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The Spanish-American War: The Leap Into Overseas Empire, Part 2

by Joseph R. Stromberg

In February 1899, uneasy relations between U.S. forces and the Filipino insurgents turned into actual fighting. America was now to learn the sorrows of empire along with its joys. Rallying under the slogan "*No hay derecho a vender un pueblo como se vende un saco de patatas*" ("There is no right to sell a nation like a sack of potatoes"), Filipinos flocked to the forces of Aguinaldo and Mabini to oppose the new colonial masters.

In short order, the Americans found themselves running a counterinsurgency every bit as brutal as anything the Spaniards had done in Cuba. (McKinley, of course, did not make this analogy.) Regular army soldiers, many of them veterans of America's Indian wars, undertook "marked severities" (as one termed it) against these new "Indians." One officer wrote: "We must have no scruples about exterminating this other race standing in the way of progress, if it is necessary." As of July 1902, when the United States declared the Philippine Insurrection over, 200,000 to 220,000 Filipinos had died, of whom only 15,000 were actual combatants, which suggests that U.S. forces consciously made war on the enemy's entire society (i.e., had waged total war).

In the meantime, critics of expansionism began to speak up. Some simply did not want foreign dependencies. Others, perhaps seeing more deeply into things, warned that ruling overseas dependencies violated the premises of republican government and the values of classical liberalism. Running again as McKinley's opponent in the presidential election of 1900, William Jennings Bryan made little use of imperialism as a campaign issue; as a result, the election did not provide a clear mandate for or against overseas empire.

Opponents of empire more fervent than Bryan organized the Anti-Imperialist League in Boston to oppose the Philippine War and colonialism. Erving Winslow, Edward Atkinson, Moorfield Storey, William James, Andrew Carnegie, and former President Cleveland added their voices to the anti-

imperialist chorus (as did the English liberal Goldwin Smith, writing from the relative safety of Ontario). Perhaps because of their narrow upper-class social base, the "antis" were unable to generate much support for their views. (A few years later, V.I. Lenin derided them as "the last of the Mohicans of bourgeois democracy.") After all, the economy was going again, the war had been a great success, and - at the time, at least - obtaining overseas possessions seemed just the thing that grown-up nations were supposed to do. One newspaper editor commented that it was "a sinful extravagance to waste our civilizing influence upon the unappreciative Filipinos when it is so badly needed right here in Arkansas." Such comments were out of step with the times.

Nonetheless, there was a price for having "greatness thrust upon" us (as one historian puts it). McKinley's assassination in September 1901 brought to the White House an even more strident expansionist, Theodore Roosevelt, who proceeded to detach Panama from Colombia, build the isthmian canal, and intervene in Latin America at the drop of a hat.

While the Philippine experience soured American policymakers on colonial empire, they did not give up using American political and military power to push American commerce into foreign markets, often before businessmen themselves had any real interest in them. The China market was always a snare and a delusion, except for a few businessmen who actually made money on it and policymakers who made careers out of it. That the whole overproduction-underconsumption theory was faulty does not need demonstrating here. America had plenty of markets, mainly in developed, European countries, and could have had others elsewhere, had those in power been willing to adopt free trade.

In pursuit of the mistaken or self-interested political engrossment of overseas markets, American policymakers committed themselves to an "open door" in China and to the protection of the territorial integrity of China. This sounded good on paper but was not exactly self-enforcing. If other powers stood in the way of U.S. entry into - and eventual dominance of - the fabled China market, only war could sustain the policy. To make matters worse, Teddy Roosevelt, who viewed tzarist Russia as the chief threat to U.S. China policy, deliberately favored the rising power of Japan as a counterweight. When, in the 1930s, the Japanese declined to be the stalking horse for the Americans' Open Door, Franklin Roosevelt must have regretted his cousin's line of attack.

Already in the late 18th century, the great Anglo-American classical liberal Thom-as Paine had characterized the futility of such ventures when he wrote: "The most unprofitable of all commerce is that connected with foreign dominion. To a few individuals it may be beneficial, merely because it is commerce; but to the nation it is a loss. The expense of maintaining dominion more than absorbs the profit of any trade." Or as Adam Smith wrote (oddly enough in 1776):

"To found a great empire for the sole purpose of raising up a people of customers, may at first sight appear a project fit only for a nation of shopkeepers. It is, however, a project altogether unfit for a nation of shopkeepers; but extremely fit for a nation whose government is influenced by shopkeepers. Such statesmen, and such statesmen only, are capable of fancying that they will find some advantage in employing the blood and treasure of their fellow citizens, to found and maintain such an empire."

The Spanish-American War launched the United States on just such a path: that of a modern nonaristocratic empire founded on state power but oriented towards commercial gain for well-connected friends and associates. By expanding the horizons of U.S. foreign policy in the pursuit of export markets through formal empire (the Philippines) and informal empire (Latin America and, eventually, everywhere), the Spanish-American War enhanced the role of government in American life and the role of the presidency in American government. The classical liberal sociologist William Graham Sumner, a strong anti-imperialist, had this to say, not long after the war:

"We were told that we needed Hawaii in order to secure California. What shall we now take in order to secure the Philippines? No wonder that some expansionists do not want to 'scuttle out of China.' We shall need to take China, Japan, and the East Indies, according to the doctrine, in order to 'secure' what we have. Of course this means that, on the doctrine, we must take the whole earth in order to be safe on any part of it, and the fallacy stands exposed. If, then, safety and prosperity do not lie in this direction, the place to look for them is in the other direction: in domestic development, peace, industry, free trade with everybody, low taxes, industrial power."

Sumner's intended *reductio ad absurdum* explains actual U.S. foreign policy in the 20th century far better than a stack of books and pamphlets from the Council on Foreign Relations.

Sumner remarked in 1900 that "the political history of the United States for the next 50 years will date from the Spanish war of 1898." Indeed. That splendid little war was a turning point. One hundred years later, we need to get on with turning away from its legacy.

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