luck, unanticipated ironies – intervened unexpectedly and whipped public opinion into a lather.

The slide down the slippery slope to war was greased by a number of dramatic surprises. On February 9, a cable critical of President McKinley, written by Spain's ambassador in Washington, Enrique Dupuy de Lôme, was intercepted by Cuban revolutionaries and released to the press. In the course of candidly sizing up the president, the embarrassed emissary referred to McKinley as "a would-be politician who tries to leave a door open for himself while keeping on good terms with the jingoes of his party." However accurate this and other indiscreet remarks may have been in describing the president's political style, they did not sit well with American hotheads who perceived an insult to national honor. The publication of the letter ignited a political firestorm.

On February 15, only a week later, the battleship *Maine*, which had been sent to Havana harbor to demonstrate American concern with events on the island by "showing the flag," exploded and went to the bottom with 260 seamen aboard. An American court of naval inquiry determined that the explosion had been caused by a submarine mine, while the Spanish attributed the sinking to an explosion in the forward magazine. Although a number of subsequent inquiries have failed to establish the definitive cause of the explosion, the most likely explanation is that the blast was set off by a fire in the coal bunkers that ignited powder magazines in nearby compartments, a distressingly common problem in American warships of the day.²⁸ But, for the jingoes, the Spanish were automatically assumed to be guilty of treachery and "Remember the *Maine*!" became a powerful rallying cry. For most members of Congress, the Spanish were culpable, if not necessarily for causing the explosion, then certainly for failing to assure the safety of an American vessel in their waters.

War might well have come even without these inflammatory events. Public opinion had already been aroused by a press that was frantically doing its best to act as a provocateur. A

circulation war between the Hearst and Pulitzer tabloids in New York City led both sides to concoct ever more sensational headlines about the most recent Spanish outrages in Cuba. They dwelled, according to one survey, upon “the execution of prisoners of war, starvation, the plunder and murder of defenseless *pacíficos*, the inhuman treatment of women, attacks upon hospitals, the poisoning of wells, and the killing of children.”²⁹ On occasion the dueling papers were not above creating their own incidents when the real-life situation failed to provide drama enough. “You furnish the pictures and I’ll furnish the war,” William Randolph Hearst instructed the artist Frederick Remington when sending him off to Cuba to render drawings of the situation.

With opinion in the Democratic Party, and increasingly among Republicans as well, for war against Spain, on April 11, 1898, McKinley finally submitted a message to Congress in which he recommended forcible intervention as the only solution to the Cuban problem, despite the fact that Spain’s resistance to his demands had softened considerably.³⁰ Two weeks later, Congress declared war on Spain.³¹ The war over Cuba provided a welcome distraction from all the problems affecting the country, especially as the Spaniards seemed unlikely to offer any serious military resistance. For those to whom such things mattered, honor would be redeemed. For those concerned with the decline in military valor, Cuba would offer the chance to hone the dull edge of martial virtue. If an excessive regard for pecuniary gain was a problem, Cuba offered an opportunity to act on behalf of a noble humanitarian cause. For those preoccupied with issues of class, intervening in Cuba would aid the underdogs. Not least, a war would promote some badly needed national unity.

The war-fighting strategy adopted by the US had far-ranging unforeseen consequences.³² In June 1896, naval planners formulated a contingency plan for attacking the Spanish fleet in the Philippines and Spanish possessions in the Caribbean in the event of war, a strategy that was confirmed the following year by a navy board. As the crisis with Spain intensified, Roosevelt, then assistant secretary of the navy, ordered Com-

modore George Dewey to prepare his Asiatic squadron, whose chief mission was to patrol the China coast, to confront the small Spanish naval force in Manila in the event of war. Originally drawn up without imperialist intent as a way of placing additional pressure on the Spaniards to concede defeat in Cuba, this contingency plan itself created an historical contingency. Its success forced the US to answer a question previously unasked: what to do with the Philippines?

The progress of the naval war promptly demonstrated the existence of a huge technological gap between Spain and the United States. With American ships faster, better armored, and enjoying superior long-range firepower which guaranteed virtual invulnerability to the Spanish guns, the Battle of Manila Bay (interrupted by a three-hour break for breakfast) lasted only seven hours. At its conclusion, the 10 Spanish vessels had been destroyed, silenced, or captured and the Spaniards had lost 381 dead. Dewey's six ships, meanwhile, suffered no damage, and casualties were a mere eight wounded. In the Caribbean, the decisive naval battle outside Santiago harbor on the south-east coast of Cuba was no less lop-sided. On July 3, in a battle lasting four hours, Admiral Cervera's fleet of four cruisers and three destroyers was wiped out while attempting an escape to open sea. The Spaniards lost 474 killed and wounded and 1,750 were taken prisoner. By contrast, US casualties, in what one seaman described as "a big turkey shoot," amounted to all of one killed and one wounded.

The war on land was a different story. Whereas Congress had force-fed the new steel navy, the US army was fiscally malnourished in the years following the Civil War, having been allowed to dwindle to a tiny body of 26,000 men whose chief challenge was chasing down the last resisting Indians in the Great Plains and the far west. To take on the numerically superior Spanish forces, McKinley called for 125,000 volunteers. The willingness to accept a relatively untrained regiment like Theodore Roosevelt's "rough riders" was symptomatic of the lack of modern professional organization. The new recruits used black powder rather than the new smokeless powder, were encumbered by winter uniforms ill-suited for campaign-

ing in a tropical environment, and had to resort to the requisitioning of pleasure craft in Florida for transport to Cuba. According to a Spanish spy in Florida, the American troops were “badly fed, badly clothed, and all are weak, poorly trained . . . Discipline is poor and everyone drinks heavily.”³³

Once landed on the island, the progress of the campaign was far from smooth. The Americans were fortunate that their landing at Daiquirí, which was secured beforehand by Cuban rebel forces, was uncontested; otherwise there might have been significant carnage on the beachhead. Disease took an appalling toll, accounting for more than 90 percent of all casualties. Eventually, though, in the Battle of San Juan Hill on July 1, American troops secured the commanding heights overlooking Santiago which enabled their artillery to place the city and the Spanish fleet under bombardment.

US forces also invaded Puerto Rico. The desire to deprive Spain of a major base in the Caribbean provided the strategic rationale for conquering the island. The high priest of navalism, Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, had noted that leaving Puerto Rico to Spain “would enable her practically to enjoy the same advantage of nearness to the great scene of operations that the United States [has] in virtue of our geographical situation.”³⁴ However, inasmuch as the end of the war was already in sight when troops were dispatched from Florida, the conquest was probably not without political motivation. “Puerto Rico is not forgotten and we mean to have it,” Lodge promised his imperialist soul-mate, Theodore Roosevelt. Advocates of a “large policy” counted on controlling Puerto Rico, which lay astride the central naval routes into the Caribbean, as a strategic possession after the war, when it was widely assumed that an isthmian canal under American control would at long last be constructed. The island was taken without incident, at a cost of only three killed and 40 wounded, and with a minimum of public discussion.

Before it was over, the war settled the status of Hawaii, where the US no longer enjoyed the advantages of control without any of the administrative headaches. In 1897, a crisis with Japan flared up when the government in Honolulu re-

fused to permit a shipload of Japanese laborers to disembark. Over the years, the racial composition of the islands had become predominantly Asiatic. As native Hawaiians died off in large numbers from exposure to western diseases against which they had no immunities, the plantation owners compensated by importing contract laborers from Japan and China to work the burgeoning plantation economy. Now, however, the planter oligarchy feared that continued immigration would lead eventually to Japan asserting a controlling influence in the islands. The American government backed the Hawaiians, and McKinley in 1897 let it be known that annexation by the US was only a matter of time. Though the *Shinshu Maru* incident led to some testy messages between Washington and Tokyo, the threat of a foreign takeover finally pushed the US to re-evaluate its position in the islands. In July 1898, a joint resolution of Congress annexed the Hawaiian island chain to the United States. In this case, McKinley accurately described the annexation as “not a change” but “a consummation.”

John Hay, then ambassador in London, described the conflict with Spain as a “splendid little war.” Hostilities lasted from April 25 to August 12, 1898. Its cost in lives and money was relatively modest and its four-month duration was admirably brief.³⁵ It appeared to do wonders for national unity, finally creating a solid national identity out of the fragile constitutional entity that the Civil War had kept intact by military means. As Lodge stated hopefully: “the war of 1861 was over at last and the great country for which so many died was one again.”³⁶ The lyrics to a song composed for the occasion, “He laid away a suit of gray to wear the Union blue,” well conveyed that idea. More helpful was the end of the depression, thanks in part to rising prices caused by the infusion of more gold into the world economy as a result of some major discoveries.

But this harmony was short lived as the imperial aftermath of the war raised troubling new issues of identity. According to one historian, the Spanish-American War “divided America more than any other between Appomattox and Vietnam.”³⁷ These divisions were the result of McKinley’s decision to de-

mand the cession of some major Spanish colonies with a view to creating a new American empire.

The Philippines and America's New International Identity

The sweet taste of victory following the Spanish-American War failed to quench the thirst for national self-definition. Far from resolving all questions of national character, the success of the war focused the nation's attention on yet another set of identity issues that came to the forefront in a debate about imperialism. The Spanish-American War originated in an internal crisis of national character; imperialism, by contrast, was externally oriented, the product of uncertainties about the nation's status as a member of the family of nations. Whereas the nation's inner make-up was the central concern in the period leading up to the war, outer identity issues played a much more prominent role in debates about how the peace should be shaped. Thus a series of events that originated in a domestic identity crisis wound up raising outward-facing questions of international identity.³⁸

In the war with Spain, Americans had tried to resolve their identity problems in negative terms, by imagining themselves to be everything that the Spaniards were not. But identity, personal or cultural, is never a matter solely of negation. It is also shaped positively, through identification with others who serve as a reference group or as role models.³⁹ Unlike the urge to go to war with Spain over Cuba, the desire for empire was not the result of a domestic crisis or, for that matter, any crisis at all. It was the product of what seemed a heaven-sent opportunity, what McKinley called "a gift from the gods." In the debate over empire, the chance to pursue seductive and self-flattering visions of the nation's new standing in the world became the chief force behind the adoption of an imperial identity.

These very different kinds of identity issues were brought into play by the nation's military triumph in the Philippines.

“If old Dewey had just sailed away when he smashed that Spanish fleet,” mused McKinley, “what a lot of trouble he would have saved us.”⁴⁰ But it was less Dewey’s continuing naval presence in Manila Bay than McKinley’s decision to dispatch an expeditionary force of 11,000 troops to the Philippines that brought the question of empire to the forefront and, to a significant extent, predetermined the outcome. Based on the same strategic logic that had dictated Dewey’s naval encounter, the decision to take Manila was conceived as a way of forcing Spain to sue more quickly for peace. As Secretary of the Navy John D. Long put it, an American-held Manila was intended to be “one of the most strenuous elements which brought Spain to terms.” In a comic opera staging in which the Spanish garrison satisfied its honor with only a symbolic show of resistance, Manila was taken on August 13, the day after the armistice was signed. But the city’s seizure had enormous political consequences that had not been thought through in advance. Writing to McKinley, the New York businessman Oscar S. Straus predicted correctly that “entanglement and embarrassment” would be the result.⁴¹

Setting sail on a voyage to empire had not been on the foreign-policy horizon prior to a war in which the island of Cuba had been the sole object of attention. Although there was little enthusiasm in some quarters at the prospect of a Cuban republic dominated by the *insurrectos*, annexation was never on the table. McKinley told Congress in his war message that “forcible annexation . . . cannot be thought of. That, by our code of morals, would be criminal aggression.” To demonstrate the purity of America’s intentions, Congress agreed and attached the Teller amendment to the war resolution, which repudiated any annexationist aims. It was all the more astonishing, then, that the United States should decide to keep Puerto Rico and the Philippines.

McKinley may have been exaggerating when he later admitted that “I could not have told where those darned islands were within 2,000 miles”,⁴² but it is not likely that acquisition of the Philippines was an unstated initial war aim. Even enthusiastic expansionists like Roosevelt and Lodge jumped

aboard the Philippine bandwagon relatively late, only after the possibility of annexation came somewhat slowly into focus; shortly after Dewey's victory, talk had centered mainly on demanding a coaling station. Consistent with these more modest ambitions, McKinley at first toyed with the possibility of retaining only Manila; by September, he was thinking of keeping the island of Luzon.

Nevertheless, although some other terms were clearly stated in the armistice agreement, McKinley's decision to defer judgment on the fate of the Philippines until the opening of the peace conference suggests that he was already considering keeping much more than Manila. Annexation was already weighing heavily on his mind when he appointed the peace commissioners in August, most of whom were expansionist. How and when he decided to demand all the islands is not known, but the constraints under which he operated are fairly clear. Once American soldiers were in control of Spanish territory, it became extremely difficult to dislodge the US presence for any but the most compelling reasons. And those reasons could not be produced in the debate over empire.

McKinley's famous explanation of his reasoning to a group of Methodist clergymen visiting the White House deserves repeating:

I thought first we would take only Manila; then Luzon; then other islands, perhaps, also. I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight; and I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night. And one night late it came to me this way – I don't know how it was, but it came: 1) that we could not give them back to Spain – that would be cowardly and dishonorable; 2) that we could not turn them over to France or Germany – our commercial rivals in the Orient – that would be bad business and discreditable; 3) that we could not leave them to themselves – they were unfit for self-government – and they would soon have anarchy and misrule over there worse than Spain's was; and 4) that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died. And then I went to bed, and went to sleep and slept soundly.

Whatever the spontaneity of this account, it does give an accurate indication of the kinds of thoughts that were bouncing around in the president's mind.

Though McKinley would have been satisfied at first with only a naval base, pursuing that option depended on the ability of the Filipinos to maintain their independence; otherwise the islands might be swallowed up by one of the imperialist sharks that cruised the region. The possibility of another nation acquiring the Philippines was real enough. The British were interested in the event that the United States decided against annexation. A prominent German official believed that German warships were lingering around Manila Bay – all too provocatively, in Dewey's opinion – “to seduce the Filipinos into believing that other Gods besides the Americans could be had.”⁴³ After the fall of Manila, the German Foreign Ministry launched a diplomatic campaign intended to secure the islands. The Japanese, too, discreetly expressed an interest in the archipelago. But selling the islands to another nation would have meant that America had fought a war to aggrandize the position of one of the imperial powers in the region.

Allowing Spain to maintain sovereign control might lead to the same result, given Madrid's shaky hold on the islands. Summing up these possibilities, Albert Beveridge said: “Shall we turn these peoples back to the reeking hands from which we have taken them? Shall we abandon them, with Germany, England, Japan, hungering for them? Shall we save them from those nations, to give them a self-rule of tragedy?” To ask the question was to answer it. “Then,” Beveridge concluded, “like men and not like children, let us on to our tasks, our mission, and our destiny.” A protectorate – granting domestic freedom while maintaining control of external relations – was considered, but McKinley saw this as the worst of all worlds. By October, conversations with individuals personally familiar with the islands led McKinley to doubt the democratic bona fides of the revolutionaries, their capacity for self-rule, and the degree of popular support that they commanded.

In the end, for all the possibilities, the issue came down to an all-or-nothing choice – independence for the Filipinos or

annexation of the islands as an outright colonial possession. Early discussions in McKinley's cabinet indicated that most officers favored keeping some part of the islands, but this minimalist approach was ruled out because of uncertainty about the fate of the remaining portion. Thus, the decision to keep the entire archipelago had less to do with expansionist greed than with the absence of better options. As McKinley said afterwards, despite his many doubts and lack of enthusiasm, "in the end there was no alternative" to keeping the islands."⁴⁴ By the end of October, he instructed his peace commissioners to demand them all. In his final instructions, he explained that "the war has brought us new duties and responsibilities which we must meet and discharge as becomes a great nation on whose growth and career from the beginning the ruler of nations has plainly written the high command and pledge of civilization . . ." With reluctance, the Spanish complied in the Treaty of Paris in December 1898 and agreed to accept 20 million dollars in compensation. In addition, the Spanish ceded Guam and Puerto Rico to the US.

A large measure of the president's indecision had been due to uncertainty about how imperialism would be greeted by the public. Having recently been singed by the hot blast of opinion over Cuba, it was only natural that he should be sensitive about an adverse popular reaction. But the public opinion that became a crucial factor in the decision to annex the Philippines was very different in its make-up from the kind of pressure he had encountered in the Cuban crisis. The volcanic, fire-breathing jingoism that had overpowered McKinley earlier in the year had settled down. With confusion having taken the place of compulsion, the president's instinct was to put his ear to the ground, not to reach for earplugs.

Not until an electoral speaking tour in October did he realize that annexation would not be a political albatross. As early as May, Senator Lodge, in a letter to his fellow expansionist, Theodore Roosevelt, reported that "the feeling of the country is overwhelming against giving the Philippines back to Spain . . . We shall sweep the country on that issue in my judgment. Republican conventions are all declaring that where the flag

once goes up it must never come down.”⁴⁵ Lodge’s prediction was on the mark, for the people did indeed appear to be smitten by the allure of empire. Anti-imperialist Democrats like former president Grover Cleveland were amazed by the change in the public temper, complaining that “the ears of our people are closed to reason.”⁴⁶ The most striking indication of this new enthusiasm for imperialism was the election to the US Senate of a strident pro-imperialist from Indiana, Albert Beveridge. Indiana! Beveridge was a Johnny One Note, singing a monotonously simple tune of imperialism that was, somehow, catchy enough to get him elected.⁴⁷

Imperialism was possible because it was in the air. Prior to the 1890s, Americans held mixed views on imperialism that prevented its adoption in the few cases when the issue had come up for policy discussion. While they tended to approve of colonialism on the whole as a way of spreading civilization, just as often they condemned European methods of colonial administration. For example, the travel writer Bayard Taylor, commenting on British rule in India, was quite critical of the racism and exploitation that he encountered there. Nevertheless, “in spite of [a] spirit of selfish aggrandizement,” he concluded that “the country has prospered under English government.”⁴⁸ In South Africa, a US mining engineer called the British presence “a blessing, not only for the whites, but for the natives as well.”⁴⁹ The distinctions ran finer still. Though Americans were often critical of their methods of administration, the British tended to be perceived as “good” colonizers when measured against the efforts of other imperial powers.⁵⁰

Despite its positive aspects, for the United States imperialism would have violated the tradition of republican expansion whereby new territories in North America had been added with the expectation of eventual admission to the union as states. There were a host of reasons why Americans felt no need to follow in the footsteps of the Europeans, but identity concerns were at the top of the list. The refusal of the Senate to agree to the annexation of the Dominican Republic during the Grant administration was the chief post-Civil War example. While its large negro population made statehood unthink-

able, the alternative of annexing the Dominican Republic as a colonial dependency seemed too radical a departure from the tradition of republican expansionism.⁵¹ “We cannot have colonies, dependencies, subjects, without renouncing the essential conception of democratic institutions,” said the *New York Tribune*, when the Johnson administration, pushed by the expansionist Secretary of State William Seward, had first sought to purchase the nation.⁵²

But as times changed, so too did opinions. Thanks to industrialization and democratization, the United States and Europe were becoming more alike. As one historian has noted of the end of the nineteenth century, “underneath the political and the aesthetic contrasts, there was neither Old nor New World, but a common, economy-driven new-world-in-the-making.”⁵³ Herbert Croly, the oracle of progressivism, believed that “the distance between Europe and America is being diminished.” The democratization of Europe and the lessening of ideological distance with America were creating “a condition which invites closer and more fruitful association with the United States.”⁵⁴ Another historian, writing in 1902, expressed this theme of democratic universality a bit differently: “The story of America and the story of modern world history are the same story.”⁵⁵ This sense of historical convergence gave rise to all kinds of common interests between Europe and the United States, not least of which seemed to be a common way of handling their foreign relations.

With imperialism all the rage in Europe, an increasing number of cosmopolitan Americans who kept abreast of developments on the continent saw imperialism as the initiation rite that would admit the nation into the great power fraternity. Identity is defined to some extent by identification with role models or reference groups. As Ernest May has argued, “International fashions in thought and events on the world scene could have had a decisive influence on men of the establishment.” These establishment men “belonged both to their own country and to a larger Atlantic community.”⁵⁶ For people of this kind, America’s international identity was a matter of growing concern, and with good reason. As an economic

giant in the world revolution of industrialization, the US led the pack in just about every quantitative measure of industrial prowess, but it exercised little international influence in shaping the military, political, or ideological direction being taken by that revolution.

For people who were concerned about securing America's place in the modern world, imperialism was a form of internationalism. Whether it was undertaken for reasons of national pride or international duty, imperialism would clarify America's international identity, by confirming the nation's new standing and place at the forefront of civilization. According to Richard Olney, momentarily seduced by the vision of imperialist internationalism, "both duty and interest required us to take our true position in the European family."⁵⁷ Formerly an unorthodox notion, the idea of imperialism began to appeal to a growing number of people who thought seriously about foreign relations. The prophet of navalism, Alfred Thayer Mahan, put the connection between imperialism and internationalism in its simplest terms: "I am an imperialist simply because I am not an isolationist."⁵⁸

The breakdown of the long-standing consensus on the undesirability of imperialism and the emergence of a rift within the foreign-policy elite provided imperialist ideas with an appeal that they had not formerly enjoyed. But the inroads made by these ideas were only partial. Because the question of empire was so hotly contested among the elites, public opinion became a decisive consideration. In the absence of united counsel from those who traditionally set the agenda of foreign policy, politicians were forced to take their bearings from the *vox populi*. And the public, influenced by events abroad and by opinion-makers at home who were enamored of imperialism, seemed to want an empire. The more the issue was discussed, the more people clambered aboard the bandwagon.

So too did special interest groups. American business leaders, who had generally opposed the war with Spain and the acquisition of colonies, changed their minds in the aftermath of victory and came down in favor of retaining the Philippines. Business organs like the *New York Journal of Com-*

merce argued that giving up the islands “would be an act of inconceivable folly in the face of our imperative future necessities for a basis of naval and military force on the Western shores of the Pacific.”⁵⁹ Typically, the Philippines were not seen as valuable in themselves, but as a “way-station” to the China trade – “insular stepping stones to the Chinese pot of gold”⁶⁰ – an American Hong Kong.

Where there is political enthusiasm, there is money, but in this case one should be careful about attributing imperialism to economic interests. This rainbow, like all rainbows, was an optical illusion and the China arguments were most illusory of all from the standpoint of national interest. There was but a small though vocal group interested in the China market, and its economic arguments were rather doubtful. For one thing, at the time there was little money to be made in China. If anything, China’s attractiveness and profitability as a site of investment had declined in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the late 1890s, China absorbed only about 2 percent of American exports. Its huge population did give rise to some grand dreams of cashing in on a limitless China market, but there was no indication that China would soon begin to industrialize and develop a standard of living capable of absorbing vast amounts of foreign goods. If anything, the prevailing image of China was that of a culturally comatose country. Given these practical limitations, one can only conclude that the special interests in this case were dreamers with ideas far removed from interests as they are commonly understood.

Another source of concern for some expansionists was the possibility that the Chinese empire would soon be carved up by the European powers, in which case the United States might have been excluded from a potentially lucrative trade. But in that case, how exactly would Manila serve as an entrepôt? And if that misfortune did not come to pass, why was Manila necessary in the first place?⁶¹ Some wanted the Philippines as an outpost of American power in the region, on the assumption that trade would not flourish “without influence and power in back of it.”⁶² But this presumed the willingness of

the United States to use force and power to elbow its way into the commercial action in China, something that even the pro-imperialists refrained from advocating. As events in China would soon confirm, the US was simply not prepared to leap into a dangerous diplomacy of imperialism from which it had shied away in the past.

The discussion was blanketed by a dense fog of ignorance about an island group located more than 6,000 miles away from the west coast. So meager was their knowledge about the Philippine islands that Americans relied on a few alleged British experts to provide them with much-needed information. To illustrate the geographical absurdity of annexing this new object of fascination, the anti-imperialist Republican speaker of the House, Thomas "Czar" Reed, stretched a string across a globe to get some sense of where the Philippines were located. Unlike Hawaii, where a large, influential, and vocal community of Americans had been pressing for US annexation for years prior to 1898, there were few Americans in the Philippines. Although a few merchants had taken up residence in the nineteenth century, in 1889 the US consul in Manila counted only 23 American citizens residing there, six of whom were members of his immediate family.⁶³

The scarcity of concrete interests suggests that more rarefied ideological considerations were uppermost in the minds of McKinley and his advisers. In his speeches on the topic, the president stressed the country's need to abide by its obligations to civilization. It was "a holy cause" to advance "the banner of liberty" across the Pacific. "We must be guided only by the demands of right and conscience and duty," he told an Iowa crowd in October. In Atlanta, he claimed that "by meeting present opportunities and obligations we shall show ourselves worthy of the great trust that civilization has imposed upon us." Of course, the president was not above trying to place a divine sanction upon the enterprise. "The Philippines, like Cuba and Puerto Rico, were entrusted to our hands by the providence of God," he told a Boston audience in February 1899. McKinley was not alone in thanking Providence. Religious groups, Protestant and Catholic alike, warming to

the idea of accepting the “responsibilities which God lays on,” expressed a sudden interest in plowing the new evangelical fields opening up before them.⁶⁴

Far from being interested in the Philippines, as such, Americans had fallen in love with the *idea* of empire as part of a broader historical outlook that caused people to thrill to McKinley’s summons to “duty.” More than any other argument, it was the call of duty and civilization, the internationalist rhetoric of empire, that appears to have had the greatest impact. Their imperial moment was understood by Americans in a global context, without which America’s imperial expansion would probably not have taken place. The British arch-imperialist Cecil Rhodes once said that “I would annex the planets if I could.” Though the Philippines were only a small asteroid in the imperialist solar system, for the moment their annexation was sufficient to give many Americans a sense of cosmic purpose.

Some historians have argued that the decision was influenced by a competitive ideology of international relations, a social Darwinist creed of the “survival of the fittest” that prompted the nation to seize its share of colonial booty or be left behind in the international struggle for existence. But social Darwinism, in the American context, was almost exclusively a domestic doctrine that extolled the virtues of a *laissez-faire* economy and society. Strictly speaking, it was not Darwinist at all, but Spencerian, after Herbert Spencer, the British sociologist who developed a complex philosophy that justified a dog-eat-dog competitive capitalism as the best prescription for progress. The international counterpart of this classical liberal domestic outlook was not great power competition for colonies, but the anti-colonial “little England” views of Cobden-Bright free-trade liberalism. Not surprisingly, then, a sizable number of prominent so-called “social Darwinists” were actually opposed to militarism and imperialism, including the granddaddy of them all, Herbert Spencer.⁶⁵

But even the pro-imperialists failed to talk about joining the international competition for the simple reason that there was no cause for them to do so. After all, the United States

was not threatened. Acquiring the Philippine islands was not a response to international competition. The Venezuela crisis and the Olney Corollary, which demanded the retraction of European power from the western hemisphere, had been the nation's answer to *that* kind of challenge – and it was not an imperialist answer, at least not yet.

Far from suggesting international strife, imperialism conjured up images of a communal enterprise. As one historian has noted, “the powers of the late nineteenth century – including, briefly, the United States – all claimed essentially the *same* ideological justification.”⁶⁶ Because the spread of civilization was a process that could not be described solely in nationalist terms, its rhetoric implied that imperialism was a common undertaking of the developed nations, a form of internationalism that was helping to build a common, better world. Annexationists hoped that the adoption of an imperialist style would be connected to substantive changes in the conduct of international relations. Imperialism was emblematic of an optimism about the nation and the modern, progressive world of which it was now clearly a member. Somehow, the burst of enthusiasm for the idea of promoting civilization through imperialism tapped a hidden reservoir of popular sentiment.

Anti-imperialism and America's National Identity

As always in US foreign relations, an American president had to deal with two adversaries in negotiating a peace treaty: the defeated foe and the United States Senate, which was often the more powerful opponent. By virtue of its constitutional obligation to advise and consent to treaties by a two-thirds' majority, the Senate, normally a more independent-minded body than the House, would have to be convinced of the desirability of empire. All indications were that it was going to be a hard sell, especially as the Democratic Party under Bryan's leadership, which had been outspoken in its advocacy of war over Cuba, had taken a position against imperialism.

The ratification of the treaty showed once again the extent to which the process of acquiring an empire was affected by haphazard developments. This time, party politics and political miscalculation had an enormous impact. When it came time to consider the treaty in the Senate, the commanding role played by an unpredictable party politics in shaping the outcome demonstrated that there was no overwhelming wave of sentiment for empire. On paper, at least, the coalition of anti-imperialist Republicans and Democrats seemed to add up to a solid majority against imperialism. But once again military events influenced the final outcome. Two days before the Senate voted on the treaty, the US forces in Manila found themselves at war with the forces of Emilio Aguinaldo's independence movement.

Remarkably, it was Bryan himself who was largely responsible for the Senate's approval of the Treaty of Paris (by a 57–26 vote, one more than the two-thirds' majority necessary for ratification).⁶⁷ Bryan, in his capacity as party leader, instructed his troops to vote *for* the treaty. Despite having taken a firm stance against imperialism as a matter of principle, it appears that he did not want to make a political football of the treaty process. He reasoned that once the Democrats were returned to power – it was hoped in the election of 1900 – the islands could quickly be given their independence. As 11 Democrats followed Bryan's lead and voted for the treaty, the imperialists marveled "at seeing an opponent fall on his sword."⁶⁸ In the end, the Republicans did a better job of maintaining party cohesion by using promises of patronage and even offers of money to reel in the waverers from the other side of the aisle, which might well have done the trick even without Bryan's accommodating tactics.

But the close call in the Senate did not mean that imperialism had a clear field before it. After the treaty was passed, a resolution calling for early Philippine independence produced a tie vote in the Senate, which was broken only by the vice-president's deciding ballot. With the favorable Senate vote, the anti-imperialists shifted their attention to the election of 1900. Bryan and the Democrats opposed imperialism in the

campaign, as the Democratic platform called the Philippines a “burning” and “paramount” issue of the day. Meanwhile, an anti-imperialist league, which had been formed in Boston in November by liberal Republican types, or “Mugwumps,” had organized a nation-wide opposition to the acquisition of the islands.

Debates about fundamental issues are rarely conclusive, but they do tend to be quite informative in revealing the basic assumptions of the two sides. And so with this debate. The anti-imperialists had a battery of arguments to hurl against the imperialists. They believed that imperialism would involve the country in power politics and allow militarists too much influence in the US government. Commerce? Trade was developed “not by the best guns, but by the best merchants,” they insisted. The China trade? It seemed clear to them that “one European customer is worth more than twenty or thirty Asiatics.” World power? “We *are* a world power now, and have been for many years,” they claimed. With respect to the civilizing mission, was it absolutely certain that the Filipinos were unfit for independence? “This is their affair and . . . they are at least entitled to a trial,” said one. As for coaling stations, they could be had aplenty without resorting to empire.

There was also an important racial critique of imperialism which, in the past, had been played as a trump card in opposition to annexationist projects.”⁶⁹ In some respects, the anti-imperialists took a generous view of Filipino capabilities, most notably so when they questioned the presumption that the Filipinos were unfit for self-government. “There is an overwhelming abundance of testimony,” said Carl Schurz, “that the Filipinos are fully the equals, and even the superiors, of the Cubans and the Mexicans.” But that was to damn them with faint praise, for few believed that they were the equals of the white man. “That the islanders are not qualified for American citizenship is everywhere acknowledged,” said one anti-imperialist.⁷⁰

For the more liberal anti-imperialists and for African-Americans, the sorry record of the United States in dealing with its negro population was hardly an endorsement of the country’s

ability to treat the Filipinos in an enlightened manner. “It is a sorry, though true, fact that wherever this government controls, injustice to the dark race prevails,” said one observer.⁷¹ And even if the proponents of the “white man’s burden” were taken at their word, the connection between climate and racial degeneracy seemed an insurmountable barrier to racial uplift. One anti-imperialist senator maintained that “you can no more produce a white man, a man of our blood, in the Tropics than you can a polar bear.” It seemed silly to talk about uplift for the Filipinos when many anti-imperialists worried that life in the tropics would lead to degeneracy among the white colonists. Given this pronounced aversion to the idea of annexing non-white peoples, it may well be, as one historian has suggested, that racism was “a deterrent to imperialism rather than a stimulant to it.”⁷²

Many imperialists also appealed to racial inferiority, but it was an appeal that painted a more optimistic picture of racial possibilities. As an example, take the famous suggestion by Albert Beveridge that giving independence to the Filipinos would be “like giving a razor to a babe and asking it to shave itself.” This quotation is usually found in contexts that stress the patronizing adult–child contrast but ignore the fact that babies do eventually grow up to wield razors successfully. Thus Beveridge’s caustic remark, which suggested the capacity of non-white peoples eventually to become civilized through tutelage, actually exhibited a softer form of racism than the hard-edged arguments of many anti-imperialists.⁷³ On balance, however, race – persuasively deployed against annexation for much of the century – had become simply an inconclusive argument used by both sides. By itself, racism did not point clearly in the direction of imperialism.”

To the extent that race did influence the debate, it is more likely that the *intra-racial* doctrine of Anglo-Saxonism – which was, to be more precise, an expression of inter-cultural solidarity based on affinities of language and institutions – had a greater impact on the outcome. Anglo-Saxonism was an approving expression of the trend toward reconciliation between England and America, but its new-found attraction derived

largely from the seductive internationalist packaging that appealed to some key features of America's new global self-image. "The two countries which stand best for a free civilization have all their interests in common," said one journal. "Together they can do much for the world." Thoughts about marching arm in arm with the formerly despised mother country, England – according to John Hay the two nations were "joint ministers in the same sacred mission of freedom and progress" – also implied a readiness to transcend purely national concerns. For example, Richard Olney pointed to "a patriotism of race as well as of country – and the Anglo-American is as little likely to be indifferent to the one as to the other."⁷⁴ At the margins, this patriotism of race shaded into a sense of affinity for other civilized powers like France and Germany.⁷⁵

While the anti-imperialists had responses to all of the imperialist contentions, their strongest and most passionate arguments emphasized the poisonous effect of colonialism upon the national character. If, as one author has suggested, "imperialism is government of other people by other people for other people," there was indeed an ideological discordance between empire and democracy.⁷⁶ Pointing up this incompatibility, Schurz argued that "a democracy cannot so deny its faith as to the vital conditions of its being." Senator George Hoar of Massachusetts, one of the more eloquent anti-imperialist Republicans, put the concern squarely when he described imperialism as "a greater danger than we have encountered since the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth – the danger that we are to be transformed from a republic, founded on the Declaration of Independence, guided by the counsels of Washington, into a vulgar, commonplace empire, founded upon physical force." As historian Robert Beisner has suggested, the "Mugwump" anti-imperialists worried that "the more America departed from her original character, the more it seemed . . . that she began to resemble the old nations of Europe."⁷⁷

Resorting to rhetoric that was reminiscent of the anti-slavery crusade, Hoar argued that "No man was ever created good enough to own another. No nation was ever created good

enough to own another.”⁷⁸ Though such identity-based arguments tend to be associated with Republican anti-imperialists, they were also prominently on display in the rhetoric of that ostensible insurgent, William Jennings Bryan, when he insisted that “the highest obligation of this nation is to be true to itself.” Anti-imperialism appealed, in William James’s phrase, to “every American who still wishes his country to maintain its ancient soul – soul a thousand times more dear than ever, now that it seems in danger of perdition.”⁷⁹ Adopting the new other-directed international identity would irreparably warp the nation’s innate inner-directed character.

Perhaps the most telling indicator of the mentality of the avid anti-imperialists was their advanced age – the average age of leading anti-imperialists in one study was 69. These men had cut their political teeth in an earlier era as abolitionists, radical republicans, and civil service reformers. The generational difference was underscored by Roosevelt in a letter to Mahan. “We have in America among our educated men a kind of belated survivor of the little English movement among the Englishmen of thirty years back,” he said. “They are provincials, and like all provincials, keep step with the previous generation of the metropolis.”⁸⁰ By contrast, imperialism seemed more appealing to what the US consul in London described as “the younger and more active elements of the country.” Thus the debate over empire to some degree reflected a generation gap between those who wanted to adhere to tradition and a younger group who believed that modern times demanded that the United States abandon its aloofness and become an active partner of the Europeans in the project of creating a global civilization.⁸¹

It was this international standard of civilization that made imperialism seem a good and noble policy. As McKinley told one audience in Ohio, “we must take up and perform and as free, strong brave people, accept the trust which civilization puts upon us.”⁸² The belief in civilization implied an unselfish willingness to undertake what Rudyard Kipling called, in a poem drafted in celebration of the Senate’s ratification of the Paris treaty, the “White Man’s Burden.” The white man’s

burden was a supranational racial principle, not a nationalist conviction. As one earnest soul put it, "What America wants is not territorial expansion, but expansion of civilization. We want, not to acquire the Philippines for ourselves, but to give the Philippines free schools, a free church, open courts, no caste, equal rights to all. This is for our interest."⁸³ This was a position that appealed even to some prominent anti-imperialists who opposed empire for geopolitical reasons. According to John W. Burgess, "There is no human right to the status of barbarism. The civilized states shall have a claim upon them, and that claim is that they shall become civilized."⁸⁴

In the end, the debate over empire revolved around contrasting visions of the nation's place in the world. Those who sought to fashion a new international identity for the United States saw imperialism as the price of admission into a fast-developing global society in which the United States was destined to be a leading member. Those who opposed empire did so largely because it would have been a denial of what they conceived to be the nation's unique ideological essence. The difference was between those who believed that America's place outside history was the source of its greatness and those who believed that continued exclusion from the global flow of time would marginalize the nation.