

PART FOUR

**1898-1919:
THE TURNING POINT**

“Splendid Little War”

The great nations are rapidly absorbing for their future expansion and their present defense all the waste places of the earth.... As one of the great nations of the world the United States must not fall out of the line of march.¹

—SENATOR HENRY CABOT LODGE, 1895

We are face to face with a strange destiny. The taste of empire is in the mouth of the people even as the taste of blood in the jungle. It means an imperial policy, the Republic renascent, taking her place with the armed nations.²

—WASHINGTON POST, 1898



With the hammer blows of Sherman and Grant did Lincoln reforge a Union of free states into a centralized nation. Under William McKinley the nation became an empire. The years from McKinley's annexation of the Philippines in 1898 to Wilson's return from Versailles in 1919 mark the great turning point in U.S. history, when America turned its back on George Washington to join the imperial powers in a mad scramble for global preeminence. Why did it happen? Was it inevitable?

“UNPROTECTED AS A JELLYFISH”

One of the first signs that America was looking outward can be found by looking at its navy. Nine months after Appomattox, the axe and the auctioneer had reduced the Union fleet from 971 ships to 29 ships. Lincoln's mighty navy had been junked. In 1874, during a skirmish with Spain off Cuba, fleet maneuvers in the Gulf of Mexico exposed the U.S. Navy as a “heterogeneous collection of naval trash” and “antiquated and rotting ships.”³ One warship from the modern navy of Chile, which had bested Peru and Bolivia in the Pacific War (1879–1884), could have sunk the entire U.S. Navy. “China's fleet today, if properly manned,” quipped Rudyard Kipling, “could waft the entire American navy out of the water and into the blue. The big, fat Republic that is afraid of nothing... is as unprotected as a jellyfish.”⁴

In 1882, the year that Egyptian fortifications at Alexandria were pounded to pieces by eighty-ton British naval guns, the USS *Tallapoosa* was run down by a coal barge on the Hudson River. In the rueful observation of Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, America's prophet of sea power, the U.S. Navy had neither the strength to fight nor the speed to run away.⁵

Yet, by this time, a revolution had begun in naval technology. Steam was replacing sail, and the screw propeller replacing wind. Breech-loading rifled guns were being brought on line as old muzzle-loading smooth-bore cannons were removed from decks. Iron and armored plate were replacing wood.

It was Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland who began to rescue the navy, building first the 7,000-ton battleships of the *Maine* class, then the 10,000-ton *Oregon*-class battleships that boasted speeds up to seventeen knots and carried four thirteen-inch and eight eight-inch guns. In 1898 *Oregon* would sail from Puget Sound around Cape Horn to join the U.S. Atlantic squadron in blockading Santiago.⁶

TWISTING THE LION'S TAIL

In 1895, toward the close of his second term, Cleveland, who had endured the terrible Panic of '93, got caught up in the jingoistic spirit. The British were in a dispute over the border between British Guiana and Venezuela, over a few hundred square miles of jungle. When gold was discovered in the 1880s, the land suddenly acquired value. With the bellicose American press demanding that the United States enforce the Monroe Doctrine, Cleveland's friends told him he had an issue on which he could not lose. “Turn this Venezuela question up or down, North, South, East or West,” said one, “and it is a winner.”⁷

Tom Paschal of Texas urged Secretary of State Richard Olney to consider how a clash with the British might steal the thunder of the radicals and populists who were clamoring for government action to rein in the robber barons of the Gilded Age: “Why, Mr. Secretary, just think how angry the Anarchistic, socialistic, populist boil appears on our political surface, and who knows how deep its roots extend or ramify. One cannon shot across the bows of a British boat... will knock more *pus* out of it than would suffice to inoculate and corrupt our people for the next two centuries.”⁸ Paschal was suggesting, inelegantly, what Henry IV had proposed on his deathbed to his son Prince Hal:

Therefore, my Harry,
Be it thy course to busy giddy minds
With foreign quarrels....⁹

Cleveland decided to intervene on the side of Venezuela. The assignment to draft the message to Britain went to the new secretary of state, Olney, an unbending descendant of Puritans who had made his reputation as an aggressive railroad attorney. Olney's note of July 20, 1895, was arrogant, swaggering, and belligerent. Grossly

misrepresenting British conduct in the dispute (Olney probably relied on Venezuelan sources), the note invoked the Monroe Doctrine and declared:

To-day the United States is practically sovereign on this continent, and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition. Why? It is not because of the pure friendship or good will felt for it. It is not... because wisdom and justice and equity are the invariable characteristics of the dealings of the United States. It is because, in addition to all other grounds, its infinite resources combined with its isolated position render it master of the situation and practically invulnerable as against any or all other powers.¹⁰

"[T]he best thing of the kind I have ever read," chortled Cleveland, who described Olney's note as a "twenty-inch gun" blast.¹¹ The British were stunned. But their new prime minister, Lord Salisbury, was not a man easily intimidated. He treated Olney's ultimatum as he might have a challenge to a duel from his tailor. Salisbury took four months to reply. In his return note of November 26, he picked apart Olney's rendition of events like a tenured professor taking apart a freshman term paper, and informed Olney the border dispute was none of his business:

The disputed frontier of Venezuela has nothing to do with any of the questions dealt with by President Monroe. It is not a question of the colonization by a European Power of any portion of America. It is not a question of the imposition upon the communities of South America of any system of government devised in Europe. It is simply the determination of the frontier of a British possession which belonged to the Throne of England long before the Republic of Venezuela came into existence.¹²

Now it was Cleveland's turn to be stunned. A secretary of state had demanded that Britain accept U.S. arbitration, and the British had told the American the quarrel was none of his concern, and to keep out. The dispute was no longer about a patch of jungle; it was about national honor, and Cleveland was not a man to back down. He sent a strong message to Congress asking for the appointment of a commission to determine the correct boundary. If, after this commission had ruled, Britain attempted to alter the boundary by force, said the president, the United States would consider it "willful aggression" and resist "by every means in its power."

Jingoism swept the country. "WAR IF NECESSARY" roared the *New York Sun*.¹³ "I rather hope that the fight will come soon," said Teddy Roosevelt. "The clamor of the peace faction has convinced me that this country needs war."¹⁴ British jingoes were not to be outdone by their bellicose cousins. In a letter to the *Times* of London, novelist and journalist Morley Roberts wrote:

No Englishman with imperial instincts can look with anything but contempt on the Monroe Doctrine. The English and not the inhabitants of the United States are the greatest power in the two Americas; and no dog of a Republic can open its mouth to bark without our good leave.¹⁵

Fortunately, history intervened with a distraction. In December 1895 there took place in South Africa what has come to be known as the Jameson Raid. At the instigation of Cecil Rhodes, six hundred settlers from the Cape Colony under Dr. Leander Starr Jameson invaded the Boer Republic of the Transvaal to bring all South Africa under British rule. Jameson's raiders were routed and captured, to the great delight and public applause of the kaiser. "Instantly," writes the historian Barbara Tuchman, "every British gaze, like spectators' heads at a tennis match, turned from America to Germany, and British

wrath was diverted from President Cleveland, always unlikely in the role of menace, to the Kaiser, who played it so much more suitably."¹⁶

Voices of reason on both sides of the Atlantic now arose with calls for compromise on Venezuela, and the border question was settled by arbitration. Looking back, a war between the two great English-speaking peoples would have been disastrous. A superior British navy might have ravaged U.S. fleets and shut down U.S. ports, but Britain's defense of vast, vulnerable, and empty Canada from jingoistic and expansionist Americans would have proven no easy task.

As the Venezuela crisis dissolved, a relieved Arthur Balfour declared that a time must come when a statesman even greater than Monroe "will lay down the doctrine that between English-speaking peoples war is impossible."¹⁷ Balfour was right, and the now-forgotten Venezuela incident marked a sea change in British policy that profoundly affected the history of the twentieth century.

THE GREAT RAPPROCHEMENT

From the Boston Tea Party to the Venezuelan imbroglio, American-British relations had undergone repeated crises, often bringing the two nations to the brink of war, and, in 1812, over it. No nation could make America's blood boil more rapidly than Great Britain. Baiting John Bull, twisting the Lion's tail, was a campaign tactic of American politicians as reliable as waving the bloody shirt. Irish-Americans made up a voting bloc that could be depended upon to cheer any politician who offended Great Britain and punish any perceived as too cozy with the Empire.

After the Civil War, Irish-American Fenians had attempted several invasions of Canada to provoke a U.S.-British war they believed would bring independence to Ireland; and throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, Irish-Americans stood in the path of any rapprochement. In 1896 Republicans would seek to enhance their candidate's appeal with a tract entitled "How McKinley is hated in England."

Toward the century's end, however, the British Empire was being challenged not only by traditional rivals Russia and France, but also by rising powers like Japan, Germany, and the United States. Britain could no longer go it alone in the world, antagonizing whom it pleased. Like other nations, Britain now needed powerful friends, and to the most farsighted of its statesmen, America was a natural ally. For two decades following the Venezuela crisis, Britain courted the Americans. At international conferences, British and U.S. diplomats collaborated; in the Spanish-American War, Britain alone sided with the United States, and America's elite, proud of its blood ties to the great empire, warmly reciprocated.

This wise and patient policy would pay off a thousandfold when the United States would tolerate British interference with trade in World War I, tolerance it would have afforded no other nation. Had there been a U.S.-British clash over Venezuela, with U.S. ships sent to the bottom and U.S. sailors burned and drowned, there might have been no doughboys beside British Tommies in the trenches of France. If Lord North had handled it all rather badly back in the days of the Revolution, the British diplomats who conducted American policy from 1895 to 1914 handled it brilliantly. They had not forgotten the admonition of Palmerston to the House of Commons in 1848:

It is a narrow policy to suppose that this country or that is to be marked out as the eternal ally or the perpetual enemy.... We have no eternal allies, and we have no eternal enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.¹⁸

"BUTCHER WEYLER" COMES TO CUBA

Cleveland's successor was a reluctant imperialist. There will be "no jingo nonsense in my administration," McKinley had written Carl Schurz, the anti-imperialist German-American leader, in 1897.¹⁹ In

his inaugural address the new president placed himself in the tradition of Washington:

We have cherished the policy of non-interference with the affairs of foreign governments wisely inaugurated by Washington, keeping ourselves free from entanglement, either as allies or foes, content to leave undisturbed with them the settlement of their own domestic concerns.... We want no wars of conquest; we must avoid the temptation of territorial aggression.²⁰

Yet McKinley, too, would yield to the tides of history—to become America's first imperialist president. How did it happen?

Cuba had been a Spanish colony for four hundred years. The "Ever-Faithful Isle" had remained loyal when Spain's other American colonies had broken away. But Cuban revolutionaries were now determined to drive Spain out and had adopted a "scorched earth" strategy, devastating the island to force a Spanish withdrawal, because Madrid could not afford to hold on. Hoping that chaos would bring intervention, the rebels burned American property, shook down U.S. planters, and dynamited passenger trains.

Madrid's answer was General Valeriano Weyler, who arrived in 1896. Weyler believed the key to victory was to deny the rebels access to the peasants aiding their cause. He decided to concentrate much of the Cuban rural population in camps where, without proper sanitation, the women and children began to die in the thousands. Pathetic stories from the camps, embellished by the American press, incited a congressional clamor for a war with Spain—to liberate Cuba.

But Cleveland did not have a high regard for the "rascally Cubans" and was determined to stay out. He warned Congress that if it declared war, he would not send the army to fight. When

Congress recognized Cuban belligerency, however, some Spaniards went wild. In Barcelona a mob of 15,000 shouting, "Down with the American pig killers," stoned the U.S. consulate and tore up the Stars and Stripes.²¹

Though vilified in the jingo press as a toady of Spain, Cleveland showed courage and resolve in resisting the war clamor. When he left office in 1897, the nation was still at peace, and McKinley entered determined to avoid war. But the "yellow press"—as it was known from the name of one of its comic strips, "The Yellow Kid"—was in a frenzy. Led by William Randolph ("You-furnish-the-pictures-and-I'll-furnish-the-war!") Hearst's *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, the papers competed daily in the vitriol they poured on the Spanish. For the first but not the last time in U.S. history, the media beat the war drums of intervention until the nation rose and followed.

Playing a supporting role was the "black legend," the "stereotype of Spaniards as blood-thirsty despots that Americans had inherited from their English forebears."²² The Protestant press was up in arms over Spanish barbarities and wanted Catholic Spain driven out of the hemisphere in humiliation. "And if it be the will of Almighty God that by war the last trace of this inhumanity of man to man shall be swept away from the Western Hemisphere," thundered the Presbyterian journal *Evangelist*, "let it come."²³

Like most antiguerrilla wars, the campaign waged by Weyler was brutal, though probably no more so than the subsequent U.S. war to crush the insurrection of Emilio Aguinaldo in the Philippines. But to the American press Weyler was a monster, a beast. "Butcher Weyler" he was called, "Wolf" Weyler, a "human hyena," a "mad dog" who "massacred prisoners or threw them to the sharks; dragged the sick from their cots, shot them, and fed their bodies to the dogs."²⁴ The *Journal* solemnly asserted:

It is not only Weyler the soldier... but Weyler the brute, the devastator of haciendas, the destroyer of families, and the outrager of women.... Pitiless, cold, an exterminator of men.... There is nothing to prevent his carnal, animal brain from running riot with itself in inventing tortures and infamies of bloody debauchery.²⁵

Circulation at the *Journal* soared to 800,000 daily.

Pulitzer's *World* rose to Hearst's challenge by lowering itself to Hearst's depth. "Blood on the roadsides, blood in the fields, blood on the doorsteps, blood, blood, blood!" its correspondent in Havana telegraphed. "Is there no nation wise enough, brave enough, and strong enough to restore peace in this bloodsmitten land?"²⁶

"REMEMBER THE MAINE"

Still, McKinley refused to yield. "I have been through one war," he told a friend. "I have seen the dead piled up, and I do not want to see another."²⁷ Unlike most of the hawks of 1898, McKinley knew war. Within months of Fort Sumter, seventeen-year-old Bill McKinley had enlisted in the 23rd Ohio and was on his way to the Shenandoah to face the army of Stonewall Jackson. On a Maryland field near Antietam Creek, where more men died than had been killed in battle in all of America's previous wars, the teenager rode into the thick of battle carrying hot food and coffee for the Union troops. The memory of the dead and wounded on that field would never leave McKinley.

In 1897 his patience seemed to be rewarded. A liberal government came to power in Madrid, anxious to resolve the crisis. It recalled Weyler, modified the camps policy, released all Americans from prison, and gave Cubans a measure of autonomy. In his annual message on December 6, 1897, McKinley urged the country to give the new government time: "I shall not impugn its sincerity, nor

should impatience be suffered to embarrass it in the task it has undertaken."²⁸ But Spain's luck had run out. As George F. Kennan writes:

Unfortunately, two things happened during the winter which changed the situation quite drastically. First, the Spanish minister in Washington wrote an indiscreet letter in which he spoke slightly of President McKinley, calling him a "bidder for the admiration of the crowd," and a "would-be politician... who tries to leave open a door behind himself while keeping on good terms with the jingoes of his party." The letter leaked; it was published in the New York papers, causing much indignation and resentment. And a few days later the American public was profoundly shocked and outraged to hear that the battleship "Maine" had been sunk in Havana harbor with the loss of 266 American lives.²⁹

The letter was a blunder, but hardly unusual for an envoy to put in private correspondence; and the insult was surely less egregious than the cutting remark of Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, who had called the president "as spineless as a chocolate éclair."³⁰ Nor was evidence ever discovered that a Spanish mine had sabotaged the *Maine*. Nonetheless, Hearst's headlines screamed:

THE WARSHIP MAINE WAS SPLIT IN TWO BY AN
ENEMY'S SECRET INFERNAL MACHINE!

THE WHOLE COUNTRY THRILLS
WITH WAR FEVER

THE MAINE WAS DESTROYED
BY TREACHERY³¹

Hearst was echoed by Theodore Roosevelt: "The *Maine* was sunk by an act of dirty treachery on the part of the Spaniards."³²

McKinley's friend and patron Senator Mark Hanna had warned against sending the *Maine* to Havana, comparing it to "waving a match in an oil well for fun."³³ The Spanish in Cuba and the U.S. consul general had pleaded with the president not to send the ship. After the disaster, Spain offered to cooperate in any investigation. Since Spain was desperate to avoid war, the least logical explanation of the *Maine* disaster is that Madrid ordered it. But an American court of inquiry conducted by naval officers concluded on March 28, 1898, that the *Maine* had been sunk by a submarine mine. Slogan of the hour:

Remember the *Maine*!
To hell with Spain!

In its hour of desperation Spain appealed to Europe. No nation offered aid. The German secretary for foreign relations was blunt: "You are isolated, because everybody wants to be pleasant to the United States, or, [at] any rate, nobody wants to arouse America's anger; the United States is a rich country, against which you simply cannot sustain a war."³⁴

Many Americans were by now wild for war—but still McKinley resisted. Discussing the crisis with a friend, he reportedly broke down and cried "like a boy of thirteen."³⁵ Roosevelt was disgusted. Coming out of a White House meeting, he told one friend, "Do you know what that white-livered cur up there has done? He has prepared *two* messages, one for war and one for peace, and doesn't know which one to send in!"³⁶

Facing congressional elections in six months and a 1900 rematch with William Jennings Bryan—a hawk where Spain was concerned, already running on "Free Cuba!" and "Free Silver!"—the president,

on April 11, 1898, joined the crowd. "Better a foreign war than an internal upheaval; better that Spain should be ejected from Cuba than the Republicans be ejected from Washington," wrote one historian.³⁷ A *Times* of London correspondent captured the thoughtful and reflective mood in Congress:

Men fought; "Liar," "Scoundrel," and other epithets were bandied to and fro; there were half-a-dozen personal collisions; books were thrown; members rushed up and down the aisles like madmen, exchanging hot words, with clenched fists and set teeth; excitement was at fever heat. Not for years has such a scene occurred.³⁸

Had Congress delayed but a few days, the United States might have won a diplomatic triumph. In the final hours before war was declared, it became clear Spain was casting about for an honorable way to capitulate, even if it meant ceding Cuba to the United States. Four days before the McKinley war message, the American minister in Madrid wired home:

I hope that nothing will now be done to humiliate Spain, as I am satisfied that the present government is going, and is loyally ready to go, as fast and as far as it can. With your power of action sufficiently free you will win the fight on your own lines.³⁹

Too late. Eleven days after the declaration of war, Commodore George Dewey attacked and sank a Spanish squadron in Manila Bay. He lost one man, an engineer, who died of heat stroke. Only days later, McKinley ordered preparations for the dispatch of troops to complete "the reduction of Spanish power in that quarter" and give "order and security to the islands while in the possession of the United States."⁴⁰ Since the war declaration mentioned only a

demand for Spain's withdrawal from Cuba, what was going on 10,000 miles from Washington? Kennan speculates:

We know that Theodore Roosevelt, who was then the young Assistant Secretary of the Navy, had long felt that we ought to take the Philippines; that he wangled Dewey's appointment to the command of the Asiatic fleet; that both he and Dewey wanted war; and that he had some sort of a prior understanding with Dewey to the effect that Dewey would attack Manila, regardless of the circumstances of the origin or purpose of the war.⁴¹

Quick to grasp the meaning of Manila was the *Washington Post*: "The guns of Dewey at Manila have changed the destiny of the United States. We are face to face with a strange destiny and must accept its responsibilities. An imperial policy!"⁴²

HAPPY DAYS ARE HERE AGAIN

The Spanish-American War brought Americans together as they had not been since Monroe's Era of Good Feelings. During a presidential trip to Atlanta, the veteran of Antietam affirmed that the care of Confederate graves was a national duty and named two ex-Confederate soldiers as major generals to command U.S. troops. "Fighting Joe" Wheeler, who had "laid away a suit of gray to wear the Union blue," took part in the surrender of Spanish forces.⁴³ In the campaign before Santiago, the old cavalryman was heard shouting, "We've got the Yankees on the run!"⁴⁴

On May 28, 1898, the Sixth Massachusetts marched through Baltimore on its way to camp. In 1861 the regiment had been stoned by a mob while changing trains in Baltimore en route to defend the capital. Now the Sixth was wildly cheered as it tramped through, its regimental band playing "Dixie." Senator Lodge journeyed up from Washington to see the parade. He wept unashamedly. "It was," he

said, "roses, roses all the way"—flags, cheers, excited crowds. Tears were in my eyes. I never felt so moved in my life. The war of 1861 was over at last and the great country for which so many men died was one again."⁴⁵ So great was the patriotic fervor after the *Maine* was sunk that when McKinley put out a call for 25,000 men to fight, a million men answered.⁴⁶

The war lasted from late April to early August, a few weeks longer than the three months Captain Mahan had predicted. At its end America made a decision it had never made before. The United States annexed Spain's colonies of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, acquiring control of lands we had no intention of converting into states, and of peoples we had no intention of allowing to become U.S. citizens. We also annexed Hawaii. The Republic had become an empire.

"THE VOICE OF THE SERPENT"

Even in the flush of victory some warned against the course on which America was embarking. From Grover Cleveland to Speaker Thomas B. Reed, from labor statesman Sam Gompers to industrialist Andrew Carnegie, they implored the Republic to resist the temptation. "The fruits of imperialism, be they bitter or sweet," declared Bryan, "must be left to the subjects of monarchy. This is one tree of which citizens of a republic may not partake. It is the voice of the serpent, not the voice of God, that bids us eat."⁴⁷ To annex foreign peoples without their consent, said Massachusetts Senator George Hoar, contradicted the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. The Founding Fathers would not believe, said Hoar, that their heirs

would be beguiled from these sacred and awful verities that they might strut about in the cast-off clothing of pinchbeck emperors and pewter kings; that their descendants would be

excited by the smell of gunpowder and the sound of the guns of a single victory as a small boy by a firecracker on some Fourth of July morning.⁴⁸

An Anti-Imperialist League was founded in September of 1898. "The serious question for the people of this country to consider," said Frederick Gookin, "is what effect the imperial policy will have upon ourselves if we permit it to be established."⁴⁹ In his poem—"On a Soldier Fallen in the Philippines"—about an American who died suppressing the Filipino uprising, William Vaughn Moody "urged us never to let the deceased know of the rotten cause for which he died":

Let him never dream that
his bullet's scream went wide of its island mark,
Home to the heart of his darling land
where she stumbled and sinned in the dark.⁵⁰

"We cannot maintain an empire in the Orient and maintain a republic in America," said Mark Twain.⁵¹ "What do the people get out of this war?" asked Senator Tom Watson of Georgia. "The fighting and the taxes.... What are we going to get out of this war as a nation? Endless trouble, complications, expense. Republics cannot go into the conquering business and remain republics."⁵² William Graham Sumner gave a speech he titled "The Conquest of the United States by Spain." In it he said:

...[W]e are submitting to be conquered by her on the field of ideas and policies.... If we believe in liberty, as an American principle, why do we not stand by it? Why are we going to throw it away and enter upon a Spanish policy of dominion and regulation?⁵³

To the charge he was lacking in patriotism, Sumner responded, "My patriotism is of the kind which is outraged by the notion that the United States never was a great nation until in a petty three months campaign it knocked to pieces a poor, decrepit, bankrupt old state like Spain."⁵⁴

Ironically, Bryan was as responsible as any man for annexation of the Philippines. When the peace treaty came up for a Senate vote, with two-thirds needed for approval, the prairie populist urged his party's senators to vote yes. Bryan told followers that this would give the nation a formal peace and that when Democrats took back the presidency in 1900, they would liberate the Philippines. The treaty passed 57-27, one vote more than needed. "One word from Mr. Bryan," said a bitter Andrew Carnegie, "would have saved the country from disaster. I could not be cordial to him for years afterwards. He had seemed to me a man who was willing to sacrifice his country and his personal convictions for party advantage."⁵⁵ It is difficult to defend Bryan from a charge of rankest cynicism. After the treaty had been adopted, Bryan exulted, "We are now in a better position to wage a successful contest against imperialism [in the 1900 election] than we would have been had the treaty been rejected."⁵⁶

In Mahan's dismissive term, the anti-imperialists were "isolationists." And in 1901 the *Oxford English Dictionary* gave us the word to describe "one who favors or advocates isolation. In U.S. politics one who thinks the Republic ought to pursue a policy of political isolation."⁵⁷ Thus did the term of derision, invented by interventionists for those who adhere to the wisdom of Washington, formally enter the political lexicon.

The anti-imperialists were principled, but history does not validate their direst warnings. The character of the Republic was not altered by the annexations, and U.S. imperialism proved far more enlightened than that of most European states, and surely more benign than

that of Japan. Still, what was a republic, born of revolution against British colonialism, doing crushing rebellions and collecting colonies? "In what respect does the position of the Republican Party differ from the position taken by the English government in 1776?" Bryan had asked.⁵⁸

But across the sea Britain's poet of empire was egging us on:

Take up the White Man's burden,
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go, bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need.⁵⁹

Kipling mailed a copy of his poem to Roosevelt, who wrote Lodge that he found it "rather poor poetry, but good sense from the expansionist standpoint."⁶⁰ Yet within a few years even Roosevelt would come to see the islands as a strategic liability, a "heel of Achilles." But before annexation was complete, a brutal war had to be fought against Filipino guerrillas in which many more American lives would be lost than in the war with Spain. Thousands of Filipinos perished in that war and the famine it produced. But the harsh realities of putting down the insurrection and ruling a subject people had one sobering, beneficial effect: It killed the spirit of imperialism in the American people and was among the reasons the United States never annexed Cuba. By late 1899, a year after victory, the *Boston Transcript* was writing:

O Dewey at Manila
That fateful first of May,
When you sank the Spanish squadron
In almost bloodless fray,
And gave your name to deathless fame;
O glorious Dewey, say,

Why didn't you weigh anchor
And softly sail away?⁶¹

The *New York World* had its own reply to Britain's poet of empire:

We've taken up the white man's burden
Of ebony and brown;
Now will you kindly tell us, Rudyard,
How we may put it down?⁶²

The "ruling of distant peoples is not our dish," said George Kennan in his 1951 lectures gathered together in *American Diplomacy*. "[T]here are many things we Americans should beware of, and among them is the acceptance of any sort of paternalistic responsibility to anyone, be it even in the form of military occupation, if we can possibly avoid it."⁶³

As for the Spanish, they had fought bravely. On Sunday morning, July 3, 1898, a squadron led by the *Infanta Maria Teresa*, bottled up in Santiago harbor and facing capture by American troops besieging the city, sallied forth for the honor of Spain. "The Spanish ships came out as gaily as brides to the altar," said Captain John Philip of the *Texas*.⁶⁴ The U.S. ships stoked up and gave chase, sinking or beaching every Spanish vessel with the loss of but a single man. As American sailors exulted and gloated over the burning Spanish ships, the pious Captain Philip admonished his men: "Don't cheer, boys, the poor fellows are dying."⁶⁵

With the battle ended, American bluejackets braved shark-infested waters to rescue drowning Spanish sailors. They fed and clothed the survivors, while consigning the dead to the deep with prayer. "So long as the enemy showed his flag, they fought like American seamen," Captain Robley Evans wrote of his *Iowa* crew,

“but when the flag came down they were as gentle and tender as American women.”⁶⁶

The Civil War veteran Dewey became a legend. His order to the commander of the *Olympia*, “You may fire when ready, Gridley,” became the stuff of legend.⁶⁷ And Roosevelt proved himself no arm-chair warrior. While a jingo to the core who clamored for war and plotted its victory, he had always planned to fight. He became a lieutenant colonel of the Rough Riders, sailed to Cuba, fought gallantly at Kettle Hill, and emerged a national hero, the personification of the young America that had strutted onto the world stage. “It has been a splendid little war,” wrote Secretary of State John Hay, “begun with the highest motives, carried on with magnificent intelligence and spirit, favored by the fortune which loves the brave.”⁶⁸

Most Americans exulted in our new empire. Albert Beveridge, Indiana’s newly elected thirty-five-year-old senator, an unabashed imperialist, declared that Americans were among God’s chosen people, and that it was the destiny of the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic peoples to rule over the earth:

It is elemental. It is racial. God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-admiration.... He has made us the master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns.... He has made us adepts in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples.⁶⁹

Beveridge believed in a foreign policy of “America first, and not only America first, but America only.”⁷⁰ William Allen White’s *Emporia Gazette* saw a tribal destiny beckoning: “It is the Anglo-Saxon’s destiny to go forth as a world conqueror. He will take possession of all the islands of the sea. He will exterminate the peoples he cannot subjugate. This is what fate holds for the chosen people. It is so writ-

ten.”⁷¹ Such sentiments were far removed from what the Founding Fathers had intended the young Republic to become, but that was the spirit of the confident years.

WHY WE TOOK THE PHILIPPINES

“When we received the cable from Admiral Dewey telling of the taking of the Philippines I looked up their location on the globe. I could not have told where those darned islands were within 2,000 miles!” said McKinley.⁷² Nevertheless we had taken them. Turning our backs on eleven decades of American history, we had begun to behave like Europeans. We had become imperialists. Attacking the Spanish squadron at Manila was a bold, brilliant, and legitimate act of war. But why did we annex the Philippines? Why did we annex Puerto Rico rather than extend a protectorate over the island, as we did with Cuba?

McKinley reportedly came down after a night of prayer to tell a startled press: God told me to take the Philippines. In an interview with the General Missionary Committee of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which supported annexation, as did most of the Protestant press, he reportedly offered this explanation of how his apparition had come:

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—I don’t know how it was but it came... 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 very best we could by them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died. And then I went to bed, and went to sleep, and slept soundly, and the next morning I sent for the chief engineer of the War

Department (our map-maker), and I told him to put the Philippines on the map of the United States, and there they are, and there they will stay while I am President!⁷³

Among Catholics, aware that baptisms had begun in the islands fifty years before the English landed at Jamestown, and that two million Filipinos had already been received into the Church, the idea that Americans had been sent by God to "Christianize" the islands caused some puzzlement.⁷⁴

"Contingent necessity" was a second argument. Had we not taken the islands, the Germans or British—who had squadrons larger than Dewey's in Manila Bay in that spring of 1898—would have gladly taken them off our hands. But so what? While annexation of Hawaii, Midway, and Guam strengthened the U.S. defense line and extended it to mid-Pacific, the same could not be said of the Philippines. From the beginning, the islands were "a military and diplomatic liability... the Achilles heel of American defense, a hostage to Japan for American foreign policy in the Far East."⁷⁵ They were impossible to defend without investments of men and money their economic and strategic benefit could not justify. In October 1898 British Admiral P. H. Colomb wrote in *North American Review* of what might befall the United States from having taken the islands. For the first time, he said:

[America was giving] hostages to fortune, and [was] taking a place in the world that will entail on her sacrifices and difficulties of which she has not yet dreamed.... [W]ith outlying territories, especially islands, a comparatively weak power, has facilities for wounding her without being wounded in return.⁷⁶

Another reason given for annexation was historic inevitability. By the century's end, America had become the greatest economic and industrial power on earth, with the potential to become the

world's first military power. The nation had begun to sense that power. It was inevitable that, having subdued the continent, Americans would go out into the world, that when we did we would collide with other nations, that if we prevailed we would take what was theirs. Brooks Adams, of the great American Adams family, gave voice to the idea of the predestination of nations:

It is in vain that men talk of keeping free of entanglements. Nature is omnipotent; and nations must float with the tide. Whither the exchanges flow, they must follow; and they will follow as long as their vitality endures.... These great catastrophes escape human control.⁷⁷

But Adams's fatalism and determinism are belied by the history of his own family. His father's diplomacy helped avert a war with Britain at the time of the *Trent* affair. His grandfather kept America from enmeshing itself in the Greek struggle for independence. His great-grandfather put his presidency on the line to keep the United States out of an open war with France, and to sever the 1778 Treaty of Alliance with Paris, which could have involved America in a decade of Napoleonic Wars. No, our destiny is not preordained; we determine it.

Some scholars contend that imperialism was the inevitable next step of Manifest Destiny, as Marx argued that imperialism was the last, highest form of capitalism. But this also denies the possibility of statesmanship, of the leader who knows his country's limits. Annexation of the Philippines was no more inevitable than annexation of Cuba or Mexico, both of which had been advocated, neither of which was ever consummated. Where we resisted the imperial temptation in 1848, we embraced it in 1898.

Yet another reason for annexation was the desire of American merchants and manufacturers to acquire bases of operation off the Asian coast to give America a foot in the door to the lucrative China

trade. But in that day as well as this, the "China trade" would prove a mirage. Historian Charles Beard exonerates the captains of industry and indicts the policies and propaganda of America's navalists and imperialists, particularly Captain Mahan:

Loyalty to the facts of historical record must ascribe the idea of imperialist expansion mainly to naval officers and politicians rather than to businessmen.... By universal consent, Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan was the principal formulator of imperialism for the United States.⁷⁸

Annexation of the Philippines, writes Beard, "was a flat, violent, and revolutionary breach with old American policy" and a fateful error.⁷⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, the pastor turned international ethicist, would decry the war as an unconscionable act of aggression by the United States, bred of the "will to power of an adolescent nation and the frustrated impulses of pugnacity and martial ardor of the pitiful little 'men in the street.'"⁸⁰

For years, Americans fought a war against Filipino *insurrectos* who felt betrayed by the nation that had made the world's first revolution. Although the governor appointed by McKinley, William Howard Taft, would urge his countrymen to regard the Filipinos as our "little brown brothers," U.S. troops crushing their rebellion had another view:

He may be a brother of Big Bill Taft,
But he ain't no friend of mine.⁸¹

Half a decade after the United States became the first non-European nation to enter the imperialists' club, the first Asian applicant appeared in a fashion even more dramatic. Believing itself swindled by Russia out of the fruits of its victory over China during

a war in 1894–1895, Japan, on February 6, 1904, launched a surprise attack on the Russian naval squadron at Port Arthur. Humiliated before Europe, the tsar sent his Baltic squadron on a six-month voyage of vengeance. Waiting at Tsushima Straits, between Korea and Japan, was Admiral Togo. When the Russian fleet was sighted, he attacked for two days. Thirty-five Russian ships went to the bottom, reducing the Russian navy from the world's third greatest to sixth in thirty-six hours. "Neither Trafalgar nor the defeat of the Spanish Armada," said TR, "was as complete—as overwhelming."⁸²

The Japanese had launched their surprise attack on Port Arthur before any declaration of war. Yet the U.S. press thought it a splendid piece of work. Our Asian protégés had caught the Russian Slav with his guard down. "Was not the way the Japs began the fight bully?" wrote an admiring Elihu Root, the former secretary of state.⁸³ Interesting observation in light of what the Japanese would manage in December of 1941.

America in 1898 had humiliated a fading European power with a population one-fourth its own. Japan had sent to the ocean floor the navy of the largest nation on earth. The Philippines suddenly seemed less a forward base of U.S. power than the vulnerable island possessions of which Admiral Colomb had lately written. But the great turn had been taken. The Americans had become imperialists, and the nation endorsed the new course in the McKinley landslide of 1900. Even before that election, U.S. troops were marching beside British imperial troops to Peking.