

Why America Took the Philippines

Jonathan C. FOE

Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Maynila

jonathan_foe@hotmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8190-7375>

ABSTRACT

This paper will give history teachers a helpful overview of American events leading to the Philippine-American War. The United States had rapidly become the leading industrial power, and with the end of the Western expansion, many Republicans yearned for overseas territories to control. This represented an abrupt shift as it had previously led one of the first anti-colonial revolutions, yet now emerged as a colonial power itself. As is often the case today, America was deeply divided—the pro-imperialists versus the anti-imperialists, the conservatives versus the liberals. Resistance to the United States' invasion of the Philippines was motivated by both moral and economic considerations. The Democrats, along with a few Republicans, were against any colonization by their government, and the farmers stood to lose against the importation of cheap tropical sugar. These disputes were at times explicitly racist, reflecting a nation that had abolished slavery thirty years earlier, yet still denied the principle of racial equality to American Blacks and Filipinos.

Keywords: *American imperialism, Gilded Age, American colonial policy, Spanish-American War, William McKinley*

Introduction

The United States of America had the world's first anti-colonial revolution. Yet, it too became a colonial power. At first glance, on the face of it, it is surprising. Indeed, it had invaded its neighbors, such as Mexico and Canada, but had never planned to occupy them permanently. Nor had America ever threatened faraway nations. Yet, at the turn of the last century, that is exactly what it did.

This might be hard to understand for Filipinos today. Also confusing is that the Republicans and the Democrats advocated different policies than they do now. Opposition to the invasion of the Philippines did not just come from those who were anti-imperialist, but also from sugar beet farmers in the Midwest. Also confusing, at the start of the conflict, the focus was not on the Philippines, but on Cuba, a Spanish colony that lay below Florida.

To review, there were a number of reasons for the Spanish-American War and the subsequent invasion of the Philippines. These reasons include:

1. The “yellow press” that agitated for war to liberate Cuba, in part to sell more newspapers.
2. The thirst for a manly war of conquest, personified by Theodore the “Rough Rider” Roosevelt.
3. The imperialist enthusiasm of the era to control foreign markets and people, particularly sugar growing areas.
4. Racial prejudice against non-whites as justified by Social Darwinism.
5. The drive to make America into a world power, through a strong navy.

This paper will give a glimpse of American history, focusing on political events, to put the American invasion of the Philippines into context. Hopefully, this will help cleanse the confusion that face Philippine history teachers.

An Unequal Relationship

It is necessary for one concept to be understood before a discussion of American politics. In other words, the United States was interested only briefly in the Philippines. American high school history textbooks will mention, of course, the Spanish-American War, and how this conflict resulted in the Philippine-American War. However, after this, the Philippines disappeared. Only when Douglas McArthur proclaimed “I have returned” was our colony mentioned again as part of the Pacific War. Often, not even our independence will be mentioned. Moreover, many Americans may not be aware that the Philippines was formerly a territory of the United States. This is the point of Immerwahr, in *How to Hide an Empire*¹. The mainland United States, Mainland USA, quickly forgot its own invasion of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, Hawaii, and the many other small island possessions of the nation dotting the Caribbean and Pacific Ocean. These actions were undertaken were made in during an imperialist age and remain important to American history, but lie forgotten. Yet, America remains a big part of us. Policies developed in Washington, DC made our laws and set our future. This is a part of our textbooks. America is often used as a point of comparison between the in-group and the out-group, even if the two nations are markedly different, and the Philippines is often portrayed unfavorably. In addition, most Filipinos are able to speak some English, and a significant portion of culture, politics, education, and business is conducted in this language. Our government structure imitates that of the Americans, and we are still tied militarily to the “mother” country. Moreover, there remains an emotional bond—whether characterized by admiration or resentment—that

¹ Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 7 – 15.

continues to exist among Filipinos toward the United States, yet this is largely unreciprocated.

In the eyes of America, today we are only a small part of a trading and military network of Southeast Asia, and nothing more. They have moved on, while many Filipinos have not.

Politics, A Dirty Business

The Civil War, lasting from 1861 through 1865, was the most traumatic experience for America. The conflict brought into power a new party, the Republicans. This was the party of Lincoln, and their platform was the restriction of the inhumane system of slavery. Once in office, they expanded this platform, adding the complete abolition of slavery by constitutional amendment and the Emancipation Proclamation. The party also sided with Northern businessmen and Midwest farmers to include expansion of the American West, a transcontinental railroad, high tariffs (to shield American corporations from European competition and generate taxes), in addition to a national banking system. During the Civil War, the Republicans could easily enact their program because the southern states, which had always opposed these policies, had walked out, leaving Congress in the hands of Republicans.

So, this party became pro-business, both big and small. Growth took off because of the financial and industrial demands of the Civil War. As the South surrendered, Lincoln was assassinated, succeeded by his Republican Vice President, Andrew Johnson. He carried out Reconstruction. This was the restructuring of the American South to give the former slaves some political power. The white Southerners absolutely hated Blacks getting above them and did everything in their power to stop racial equality. In fact, racial prejudice persisted in all parts of America, North and South, in spite of the end of slavery. There were violent anti-Black riots in Chicago, Detroit, Oklahoma and New York after the war. Neither the Republicans nor the Democrats seemed willing to fight discrimination.²

Reconstruction died by the 1890s because of a secret deal. In order to retain the presidency, the Republicans compromised with the Democrats, promising to stop Reconstruction. The result was a campaign of terror perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan against African Americans, while the federal government remained silent. Most African Americans were disenfranchised—that is, their right to vote was taken away.

² Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response, From Reconstruction to Montgomery*. (Boston, University of Massachusetts Press, 1988) 93 - 118

Consequently, the South, controlled by whites, consistently voted for the Democratic Party. Nevertheless, the South remained in poverty, as it failed to develop an alternative to the abolished slave system. It did not industrialize and remained a degraded agrarian society.

This was an exceptional time in American history. After the war, the Republican Party still dominated the Congress and the Presidency, up until the administration of Woodrow Wilson in 1912. In the 40 years since the Civil War, the Democrats had only won the presidency once, with Grover Cleveland, who, like Donald Trump years later, served two non-consecutive terms. It was not just the presidency that the Republicans controlled, but often both houses as well.

Part of the Democratic Party's problems was that their support came from "Dixiecrats" from what had become the Southern Confederacy. At the start of the Civil War, they had walked out of Congress, leaving the Republicans in control. After the war, the secessionist states were gradually readmitted into the Union, with the final state rejoining in 1871. Many Americans associated the Democrats with Confederate sore losers, and the party remained unpopular. However, the Democrats portrayed themselves as the party of "the common man."

In the nation's fast-growing cities, the Democratic party "machine" controlled local government through openly buying votes, controlling the judiciary, and supplying government workers. There was no civil service. There was little outcry from the Republicans, for they practiced similar styles of corruption on the national level. Americans grew disgusted with corruption. This was part of the reform movement, but up through the Philippine-American War, they were weak.

Part of the problem was a Republican near monopoly on national power. Perhaps voters were satisfied, since there was phenomenal economic growth, transforming what had been an agrarian society into the leading industrial power. The Republicans took credit for this progress.

There was little in the way of a check and balance system, for opposition could easily get outvoted in congressional investigations. The popular American author Mark Twain called it the "Gilded Age," that is, a thin layer of gold paint to make plain objects look flashy. It was an ostentatious era of shallow materialistic wealth, alongside widespread political corruption. American historians consider this time as the most crooked, when sleaze of politics reached obscene levels. (Was the corruption practiced by Filipino

politicians during the American occupation due in part to the influence of dishonesty in the USA? I don't know.)

Another unusual feature of this time was the weakness of the presidency, in contrast to the strength of the Congress. Lincoln was a strong leader, but his replacement, Andrew Johnson, was impeached by Congress. To suffer a trial before the legislators was undignified, and after this, all presidents needed congressional support to rule.

In 1877, the presidential election resulted in an electoral college tie. The president was decided by Congress, not by the voters. This resulted in the Compromise of 1877, killing Reconstruction. In exchange for a Republican getting the presidency, the Democrats ordered Congress to pull federal troops from the South. This effectively terminated Reconstruction and further elevated the role of Congress. As a result, the presidential office was diminished in the broader political system.

The Beginnings of Reform

By the turn of the century, corruption seemed out of control. There was a groundswell of anger against the government from a variety of sources. Originating with the Midwest and Western States came the Populist Party. This group called for an end to all monopolies, immigration restrictions, the nationalization of all railroads and communication lines, direct election of senators, and a graduated income tax. Western farmers were seething at the way railroads would overcharge them. Widespread and often violent strikes emerged from the working class, demanding the right to form labor unions, an eight-hour workday, and improved wages. The cities, too, made local reform movements, promoted high school education, municipal libraries, and better parks. (Daniel Burnham of Baguio and Luneta Park fame was one of these advocates, and was part of the "City Beautiful" movement.³ Most of these reformists were anti-imperialists.

These populists chose William Jennings Bryan as their Democratic candidate against William McKinley. Bryan was a controversial candidate, and many Democratic newspapers refused to support him. McKinley remained silent on most issues, but he clearly expressed support for raising tariffs and promoting American business interests. (An aside: President Trump likes this man. Quoting from his inaugural speech, "President McKinley made our country very rich through tariffs and through talent. He was a natural businessman."⁴)

³ Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire*, 121.

⁴ Scott Wartman, "Why Trump loves William McKinley and what it could mean," Cincinnati Enquirer, January 20, 2025,

Slowly, with the accession to office of Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and finally Woodrow Wilson, the power of business was curtailed. Monopolies were restricted, the direct election of senators started, high tariffs were replaced by a graduated income tax, and women were given the right to vote. Moreover, these men restored the power of the presidency—Roosevelt through the force of his dominant personality, and Wilson through the support of reformist movements. But this came only after the military occupation of the Philippine Islands.

Generally, America was blessed with a fortunate geography. The land was neither the snowy expanse of Siberia, the sweltering swamps of Brazil, nor the frigid climate of Canada, but rather a continent characterized by a rich temperate climate. The potential for agriculture was endless. There was one problem, though. There was no way to get a ship from New York to San Francisco rapidly. The trip through the Straits of Magellan took two to three months. This was expensive, as well as a dangerous route. This was not just a business problem, but a national defense problem as well. If the West Coast were attacked and the Pacific fleet were destroyed, the Atlantic fleet would require at least two months to reach and defend the cities on the Pacific coast.

A canal through the Isthmus of Panama was the solution, but there was a problem. An obstacle stood in the path. Cuba, a Spanish-held colony in the Caribbean Sea, sat right below Florida. Cuba was perhaps the crown of Spain's overseas colonies, viewed as an "emerald island, the last of their Latin American Empire. It could not give this up without a fight."⁵ This was bad enough, since the American Monroe Doctrine declared it would not stand for European colonies in the Americas. But there were two other factors that encouraged American intervention. First, Cubans were fighting for independence, and Spain had sent large armies to crush this revolt. This made the colony of Cuba politically unstable, thus ripe for American influence. Secondly, American sugar companies were importing large quantities of Cuban sugar, and they wanted to control the source of this valuable product.

Cuba was blessed with excellent land for growing sugar. In fact, it was the number one exporter in the world for sugar. America imported most of Cuba's sugar crop. During this time, America had developed a sweet tooth. Coca-Cola and Pepsi started during the 1890s, and rapidly became popular. Medically speaking, sugar was thought to be good for one's health, since it

<https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/politics/2025/01/20/who-is-william-mckinley-and-why-does-donald-trump-admire-him/77838559007/> accessed March 1, 2025.

⁵ David Silbey, *A War of Frontier and Empire, The Philippine-American war, 1899—1902*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 225.

added calories to the diet. Yet, sugar was expensive for American consumers. Simply put, the Philippines got sucked into the conflict because it too was a Spanish colony and also produced sugar.

Nothing as Sweet as Sugar

This industrial era, prior to the Reform Movement, was notable for the emergence of monopolies, which were referred to as “trusts” at the time. There was no effective law yet to stop them, and monopolies controlled many congressmen and senators. And, unfortunately for Cuba, as well as the American public, this was the time of the American Sugar Refining Company, or for short, the Sugar Trust. This monopoly controlled the importation, refining, and distribution of sugar. They employed both legitimate and questionable methods to maintain control over the industry.

Tariffs, or the tax on imported goods, are usually not an interesting topic, but during this time, it was the main source of federal money. There was no income tax. American industry demanded high tariffs, so that they could protect its industries against European competition. This was an outdated policy, since American industry was on its way to becoming the greatest in the world. However, high tariffs made life easier for monopolies, letting them charge high prices for their goods, since it restricted competition. It took decades before American consumers became aware that they were being exploited.

These high prices were especially true for sugar, America’s biggest import. The American sugar industry possessed the largest and best refineries in the world, yet it had high tariffs. For instance, the 40% tariff rate made German refined sugar outrageously expensive. On the other hand, the unrefined sugar tariff rates were quite low. With their modern, efficient refiners in New York, the Trust's profits were high because they controlled 90% of the market for refined sugar⁶. With this market capture, consumers paid high prices for a spoonful of sugar.

The Sugar Trust wanted low tariffs for Cuban raw sugar. But Cuba was controlled by Spain, so it logically got little special dispensation. However, if Cuba became a colony, or territory, or a state of the Union, the tariff would decrease. And since interstate American commerce had no tariff, and if Cuba

⁶ Luzminda Francisco, Jonathan Fast, *Conspiracy for Empire, Big Business, Corruption and the Politics of Imperialism in America 1876 – 1907* (Quezon City: Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1985), 15. This is an interesting book with a detailed and unique argument that the Sugar Trust was the reason for the Spanish American War. Renato Constantino made the forward to this publication.

were part of America, it might get no tariff at all. This would mean that there could even be a higher markup for Cuban sugar sold in America.

Francisco and Fast, in their book *Conspiracy for Empire*, have solid evidence that the Sugar Trust did actively intervene in Congressional tariff discussions, as well as the events leading to the Spanish-American War. Republican party fundraisers would actively solicit funds from corporations that benefited from tariffs. This is how Republicans had migrated from being the party of anti-slavery to the party of big business.⁷

After Dewey blew up the Spanish fleet in Manila harbor, the Trust wanted to make sure the USA retained the Philippines. At crucial votes, congressmen and senators would receive as gifts American Sugar Refinery Corporation stock. At the end of a successful vote, the stock price would go up. At this point, many Senators sold their stock, making a lot of money.

However, based on available evidence, there were only allegations of manipulation within the McKinley administration. No definitive proof was found, although it is evident that the President was supportive of the trusts.

One potential competitor of the Trust was sugar beet farming. This crop was developed by the Germans, and it potentially could supply all the sugar needs of the nation at competitive prices.⁸ No longer would the nation require sugar cane from the tropics. However, sugar beet farms and refineries were small affairs, scattered across the American West. This setup proved impossible for the trust to control. The industry also needed some government affirmation to get off the ground. These farmers wanted the importation of sugar to be stopped, be it refined or unrefined. These farmers ditched the Republican party, demanded high sugar tariffs to restrict imports, and objected to the invasion of Cuba and the Philippines and the annexation of Hawaii. (Ahead of the story, but in the 1930s, they strongly supported Philippine independence, since their foreign competitors would be saddled with high tariffs. Politics makes strange bedfellows!)

⁷ Francisco and Fast, *Conspiracy for Empire*, 121.

⁸ Francisco and Fast, *Conspiracy for Empire*, 194.

Agitation Breeds War

But as in any conflict, there is never just one reason for conflicts to start. After all, no one was going to war to openly defend the Sugar Trust.

The 1800s was an era of *manifest destiny*. The term was popularized in 1840 by journalist John Louis O'Sullivan who wrote that it was "our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us." There was little doubt of the sanctity and success when America won the West.⁹

Yet by the late 1800s, the census department and the influential historian Frederick Jackson Turner declared the end of the American frontier.¹⁰ The Indians had been wiped out and restricted to small reservations. Few spots of wild land were left, and these were in the inhospitable mountains and deserts. Cities rapidly expanded on the West Coast. Americans had been out conquering the land and the Indians since 1620, forever going westward, and now they had reached the Pacific coast.

So, the question was, should America expand further, beyond its borders, or just concentrate on building up itself? If the westward frontier gave America its strength, its individualism, practicality, and freedom, Turner asked, what would happen to the unique American character now that there was no more frontier?

As it was, America had grown from a third rate power before the Civil War, to the world's leading industrial power in 1890. It had the world's highest GDP per person. Its growth was a phenomena. Should it stop and restrain itself, develop more lands inside the country, or go out and conquer more territory, more frontier?

This was the era of the "industrial age" and the "age of imperialism." Nearly all European nations rushed to get a piece of land and plant a flag on it. This was the time of the "scramble for Africa," leaving only Ethiopia independent. Some Americans were tempted to conquer lands as well.

The Cubans had an on again, off again revolt against Spain that lasted about four decades. Spain was determined to retain the islands, since it had many Spanish living there, and the sugar industry made the colony a cash cow. Unlike the Philippines, nearly a million Spanish had moved recently

⁹ David Silbey, *A War of Frontier and Empire, The Philippine-American war, 1899—1902* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 58

¹⁰ Evan Thomas, *The War Lovers, Roosevelt Lodge, Hearst and the Rush to Empire, 1898* (Boston: Little and Brown and Company, 2011), 58.

there, largely lured by profits from sugar. Large scale haciendas with near slavery conditions made for high rewards. The island also occupied a strategic spot, virtually on top of the major trade routes in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico. Lastly, Cuba was the last of the huge colonial empire that started in the early 1500s. For Spain, to surrender this prize was unthinkable.

Spain had problems holding on to the island. Tropical disease killed off more soldiers than combat did. (Recall that Doctor Rizal had volunteered to serve in Cuba, just to get him away from his Dapitan exile.) Their reconcentration policy developed by Governor General Valeriano Weyler was criticized in America (yet imitated by the US Army in the Philippines and Vietnam without much opposition.) This policy was successful in reducing the rebellion, yet it caused immense suffering, disease, and death in the camps. The American press gave Weyler the name "the butcher" of Cuba. (He also served in Spain's colony here.)

This presented another challenge for Spain in Cuba. The United States has historically exerted dominance over its neighboring countries; both Mexico and Canada had been invaded in the past, and Cuba was likely to experience a similar intervention. American newspapers, especially the *New York World and Journal*, greatly exaggerated Spanish atrocities. For one year, they had made their readers enraged with Spain's treatment of the Cuban revolutionaries and encouraged American intervention through half-truths and emotional outbursts. This was the "yellow press." These newspapers, and many others like them, bombarded their readers with often fabricated stories, so that after a year of blazing headlines, many Americans were driven into a pro-war hysteria. This increased circulation. Ironically, many reformists, reading stories of exaggerated torture of Cuban revolutionaries by Spain, hearing vivid stories of Spanish atrocities, idealistically saw Cuban independence as their fight as well.

Regardless of the facts, the call to war greatly increased profits and readership. Contemporary reports of this reporting pointed to the yellow press as the reason for the Spanish-American War.¹¹ This was ironic, considering any atrocity in Cuba was somebody else's concern. After all, it was another country, clearly outside the USA, and the only Americans residing there were businessmen in the sugar trade.

Spain was put in an impossible position, bullied into war. President Cleveland had refused congressional initiatives to condemn the Spanish in Cuba. After him came McKinley. This Republican was installed as president

¹¹ Thomas, *The War Lovers*, 269.

in March, 1897. He sent to Congress a simple tariff adjustment bill, and it came back to him as a bill recognizing the Cuban rebels. McKinley was reluctant to start a war, but presented Spain with a set of demands a few months later to pressure Spain to adopt a more humane policy in Cuba.

Spain rejected these demands, and McKinley gave vague threats of intervention, and finally an ultimatum. As a result, Spain backed down and promised autonomy and better treatment to its colony.

McKinley then sent the battleship *Maine* to Havana to "protect American lives." This blew up in the Cuban harbor, probably due to coal fumes in unventilated bunkers aboard the ship. Yet the US Navy quickly concluded that it was hit by a torpedo or mine. William Randolph Hearst's newspaper, the *New York Journal*, shouted in a banner headline, "Spain Guilty! Destroyed by a Floating Mine!"¹² This was a fabrication, but regardless, it increased the *Journal's* circulation.

The yellow press went insane, adding fuel to the fire for war.¹³ Demonstrators chanted, "Remember the Maine, to hell with Spain." Indeed, the episode ranks as among the most sordid in the annals of American journalism. Eyewitness accounts were fabricated, interviews with officials were manufactured, and belief in Spain's guilt was paraded as a test of patriotism and respect for national honor. Spain was suddenly the enemy."¹⁴

McKinley, faced with an outraged nation, remained cautious, and only called for a larger defense budget. Three months later, he called on Spain to grant a six-month armistice in Cuba. He even suggested that he could be an unbiased arbitrator over the conflict, but really, McKinley was never neutral. In April 1899, in a message to Congress, the president asked for authority to "take measures to secure a full and final termination of hostilities by *forcible intervention* as a neutral United States."¹⁵ This resolution got Congressional approval only with the Teller Amendment added. This add-on promised the USA would not colonize Cuba. McKinley reluctantly approved this resolution and sent it to their Spanish ambassador. Spain recognized it as the ultimatum and declared war on April 24, 1899.

Getting the Means to Wage War

¹² New York Journal, front page, March 25, 1898 accessed May 18, 2025
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn86071545/1898-03-25/ed-6/?dl=all&sp=1&r=-0.529,-0.154,2.057,1.214,0>

¹³ Thomas, *The War Lovers*, 224.

¹⁴ Thomas, *The War Lovers*, 106.

¹⁵ Frank Golay, *The Face of Empire: United States –Philippine American Relations, 1898 – 1946*. (Quezon City: Ateneo Press, 1997),

Golay observed that McKinley, like Cleveland before him, had followed a “Cuban policy that unfolded in a sequence of incremental escalation until Spain was forced to choose between either early independence for the Cuban colony or American intervention to accomplish the same end. . . The Spanish people and their leaders ultimately accepted war as the only possible escape from their cruel dilemma.”¹⁶

There were other ideas of expansion as well. Cuba stood in the way of a Panama Canal, not yet built, but for many industrialists, it was a necessity. There was also Hawaii, which 95% of its exports was sugar. Native Hawaiians governed these group of islands, and for many in the sugar industry, a takeover of Hawaii was essential.

American military leaders, particularly Captain Mahan of the Navy emphasized the benefits of a Hawaiian naval base to protect the West Coast. Mahan also promoted the need for a large navy, a canal at the isthmus, and Cuba to protect America. He applauded when the Philippines was taken. No longer should Americans build up shore batteries for protection, but build a big navy using the latest technology was needed for an aggressive naval defense.

Mahan pointed out that if America did not control Hawaii, some other power, such as the British or Japanese or Germans would take it. It was just a matter of time, he warned.¹⁷ The nation would also need safe harbors around the world to supply coal and supplies to American navy and merchant ships. Its only colony was the tiny Virgin Islands in the Caribbean, while the British power straddled the globe. America needed to project its power worldwide, and raise a navy that could do it. After much debate, Hawaii too was added as a territory of the United States during the Spanish-American War.

Modern readers would be excused to think that America has always been a strong military power. Yet after the civil war ended in 1865, both the Army and Navy dramatically shrank. Many Americans distrusted a large standing army and navy. They were expensive and dangerous. Most soldiers and sailors quit due to low pay and bad working conditions, and the navy ships were sent to scrap heaps. By 1880, the American navy was way behind the European powers, even the Spanish navy was stronger.¹⁸ But Captain Mahan had many supporters in Congress and at the White House. He did get his

¹⁶ Golay, *The Face of Empire* 15.

¹⁷ Barbara Tuchman, *The Proud Tower, A Portrait of the World Before the War, 1890 – 1914* (New York: Ballentine, 1965), 188, 213.

¹⁸ Tuchman, *The Proud Tower*, 133.

navy, and these were the modern ships that were used to destroy Spain ten years later. So for the first time, America was able to project its power overseas.

Yet when McKinley called for volunteers for a million-man army, American ground forces were only 30,000 men. Their weapons were obsolete, and they were out of practice since the Civil War.

The Anti Imperialists

Yet there were ideological obstacles in the way of this envisioned empire. First, the Pilgrims of the Massachusetts Bay Colony had envisioned making a "city on a hill". This borrowed the concept of Saint Augustine, advocating the construction of a holy and honest city that the world would admire. Many, if not most Americans, supported this. More to the point, the United States had the first anti-colonial revolution, kicking out the British of the thirteen colonies in the spirit of 1776. Many wanted to stay true to these principles.

Senator George Hoar, speaking in Worcester, Massachusetts, on November 1, 1898, warned that becoming an imperialist power would transform the United States "from a republic founded on the Declaration of Independence ... the hope of the poor, the refuge of the oppressed – into a vulgar, commonplace empire founded upon physical force, controlling subject races and vassal states, in which inevitably one class must forever rule and other classes must forever obey."¹⁹

American leader House Speaker Reed, who, on this principle, refused to support the Spanish American War. He, along with Hoar, personified many of the intellectual leaders of the Northeast, moralistic Republicans, who had no interest in supporting American military adventures overseas. In the West, the reform movement of the Populists and the Democrats opposed imperialism, making the issue a divisive issue for Americans.

The first meeting of the Anti-Imperialist League was in 1898 in Boston. It vigorously opposed the Spanish American War, and reached a peak of membership after the Senate ratification of the Treaty of Paris in February 1899. The league boasted of over 500,000 members and 100 branches. They had many prominent members, such as Samuel Clemens—with the penname Mark Twain, Andrew Carnegie- owner of US Steel, Senator Boutwell, former

¹⁹ United States Foreign Policy History and Resource Guide, under The Great Debate Over American Empire, <https://peacehistory-usfp.org/1898-1899/> accessed November 30, 2024.

President Cleveland, and Samuel Gompers- head of the American Federation of Labor.

One member, Moorefield Storey summed up the anger they felt: "Americans are false to all we have believed in. This great free land, which for more than a century has offered a refuge to the oppressed of every land, has now turned to oppression."²⁰

Nor was opposition to the conquest just from older white men. Brooker T. Washington, a rather conservative Black American leader, put it bluntly, "Until our nation has settled the Negro and Indian problems, I do not believe that we have a right to assume more social problems."²¹

But it was an uphill battle. Whipped up by jingoist politicians and the "yellow" press, most Americans voters wanted war, to flex their manly muscles (women hadn't got the vote yet) and show the world America had arrived on the world stage. William Goodkin, a member of the league wrote to Storey in January 1900, "The military spirit has taken possession of the masses to whom power has passed."²² Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders theme put it best, "Rough, tough, were the stuff. We want to fight and we can't get enough! Woocommerce!"²³

Many of the anti-imperialists were elderly and could remember the horrors of the Civil War. One New Yorker wrote to Senator Hoar in February 1899, "What this country needs most at this time are patriotic Americans, not a lot of old women and decrepit politicians in their dotage who pose as statesmen.... You are behind the times, the nation has outgrown you. Give yourself a rest in some old man's home and give the nation a chance to grow".²⁴

People who opposed war were accused of trying to keep the USA small. During the campaign for McKinley's second term in office, Senator Lodge forthrightly spoke out, "Manila with its magnificent bay is the prize and pearl of the East. . it will keep us open to the markets in China. . . Shall we hesitate and make, in cowardly fashion, what Dante calls the 'great refusal'?"²⁵

²⁰ United States Foreign Policy History and Resource Guide, under spoils of war subhead. <https://peacehistory-usfp.org/1898-1899/>

²¹ Silbey, *A War of Frontier and Empire*, 105.

²² Tuchman, *Proud Tower*, 235.

²³ Silbey, *A War of Frontier and Empire*, 268.

²⁴ United States Foreign Policy History and Resource Guide, under spoils of war subhead.

²⁵ Tuchman, *Proud Tower*, 235.

Clearly, many Americans were excited by the war, it showed their nation had the guts and power to take on the rest of the world. Shouted the *Portland Daily Press* headline: "The Maine's Men Avenged, Dewey's Fleet has Met Spaniards in Manila and Crushed Them Completely Out."²⁶ This was ironic, seeing that the sinking of the Main logically had little to do with the Battle of Manila Bay. But it was something to make many proud. Some American business leaders thought that American held Manila harbor was a godsend, since this was the time of the Boxer Rebellion in China, and the "open door" policy of the USA meant it was now beside the great population centers of Asia. America needed more export markets.

Nothing succeeds like success. Meaning in this situation, the conquest of Cuba was over within just a few months. The mock battle of Manila and the battle of Manila bay were quick painless victories. This made it difficult for the opposition to denounce the imperialist policy. The nation was intoxicated with these easy victories, and most Americans thought it would be foolish to walk away from the new possessions.

Historians claim that the majority agreed with their leader. McKinley was a popular president. His call for a million-man army to fight was enthusiastically answered. McKinley easily won a second term as president against an anti-imperialist William Jennings Bryant.

Racism as Ideology

Against these "old women and decrepit politicians" of the North East came Social Darwinism. Using the idea of survival of the fittest argument, they looked around them and declared that the white, Protestant race was superior to all others. (Darwin himself called Social Darwinism a perversion of his ideas.) How else, the Social Darwinists reasoned, were the British, and the Germans able to subdue and conquer the Africa and Asia? Or closer to home, why were the Native Americans, Blacks and Asian left out of the road to progress. Teddy Roosevelt claimed that the intellectuals of Harvard, "the *Evening Post* and futile sentimentalists of the international arbitration type will produce a flabby, timid type of character which casts away the great fighting features of our race." ²⁷ America was based on conquest, as this

²⁶ Portland Daily Press, front page, May 2, 1898. Accessed May 18, 2025. Chronicling America, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016025/1898-05-02/ed-1/seq-1/#date1=1898&index=9&rows=20&words=1898+2+MAY&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1898&proxtext=may+2%2C+1898&y=13&x=12&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>

²⁷ Tuchman, *The Proud Tower*, 211.

Roosevelt quote, "The rude fierce settler who drives the savage from the land lays all civilized mankind under a debt to him." ²⁸

Senator Albert Beveridge perhaps described it best. "We are a conquering race. We must obey our blood and occupy new markets and if necessary new lands. . . In the Almighty's infinite plane. . . debased civilizations and decaying races are to disappear before the higher civilization of the noble and more viral types of man."

This was a time of intense racism. Reconstruction was dead, and racism came back with a vengeance. This was a time of lynching, where Black suspects of crimes in the South were dragged out of jail and hung on the nearest tree, before any trial was held. No prominent white American raised any objection. This mob justice devoid of due process occurred from 1882 and 1951 where "4,730 persons were lynched, of whom 1,293 were white and 3,437 were Black." ²⁹

There would be little doubt among white Americans that their race was superior to non-white races. Neither the anti-imperialists nor the pro-imperialists hid this. Racism was never questioned. For instance, House Speaker Reed, who, after the Paris Peace Treaty sarcastically commented, "We have bought ten million Malays at two dollars a head unpicked, and nobody knows what it will cost to pick them."³⁰ On a side note, this was one reason why Cuba and the Philippines were not destined for statehood, because there were too many people of color occupying the land.

The common American soldier usually or sometimes thought of Filipinos as a "nigger." Of course if their commanders and politicians used the term, and were racist, it would filter down to the common private. From the song, *The Water Cure in the PI*:

*Get the good old syringe boys and fill it to the brim,
We've caught another nigger and we'll operate on him. . .
Shove the nozzle deep and let him taste of liberty,
Shouting the battle cry of freedom.*³¹

The volunteer soldiers of America were primarily from the West Coast, and probably quite familiar with Native Americans. The Filipinos were Indians all over again—living on the land, but not using it properly,

²⁸ Evan Thomas, *The War Lovers*, 42.

²⁹ Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/lynching>, Accessed June 30, 2025.

³⁰ Tuchman, *The Proud Tower*, 226.

³¹ Silbey, *A War of Frontier and Empire*, 100

fascinating in their own right as "harmless and simple children of nature, but doomed to be forever blotted out by the encroachment of civilization," thought Philippine Commissioner Dean Worcester.³² The *National Geographic* suggested the soldiers were "fit representatives of humanity, invincible in war yet generous to fallen foe, subjugators of lower nature, and conquerors of the powers of the primal darkness." African Americans did not like the fact that although they lacked a voice at the national level, they maintained a limited presence in local discourse through some newspapers.

Their press saw a racial connection. From John Mitchell, editor of the *Richmond (Virginia) Planet* "The government is acquiescing in the oppression and butchery of a dark race in America, and the enslaving and slaughtering of a dark race in the Philippines."³³

Within the American Army, there were Black soldiers who grew disgusted with this. One Black soldier, David Fagan went over and fought alongside Filipinos. Another anonymous Black soldier wrote in the Philippines, the white rulers "began to apply home treatment for colored peoples, curse them as damned niggers, steal from and ravish them, rob them on the street of their small change, take from the fruit vendors whatever suited their fancy, and kick the poor unfortunate if he complained, desecrate their church property, and after fighting began, looted everything in sight."³⁴

There was also a shift in public opinion about the events in the Philippines. After Dewey sunk the Spanish fleet, there was a respect for Aguinaldo and his army. But when Filipinos started to fight back, the feeling changed. Anti-war House Speaker Reed observed, "They were—these Filipinos—only a short time ago our wards to whom we owed sacred duties, duties we could not abandon in the face of a censorious world without soiling our Christian faith. Now they are 'niggers' who must be punished for defending themselves. This is the history of the world with perhaps a stronger dash of hypocrisy than usual to soothe our feelings."³⁵

Did Conspiracy Exist

It remains a subject of historical speculation whether there was a secret plan to annex the Philippines even before the Spanish-American War. It

³² Silbey, *A War of Frontier and Empire*, 107.

³³ Silbey, *A War of Frontier and Empire*, 102.

³⁴ Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response*, 236.

³⁵ Thomas, *The War Lovers*. 393, quoting Reed to George Gifford, April 17, 1902, Thomas Reed Collection, Bowdoin College, Brunswick Maine.

would make some sense to think that the McKinley administration had a devilish plan to colonize the Philippines before Dewey's battle of Manila Bay. However, there appears to be no conclusive evidence to support such a claim. It is interesting, however, to think about. Even as far back as September 1897, Roosevelt, Secretary of the Navy Long, and the President had discussed sinking the Spanish fleet in Manila in case of war with Spain. And it was McKinley who ordered Dewey to attack Manila Bay. Was the President involved in a devious plan? Was the plan all along to take the Philippines, while Cuba was just a smokescreen?

There is no evidence to support this. Roosevelt (or Speaker Reed) claimed that McKinley had the backbone of a chocolate éclair. Yet this is unfair, for McKinley wanted to avoid war with Spain, at least during the start of his presidency. When the battleship Maine blew up, the president did not rush to blame Spain. When finally pushed to send a proposed resolution to the Congress condemning Spain, the resolution came back as a declaration of war.

If one accepts the view that a person may be judged by their associates, then McKinley did indeed surround himself with pro-imperialists and advocates of the sugar industry. Frequent visitors into the oval office included Edwin Atkins, an American hacienda owner in Cuba and partner in the American Sugar Refining Company, Senator Nelson Aldrich, prominent stockholder in the company, Mark Hanna, chief campaign fundraiser for the Republicans, whose number one contributor was the sugar trust, and Elijah Root, the Secretary of War and the chief lawyer of the same company.

McKinley has been criticized as not leading the nation, but instead being led by public opinion. Golay describes him as being self-effacing, friendly, and accessible. The president could be a sincere and simple man, quite Christian, and could shed tears on demand. McKinley could get carried away, as easily seen when he told the visiting Methodist ministers that he wanted to “uplift, civilize, and Christianize the Filipinos.”³⁶

Cautious, it was two years into his presidency before there was war with Spain, in spite of the screams of the yellow press and the public. On the other hand, he was not a fool.³⁷ It is hard to believe the often repeated quote that after Dewey's victory, McKinley claimed he had difficulty finding the Philippines on a map. This must have been a bluff, for McKinley wanted to show that he was not a “jingoist” or war monger. He saw heavy fighting in

³⁶ Golay, *The Face of Empire*. 35.

³⁷ Thomas, *The War Lovers*, 225.

the Civil War, and McKinley wanted to avoid conflict. Historian Wayne Morgan claimed, that "Even those who disagree with his policies and decisions see him as an active, responsible, informed participant in charge of decision making. His dignified demeanor and subtle operations keep him somewhat remote from public perception."

Perhaps American "doublespeak" started with McKinley. These are kind words used to disguise an unpleasant act. As an example in today's context, the US military would use the phrase "servicing the target" instead of bombing. McKinley's doublespeak was Benevolent Assimilation, for the United States did not intend to rule the archipelago as "invaders or conquerors, but as friends, to protect the natives in their homes, in their employment, and in their personal and religious rights." Denying any intention to exert imperial control, he declared that it is the "paramount aim of the military administration to win the confidence, respect, and affection of the inhabitants of the Philippines by assuring them in every possible way that full measure of individual rights and liberties which is the heritage of free peoples, and by proving to them that the mission of the United States is one of benevolent assimilation, substituting the mild sway of justice and right for arbitrary rule." ³⁸ Aguinaldo saw this as what it was however, calling it "violent and oppressive." This came on the eve of the Philippine-American War.

There will be no nakedly pro-imperialist quotes from McKinley, as one would find from Roosevelt, or Senators Lodge or Beveridge. Further, McKinley did not want open exploitation of the Philippines. After the Philippine-American War was reduced, he secured the appointment of Henry Allen Cooper in the new committee of Insular Affairs. The President ordered him not to allow "any exploitation of any of the islands" wrested from Spain. Further McKinley refused to promote natural resource concessions and franchise to American firms in the new colony.

If the president was conspiring to take the Philippines, he was not very clear-minded about it. McKinley was not sure of his plans. After the Mock Battle of Manila, he was still not sure if the United States wanted the entire archipelago, a coaling station, or just a port or two. He wrote to Dewey, who suggested just taking Luzon. In fact, the White House representatives at the Paris Peace Conference were still working out whether to demand the entire Philippines or just a part of it while the meetings were getting underway. (One logical problem was that the USA had not conquered the nation, only the harbor and the city of Manila. This was one reason why they were forced

³⁸ United States Foreign Policy, History and Resource Guide. Under subhead, Suppressing Philippine Independence. <https://peacehistory-usfp.org/1898-1899/> accessed March 25, 2025

to pay for the colony; they only held one percent of the property, and another party—Aguinaldo—held on to the rest of the archipelago.)

The actual Senate vote on the treaty was controversial as well as suspicious. McKinley pursued the treaty through a lame-duck session, seeking its ratification before March 1899, when the new Senate session was scheduled to commence. The track record on Senate treaty ratifications was poor; it had not passed a major treaty in over 25 years. The problem was they would need some Democratic votes, since treaty ratifications took a two-thirds vote of the body.

The Sugar Trust generously handed out stocks to those senators sitting on the fence. According to Senator Richard Pettigrew, Senate majority leader Aldrich contacted virtually every Senator opposed to annexation and bluntly asked the price of their vote. A principled anti-imperialist, Pettigrew himself was never re-elected, because the Republican boss Mark Hanna promised that if he voted against ratification, he would never win any election again. There were also promises of patronage, that is, giving federal jobs to friends and relatives of corrupt members.³⁹ The Democrats tried to delay the proceedings by offering amendments, and these were overruled by the Republican majority.

Otis was Indeed Devious

In Manila, on the eve of the vote, tensions were rising between American and Filipino forces. General Otis, head of the American Army in the Philippines, had no faith in the “Benevolent Assimilation.” He believed war was going to break out. A tense truce existed, especially after the Proclamation was issued, for reading between the lines, clearly the intention was to take the Philippines.

American troops were becoming rude and arrogant. General Otis did not seriously pursue meetings with Aguinaldo’s representatives. In the area of Balik Balik in the hills of Sampaloc, the general placed troops and artillery, aimed at the vulnerable rear positions of the Filipino lines on the immediately on February 4, 1899.⁴⁰ At this same time Otis asked Dewey to position his warships close into the Philippine positions, and be ready for war.

³⁹ Francisco, Fast, *Conspiracy for Empire*, 125.

⁴⁰ Stuart Miller, *Benevolent Assimilation, The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899 -1903* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 58-59.

Then, on the night before the US Senate vote would take place, hostilities broke out in Sampaloc, Manila, and there were hundreds of casualties. The Filipino soldiers lacked direction, for many of their generals were at a party in Malolos. Others had been captured while attending a theatre presentation in Manila.

American reporters claimed Filipinos fired the first shot. The *Kansas City Journal* reported “A Fierce Fight by Filipinos, Aguinaldo’s Troops Repulsed. The Clash Occurred after a Filipino sentry was shot after trying to run the picket line” for the third time. The Filipino troops, it was said, did a coordinated attack from Caloocan to Santa Monica.⁴¹ The intent of this sort of reporting was to silence dissent, and encourage Americans to support the troops.

The Filipinos did not want the war. As shots continued to be fired, Aguinaldo asked Otis for a meeting to reach a temporary truce. However, Otis refused, claiming the conflict must go on to the bitter end. It would seem that the Americans planned the fighting, but this is not what Otis reported to his superiors.

Back in Washington, the military claimed that American boys were attacked without provocation, and the treaty must be ratified and the troops supported. This “waving the bloody shirt” angered the Democrats. But the start of hostilities did indeed sway some reluctant Senators to vote for the treaty, and thus support the troops. The treaty passed with a one vote margin.

The vote, particularly the means of how it passed poisoned the Senate for years afterwards. In the future, any mention of the word “Philippines” was bound to draw emotional outbursts and bitter debate at the capital. Army appropriations bills, the Spooner Amendment, Philippine tariff bills, and the Organic (or Cooper) Act were all scenes of pent up rage by the Democrats. Nasty, drawn out fighting in the Philippines emboldened the anti-imperialist Senators and Representatives, who reminded the administration of their promise of a rapid end to the conflict.

Slowly the animosity decreased within the US Senate. Vice President Theodore Roosevelt would step up to and take the position of McKinley was assassinated soon into his second term in office. Still aggressive, Roosevelt grew to ironically believe that his own quest to take the islands had been a

⁴¹ Kansas City Journal, front page, February 6, 11898. Accessed May 18, 2025 <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016025/1898-05-02/ed-1/seq-1/#date1=1898&index=9&rows=20&words=1898+2+MAY&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1898&proxtext=may+2%2C+1898&y=13&x=12&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>

mistake. This was due to the rapid victory of Japan over Russia, and so, Roosevelt thought that Japan was to become a new Pacific power, making the Philippines an Achilles' heel of America. President Taft, always conservative, tried to lobby against the Democratic party sponsored Jones Bill. He would eventually lose this fight, and this bill, did not have the animosity attached to previous Philippine debates. According to Golay, for both parties in congress, no one was trying to hang on to the colony forever. By 1915, question of America cutting its ties to the Philippines now was only a matter of time.

It would take twenty more years before Philippine independence was to be fulfilled. But it is symptomatic of the ambivalence American leaders thought about their imperialistic adventure in Asia. At the start, there was excitement, and great fighting. But at the end, the conclusion, the granting of independence, came as a foregone conclusion. *

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbott, G. "lynching." Encyclopedia Britannica, April 25, 2025.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/lynching>.

Francisco, Luzminda and Jonathan Fast. *Conspiracy for Empire, Big Business, Corruption and the Politics of Imperialism in America 1876 – 1907*.
 Quezon City: Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1985.

Golay, Frank. *The Face of Empire: United States –Philippine American Relations, 1898 – 1946*. Quezon City: Ateneo Press, 1997.

Immerwahr, Daniel. *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019.

Kansas City Journal, front page, February 6, 1898. Accessed May 18, 2025 . Chronicling America, Library of Congress.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016025/1898-05-02/ed-1/seq-1/#date1=1898&index=9&rows=20&words=1898+2+MAY&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1898&proxtext=may+2%2C+1898&y=13&x=12&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>

Miller, Stuart. *Benevolent Assimilation, The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899 -1903*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.

- New York Journal, front page, March 25, 1898 Accessed May 18, 2025.
Chronicling America, Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn86071545/1898-03-25/ed-6/?dl=all&sp=1&r=-0.529,-0.154,2.057,1.214,0>
- Portland Daily Press, front page, May 2, 1898. Accessed May 18, 2025.
Chronicling America, Library of Congress.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016025/1898-05-02/ed-1/seq-1/#date1=1898&index=9&rows=20&words=1898+2+MAY&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1898&proxtext=may+2%2C+1898&y=13&x=12&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>
- Shapiro, Herbert. *White Violence and Black Response, From Reconstruction to Montgomery*. Boston: University of Massachusetts, 1988.
- Silbey, David. *A War of Frontier and Empire, The Philippine-American war, 1899—1902*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2007.
- Thomas, Evan. *The War Lovers, Roosevelt Lodge, Hearst and the Rush to Empire, 1898*. Boston: Little and Brown and Company, 2011.
- Tuchman, Barbara. *The Proud Tower, A Portrait of the World Before the War, 1890 – 1914*. New York; Ballentine, 1965.
- United States Foreign Policy History and Resource Guide, under The Great Debate Over American Empire, <https://peacehistory-usfp.org/1898-1899/> accessed November 30, 2024.
- Wartman, Scott. *Why Trump loves William McKinley and what it could mean*. quoting from the inaugural speech,
<https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/politics/2025/01/20/who-is-william-mckinley-and-why-does-donald-trump-admire-him/77838559007/> accessed March 1, 2025.