

DUTY, DESTINY, DEFENSE, DOLLARS – MOTIVATIONS FOR EMPIRE

Aftermath of the Spanish-American War – What now?

What to do with new territories the US “won” in the War?

Former Spanish colonies of Cuba, Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam are no longer under Spain’s control. But what exactly is their status now?

Many Americans are reluctant to incorporate into the United States territories that are inhabited by people of color (the “lower races”), so as a result, one rarely hears it argued that these places should become American states.

The Teller Amendment, passed by Congress as part of the declaration of war against Spain, **forbids** the U.S. from keeping CUBA as a colony (let alone making it a state).

Nonetheless... the US government decides it must pursue an imperial (expansionist) policy and take control of these territories. Rather than a colonizer, however, the US sees itself (or at least claims to be) a “protector.” The US will “help” or “uplift” these nations, not oppress them, as the “old world” imperial powers had done.

Rather than face charges that it had “conquered” the Philippines, the U.S. buys the islands for \$20 million from Spain. This amounts to a “fig leaf” to cover U.S. expansionism since Spain really has no claim to the Philippines after having lost the war. Still, the gesture shows the extent to which the McKinley administration was reluctant to be seen as a “colonizing” power.

But, despite the uncertainty, the question remains: WHY keep these territories and pursue an empire?

The MOTIVATIONS were complex, but we can simplify things by conceiving of them as falling into four basic categories:

1. DUTY

Spiritual UPLIFT and MISSION through efforts at “civilization”

It is the “duty” of the U.S. to spread its values and principles to the entire world, and in so doing, the Americans will “enlighten” people and also contribute to a more peaceful, prosperous, and humane world.

More specifically, this entails bringing American “know-how” to those less fortunate. This the Americans did – especially in Cuba where American officials open schools, improve health facilities, pave roads, introduce banking, modernize and mechanize farming, and introduce more efficient government agencies and reliable public services.

But despite their good intentions and efficiency, American officials often ignored the wishes and the input of the people they were helping, fueling resentment from peoples who had initially welcomed American aid. Americans “doing their duty” failed to listen to the Cubans who could have helped them avoid making mistakes (building new roads in a flood plain, to name but one example). Additionally, the Americans failed to empower the Cubans by taking them on as partners in the modernization of their country. Instead, the US tended to dictate what would be done and allowed for little opposition because, after all, the US was supplying most of the resources and manpower.

To an extent, the native Cubans’ resentment is compounded when the Cubans realize that the Americans are in fact making valuable contributions and helping them achieve advances they might not have been able to achieve as quickly on their own. The Cubans, therefore, have to acknowledge they are dependent on the Americans, but the very fact that they are dependent makes them angry because they had fought against Spain for nearly a generation to achieve independence.

On the other side, the Americans who are helping the Cubans feel that the Cubans should be more grateful. The Cubans are the beneficiaries of American aid. What did they have to complain about? The Cubans’ resentment angers the Americans, but they fail to consider why the Cubans might be resentful of American intervention (and American arrogance).

Mutual resentment builds largely because both sides fail to take into account the point of view of the other side and, perhaps more

importantly, because the Americans begin with the condescending notion that they are “doing their duty” and therefore should always be appreciated (regardless of whether what they actually end up doing is helpful or not).

The motivation of “duty” also appeals to religiously-inclined Americans – an extension of the “mission” to Christianize the “lower orders.” Ironically, the Cubans and Filipinos have already been “Christianized” by the Spanish. But, apparently, being Catholic didn’t count for these Americans who were predominantly Protestant.

2. DESTINY

Had Americans been motivated only by a sense of DUTY, perhaps things would have been ok. But American racism was tied closely to notions of DESTINY. Many Americans had no interest in taking input from the native people, many of whom saw how the Americans could help them, but still wanted a voice in determining the future of their own country. Rather, those who saw the spread of US influence as part of the nation’s DESTINY came to see any resistance to American initiatives as futile and doomed by fate to fail.

When the Americans ran into resistance and took steps to oppress those who resisted, they justified their attacks on the natives as “God’s will.” More secular Americans appealed to the contemporary notion of Social Darwinism (the superior “race” was always right, or, on the side of “progress”) to justify belligerence and even atrocities. Anyone who opposed the US impeded “progress” and was dismissed as “backward.”

Once convinced that they were fulfilling their “destiny,” Americans slipped into the moral trap of believing that the ends justified the means.

The goal (or “end”) was so desirable and beneficial (and inevitable!) – whether the beneficiaries themselves realized it or not – that one could use any means (even violent or tyrannical means) to achieve one’s goal. This was false. The ends never justify the means. Rather, the means shape the end. Corrupt means will always produce a corrupted end.

Revolutionaries of all stripes often fall into this same trap – so obsessed with achieving some kind of “utopia” which they are convinced is

inevitable, they resort to inexcusable behavior that, they claim, is justified given that it is allegedly bringing a society closer to the revolutionaries' utopian vision. In the twentieth century both Fascists and Communists grappled with this paradox.

Claiming that something is a nation's or a culture's "destiny" is also fundamentally anti-democratic since it takes away the element of popular choice and replaces it with some irresistible force (either God's will, or some inflexible ideology).

Whereas the first two "D"s are IDEALISTIC motivations for Empire, the second two "D"s are REALISTIC motivations.

3. DEFENSE

To illustrate the motivation of "defense" one can turn from Cuba to the Philippines.

The US feels it must retain a presence in the Philippines since, if it does not, other nations (Great Britain, Germany, France, Japan) will move into the power vacuum, occupy the Philippines, and keep the Americans from having coaling stations on the islands where they can refuel their ships. The Philippines, it is argued, are the "stepping stone" to China [see cartoon in powerpoint]. If American merchant ships are going to carry US exports all the way from California to new markets in China, they will need the US military's protection. Specifically, they will need the US military presence in the Philippines to insure the merchant ships have access to coal so they can refuel for the rest of the journey to China.

Behind this line of thought is the American assumption that the Filipinos cannot govern themselves and cannot defend themselves against the intervention of other stronger nations. Accordingly, the U.S. must remain to help and protect them. To an extent, the assumption has some validity. The Filipinos may well have fallen victim to an occupation by some other Great Power also hoping to use the islands as a "stepping stone" to China. That said, the evidence is pretty thin that any such power posed an immediate threat to the islands in 1899. In fact, the US may have exaggerated the threat to help justify its own decision to keep a military presence on the islands.

If the US planned to “defend” its merchant ships and their access to fuel and markets, it followed that it must also build up its military (especially its navy). These beefed up forces would defend American ships on the high seas that were bringing American products to new foreign markets. This is referred to as “projection of power” – economic gains cannot be made until the U.S. first insures it is strong enough to protect the sea routes to the new foreign markets.

This is an argument discussed in Washington, but the average person does not have such a “global perspective.” A small group of elites think in strategic terms and read Alfred Thayer Mahan’s theories about projecting naval power, but the “defense” argument doesn’t sell well with the people. They prefer the “uplifting” and idealistic arguments about “civilizing” backward peoples and fulfilling their national destiny. They see these as the reasons for why American influence should expand.

4. DOLLARS

Some claim “Big Business” wants captive/sheltered markets and raw materials and therefore encourages the US government to pursue an aggressive foreign policy to serve the financial interests of American business.

This is a seductive argument, but there are some holes in it.

Some businesses actually oppose the pursuit of “empire.” The Sugar Trust, as discussed earlier, doesn’t want access to more sugar. Colonies like Cuba would glut the market and drive down prices; this might be good for consumers, but not for the Sugar Trust.

Also, maintaining and defending an empire costs money; this means HIGH TAXES. Business doesn’t like high taxes.

Beyond this, the Philippines hardly seemed a good market for US steel, woolens, and cotton. Likewise, the China market was more a myth than an immediate reality. The Chinese either don’t want or can’t afford the products US wants to sell them. As time passes, it becomes clear that the solution to America’s economic troubles is not as simple as the formulaic slogan “more foreign markets = more American jobs.”

One must also take into account that Europe remained the primary market for US exported goods, and competing with European powers for colonial markets could result in retaliation on the part of the Europeans. European nations might close their markets to US goods. Were this to happen, the nation would be in even worse economic shape.

Bottom line, it made more economic sense for the US to build better relations with its major trading partners (Europeans, Canadians) than to search for new markets (especially if those in the new markets didn't want or couldn't afford our goods in the first place). It especially didn't make sense if, in trying to find and open new markets (in China, for example) the US antagonized the European powers who might then be less interested in trading with it.

That said, it took a while to see this logic. Many "boosters" of American economic interests continued to insist that the US should pursue a more aggressive foreign policy for economic reasons (dollars). Interestingly, these "boosters" were less likely to be wealthy industrialists who stood to achieve direct economic benefits from such a policy, and more likely to be academics, theorists, or publicity agents. As a result, arguments about pursuing empire for economic reasons got a lot of press, but ultimately did not motivate most American manufacturers who continued to focus on the domestic market and on reliable foreign markets in Europe and Canada.

IN SUM, the motivations for empire were varied and often based on dubious arguments – either racism, utopianism, or bad economics. Still, one should not dismiss the power they had over many Americans, at least for a time. All of the "Four Ds" were grounded in and appealed to patriotism, which in and of itself was not a bad thing, but could easily be twisted to justify policies that ranged from ill-conceived to horrific.

By the early years of the 20th century, the majority of Americans had become less enthusiastic about imperialist adventures. In part, this was in reaction to what was occurring in the Philippines.

THE PHILIPPINE INSURRECTION

After the Spanish-American war concluded, many Filipinos let it be known that they expected the US to make good on its promise to grant them independence.

One Filipino faction, led by Emilio Aguinaldo, thought it had a deal with the US Admiral Dewey that would grant them independence once Filipino soldiers helped the Americans capture the capital, Manilla.

But the Americans go back on their promise and indicate that they plan to stay in the Philippines and make the islands a US territory rather than grant them independence.

As a result, Aguinaldo launches a guerilla war against American “occupiers.” In the United States, this becomes known as the Philippine Insurrection. Over the course of this conflict, 7000 Americans die in battle – many more than had died during the entire Spanish-American War. Putting down the insurrection costs the US \$400 million (by comparison, the US had paid Spain only \$20 million to purchase the islands).

The US retaliates against Aguinaldo’s forces by pursuing a re-concentration policy. Filipinos are rounded up and forced into camps. As a result, 200,000 Filipino civilians die. Needless to say, this policy looks suspiciously like the Spanish policy the US had condemned in Cuba. Mark Twain, among others, expressed outrage at the hypocrisy.

Ultimately, the US triumphs and the insurrection ends. Aguinaldo had never won the support of a majority of Filipinos, many of whom joined with the US in fighting against him. He was upper class, perceived as an elitist, and, accordingly, most poor Filipinos (particularly Muslim Filipinos living in more isolated areas) believed his rule would be no less oppressive than that of the Spanish or the Americans.

The disaster in the Philippines spurs debate at home.

Soldiers supposedly sent out to war to demonstrate their manliness

were turning into “savages” in the Filipino jungles – atrocities committed by American soldiers against Filipino civilians provide ample evidence of this.

In an ironic twist, arguments based on gender and cultivating “manliness” previously used to support a more aggressive, expansionist US foreign policy now are flipped on their head. War hasn’t fortified “manliness,” rather it has dehumanized American men by forcing them to live in “uncivilized” environments. Anti-imperialists co-opt the jingo’s arguments and use them to make the case for the US leaving the Philippines and abandoning imperialist policies.

In addition to gender-themed arguments, racism also shapes the debate. Imperialists claim native Filipinos are racially inferior and therefore “incapable of self-government.” They therefore must be supervised and “protected” by American forces (a variation on the “duty” argument).

Many anti-imperialists respond that they want nothing to do with the “low” races and argue that the U.S. should pull out of the Philippines altogether before interaction with the “natives” degrades the character of American soldiers. In this sense, some anti-imperialists were more racist than the imperialists who still held out hope that the “low” races could, with U.S. guidance, be “civilized.”

Some anti-imperialists (probably only a minority), including Mark Twain, believed that while the U.S. should be an example to the world, it should not directly interfere in other nations’ affairs. The solution for them was for the US to grant the Filipinos their independence – which would show the US honored its agreements. This, they argued, would win the US the support of the Filipinos and would also show the US lived up to its own ideals.

TURNING INWARD....

After the suppression of the Filipino insurrection, the US doesn’t retreat into isolation, but imperial adventures in Asia are put on hold.

Instead, Americans who had hoped to “reform” the Cubans or Filipinos

turn their attention inward – to “reform” the American political system. In this sense, then, there is considerable overlap between those who had supported American expansion abroad and those who would become known as “Progressive” reformers at home.