

The Temptation of Empire: The Great Debate over America's Role in the World at the Dawn of the 20th Century

By Robert Johnson



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"The Temptation of Empire" was presented to the Winchester Torch Club on December 6, 2017.

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From the beginning, America was a place with a large vision of what it should become and an expectation that it would be a major influence on the people of the world. As the Puritans arrived in Massachusetts Bay in 1630, and before they had disembarked their ship, their leader John Winthrop gave a speech calling on his followers to "be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us."

This idea of America having a special role, being a light unto the world, has echoed down to modern times. It is sometimes known as "American Exceptionalism": the idea that America has a unique mission in the world to spread freedom and democracy. John Kennedy used John Winthrop's imagery in a speech in 1961. Ronald Reagan used it repeatedly during his election campaign in 1980. Senator Obama invoked it in a commencement address at the University of Massachusetts in 2006, and Mitt Romney used the "city on a hill" imagery in a statement condemning Donald Trump in 2016.

A century and a half after the Puritans' arrival, America launched a revolution against the super power of the age with eloquent words of the Declaration of Independence. That document also became one of the inspirations that lit the fires of the French Revolution a few years later. Of course, achieving its ideals has been a work in progress, not yet completed, and it was far from an accurate reflection of the situation in America at the time.

Neither the "city on a hill" image nor the ideals of the Declaration seem altogether compatible with the aggressive expansion that soon followed. During the century following the end of the American Revolution, the United States was busy spreading across the North American continent, driving the indigenous peoples off their land, and taking large chunks of Mexico as the nation expanded to the Pacific Coast. After four-year pause while the nation attempted suicide in the Civil War, American industrial and financial strength surged and leaders began, once again, to look beyond the national

borders and contemplate the future role of America in the world. What kind of a “light unto the world” would it be?

An early indication of the thinking of some was the decision to bring Hawaii in as a protectorate in 1898 after its native queen and her government had been deposed by some resident American business men. That same year, the U. S. intervened in the revolt of Cuban colonials against Spain, an action partly due to rabble-rousing by newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst’s *Journal-American* and an explosion (blamed on the Spanish) that sunk the American warship *Maine* in Havana Harbor. It was a short war. The entire Spanish fleet in the Philippines, except for one ship, was destroyed in a few hours by Admiral Dewey. The land war in Cuba was hot, disease-ridden, and nasty, but it gave Theodore Roosevelt an opportunity to charge up San Juan Hill and temporarily slake his thirst for war and battle.

The peace negotiations between Spain and the United States were held in Paris. The resulting treaty took Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines from Spain and put them under the jurisdiction of the United States, the United States agreeing to pay twenty million dollars for the Philippines. The treaty required ratification by two-thirds of the United States Senate and became the focus of one of the most bitter debates in American history: the temptation for America to become an imperial power in the world had arrived.

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The great debate that ensued over the Treaty of Paris was focused on the planned takeover of the Philippines by the United States to provide an opportunity for the projection of American military and trading power into the far western Pacific region. What advantages did this move offer? Was it consistent with national ideals? Was it right?

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Some of the most famous and influential luminaries in America were lined up on both sides. Notable in the imperialist camp were Theodore Roosevelt, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, and eventually President McKinley. Most of the Republican party was aligned with them. In the anti-imperialist camp were likewise some of the most famous people in the country; Mark Twain; Andrew Carnegie, one of the wealthiest men in the United States; William Jennings Bryan, who was nominated three times to be the Democratic candidate for president; William James, philosopher and Harvard’s first professor of psychology; Samuel Gompers, the labor leader;

Jane Addams, founder of Hull House. Many of them joined a new organization, the Anti-Imperialism League. The anti-imperialists were not opposed to economic or cultural imperialism, but to the military and political dominance version provided for in the Treaty of Paris.

The flavor of that bitter contest is still discernible in the comments and speeches of the partisans on both sides of the issue. Here is a quotation from Roosevelt:

Do the man’s work of civilizing the Philippines, since the Philippines are utterly unfit for self-government and show no signs of becoming fit. I have scant patience with those who fear to undertake the task of governing the Philippines [...] but I have even scantier patience with those who make a pretense of humanitarianism to hide and cover their timidity, and who care about “liberty” and the “consent of the governed”.

Resistance must be stamped out! As for those in our own country who encourage the foe, we can afford contemptuously to disregard them; but it must be remembered that their intensions are not saved from being treasonable merely by the fact that they are despicable. (qtd. in Kinzer, 147)

Just as emphatic, though on the other side, was Mark Twain: I have read carefully the Treaty of Paris, and I have seen that we do not intend

to free, but to subjugate the people of the Philippines. We have gone there to conquer, not to redeem. [...] It should, it seems to me, be our pleasure and duty to make these people free, and let them deal with their own domestic questions in their own way. And so, I am an anti-imperialist. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land. (qtd. in Kinzer, 179)

The following year, 1901, as the horrors of the Philippine War became clear, Twain noted:

There must be two Americas: one that sets the captive free, and one that takes a once captives' new freedom away from him, and picks a quarrel with him with nothing to found it on, then kills him to get his land [...] true, we have crushed a deceived and confiding people; we have turned against the weak and the friendless who trusted us; we have stamped out a just and intelligent and well-ordered republic [...] we have bought a shadow from an enemy that hadn't it to sell, we have robbed a trusting friend of his land and his liberty. ("To the Person Sitting in Darkness")

Although initially reluctant to support the Treaty of Paris, President McKinley eventually lined up in support of both the treaty and the American occupation of the Philippines. After agonizing over his decision, he at one point publicly expressed his views as

follows:

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 to almighty God for light and guidance more than one night. And one night late it came to me this way [...] that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all and to educate the Filipinos and uplift them and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the best we could by them, as our own fellow men for who Christ also died. (qtd. in Boot, 105)

McKinley apparently did not know that most Filipinos were already Christians; his observations also reflect the view, routinely held in Washington at the time, that the Filipinos could not be self-governing. They likewise reflect Rudyard Kipling's famous, perhaps notorious, poem "The White Man's Burden," which was actually originally written not for Kipling's fellow Englishmen, but precisely for the American public and decision makers of 1899. It originally bore the subtitle, "The United States and the Philippine Islands."

Another voice, that of William Jennings Bryan, the most famous orator in the country and the leader of the Democratic party, weighed in on the anti-imperialist side:

If, however, a contest undertaken for the sake of humanity degenerates into a war

of conquest, we shall find it difficult to meet the charge of having added hypocrisy to greed...shall we contemplate a scheme for the colonization of the Orient merely because our ships won a remarkable victory in the harbor of Manila? Our guns destroyed a Spanish fleet, but can they destroy that self-evident truth, that governments derive their just powers, not from superior force, but from the consent of the governed? (qtd. in Kinzer, 15)

As the fierce debates ensued, the Treaty signed on December 10, 1898 eventually came before the United States Senate. Ratification required that it be supported by 2/3 of the senators. The vote occurred on April 11, 1899, and the Treaty was ratified with a two-vote margin in support.

As previously noted, the treaty provided that the United States pay \$20 million to Spain for the Philippines. Andrew Carnegie, a staunch anti-imperialist, offered to buy the Philippines with \$20 million of his own money so he could give them their independence. Of course, his offer was declined; the American imperialists wished to project American power and commerce into the far Pacific.

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The Filipinos had organized an uprising against the Spanish beginning in 1896. They initially welcomed the Americans and provided them assistance in ousting the Spanish remaining in

the country after the sinking of the Spanish fleet. They took the Americans to be liberators—a costly misunderstanding, as soon became clear.

The war of subjugation became much more difficult and bloody than anticipated. When President McKinley ordered the Filipinos who had been fighting the Spanish to show “honest submission” to the United States and accept “benevolent assimilation rather than independence,” the leader of those Filipino fighters, Amelio Aguinaldo, said, “My nation cannot remain indifferent in view of such a violation and aggressive seizure of its territory by a nation which has arrogated to itself the title ‘Champion of Oppressed Nations.’ My government is disposed to open hostilities if the American troops attempt to take forcible possession...upon their heads be all the blood which may be shed” (qtd. in Kinzer 102). And very bloody indeed was the war that followed, lasting over four years before the American military could assert control. During that time a total of 126,468 American soldiers served in the Philippines and fought in 2,811 engagements. The United States Army suffered 4,234 dead, compared to 379 Americans killed in combat in the Spanish-American War. 16,000 Filipinos died in battle, plus 200,000 civilians who died from a variety of causes, including shooting and torture by the Americans. There were occasions when entire villages were destroyed, and the inhabitants shot or otherwise murdered. It is beyond question that the American army in the Philippines sometimes

violated the law of war in dealing with the Filipinos.

A specific example of lawless behavior is revealed in orders given to a subordinate officer by General Jacob Smith, known as Hell-Roaring Jake, who was later the subject of an official inquiry and forced into retirement.

General Smith: “I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and the more you burn the better you will please me. I want all persons killed who are capable of bearing arms.”

Major Waller: “I would like to know the limit of age.”

General Smith: “Ten years.” (Kinzer 221)

Major Waller later told his men, “We are now making war on women and children”.

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The Americans introduced water-boarding torture, among other atrocities. Eventually the Americans prevailed, and the Philippines remained under American control, except when controlled by the Japanese during WWII, until they were eventually granted independence in 1946. America had projected its power and influence deep into the Pacific region, the islands providing a

forward base for commercial activity and military influence in Asia. The irony is that much the same result would have occurred if their independence had been respected from the beginning and the initial friendly reception by the Filipinos of the Americans had been reciprocated.

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Cuba, along with other Spanish holdings in the Caribbean, came under substantial United States control until Fidel Castro took control of Cuba in 1959. For the Cubans, the promised independence was partly an illusion. Their leaders’ plan for reform and redistribution of land and other property came as a shock to large American land holders and other business interests. The United States had become an imperial power; the Caribbean had become an American lake.

In seizing economic and strategic power, the American imperialists were little different than the imperialists of Great Britain, France, Belgium, and Germany. There were, however, risks in this type of aggression. In the words of Bismarck, “Preventive war is like committing suicide for fear of death” (Wikiquote).

The anti-imperialists were convinced that America was threatened not so much by foreign adversaries as by the negative effect that imperial wars of aggression had on the American political system and the essence of the American spirit. They believed the United States should be a champion of

freedom, dedicated to its founding principle that people may be ruled only with their consent.

The great debate at the dawn of the 20th century over the role of America in the world was fierce, and it framed the arguments concerning the direction of future policy in the fateful decades to come by the nation destined to become the most powerful country in the world in what came to be termed the American Century.

As the century unfolded, there was less American interest in invading and occupying than in exerting American political and economic power to secure American interests. America also played a key role in major world conflicts by providing military force directly in support of our allies. The United States came in and provided vital support in tipping the balance of military action against Germany in the final stages of World War I. We did it again in World War II. The United States emerged from that war as the most powerful nation in the world and did something quite remarkable; the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of devastated Europe poured huge sums of money into that effort—including the reconstruction and other assistance to a devastated Germany. We did something similar in assisting our devastated enemy, Japan. Unfortunately, we also had to take on the role as principal adversary to the worldly ambitions of the Soviet Union. Since its collapse we continue to be heavily engaged in a variety of ways in foreign confrontations and conflicts. The latest information

indicates we have American troops deployed in about 170 countries and territories.

There has been an almost cyclical movement of American opposition and action concerning our involvement in the affairs of other countries and the world, with passionate commitment followed by intense resistance. Americans resisted getting into World War I, but when they finally did, they were full of intensity. After the war there was rejection of the League of Nations, followed by an America First movement that strongly resisted assisting Great Britain when it was nearly conquered by the Nazis. That view changed dramatically when we were directly attacked. And then we were engaged in the long slog of the Cold War against the Soviet Union. In that effort we got deeper and deeper into the Vietnam quagmire and the country was almost torn apart by the domestic resistance that emerged. In recent years we have engaged in low intensity, but expensive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Since John Winthrop gave his speech in Massachusetts Bay in 1630 proclaiming that, “We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.” Americans have in various ages been of two minds concerning our role in the world. At times we have been an inspiration with the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Civil Rights Act, and the 19th Amendment granting women the suffrage, seeking to form a “more perfect union.” The other implied

role for Americans in the speech is to engage with the world, the issue that was at the center of the great debates over the Treaty of Paris and the fate of the Philippines.

The expressed ideals gradually were achieved, at least in part, over time, with other peoples in the world observing how well or poorly we have achieved them. To many they have been an inspiration. That is part of what Winthrop’s speech implied and why it has been invoked in the following centuries up to our own time.

The eyes of the world are still upon us. What do they see?

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