

Should the United States Pursue a Foreign Policy of Isolationism or Interventionism?

The Issue

In April 1898 the United States went to war with Spain. America easily won the war, taking possession of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines in the process. But when the Filipinos rejected United States control, the nation became involved in a bitter guerrilla war. Since the stated purpose of the war with Spain had been to free the Cuban people from colonial domination, the Philippine insurrection sparked a heated debate among Americans over the merits of overseas expansion.

Background

Since the War of Independence, many Americans have believed that their nation was a unique, vast democratic republic destined to play a major role in world politics and commerce. This vision was served as the basis for two recurrent yet contrary foreign policies: isolationism and interventionism.

Isolationists insisted that the United States should take advantage of its geographic good fortune and concentrate on governing itself well, while avoiding the rivalries and conflicts between other nations. They believed that America would emerge as a world leader by setting an example of neutrality, economic development, and democratic ideals.

Interventionists believed that American expansion across the continent was a natural right, an economic necessity, and a crucial factor in the maintenance of national security. They argued that America's remarkable growth was evidence of its superiority and claimed that overseas expansion would bring the benefits of the American system to the less developed countries of the world.

The Spanish-American War and the brutality of the Philippine insurrection triggered a bitter confrontation between Americans who supported one or the other of these two foreign policies. The interventionists argued that America was entitled to an overseas empire. The isolationists believed the nation was abandoning its democratic ideals in favor of *imperialism*.

The Readings

The following debate begins with a campaign speech, delivered in September 1898, prior to President McKinley's decision to keep the Philippines. Albert J. Beveridge's "The March of the Flag" immediately caught the attention of the nation. A year later Beveridge was elected to the Senate from the state of Indiana at the young age of 36. Beveridge was a gifted speaker, and his speech has been widely studied by students of oratory.

Americans who opposed the acquisition of overseas territories created a national anti-imperialist movement in the years between 1898 and 1900. The platform of the American Anti-Imperialist League was adopted at a national meeting held in Chicago in October 1899. The movement faded after McKinley's reelection in 1900.

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Senator Albert Beveridge (*R-IN*) delivered this speech during the election campaign of 1898.

It is a noble land that God has given us; a land that can feed and clothe the world; a land whose coastlines would enclose half the countries of Europe; a land set like a sentinel between the two imperial oceans of the globe; a greater England with a nobler destiny.

It is a mighty people that He has planted on this soil; a people sprung from the most masterful blood of history; a people perpetually revitalized by the virile, man-producing working-folk of all the earth; a people imperial by virtue of their power, by right of their institutions, by authority of their Heaven-directed purposes—the propagandists and not the misers of liberty.

It is a glorious history our God has bestowed upon His chosen people; a history heroic with faith in our mission and our future; a history of statesmen who flung the boundaries of the Republic out into unexplored lands and savage wilderness; a history of soldiers who carried the flag across blazing deserts and through the ranks of hostile mountains, even to the gates of sunset; a history of a multiplying people who overran a continent in half a century. . . .

Therefore, in this campaign, the question is larger than a party question. It is an American question. It is a world question. Shall the American people continue their march toward the commercial supremacy of the world? Shall free institutions broaden their blessed reign as the children of liberty wax in strength, until the empire of our principles is established over the hearts of all mankind?

Have we no mission to perform, no duty to discharge to our fellow-man? Has God endowed us with gifts beyond our deserts and marked us as the people of His peculiar favor, merely to rot in our own selfishness, as men and nations must, who take cowardice for their companion and self for their deity—as China has, as India has, as Egypt has?

. . . shall we reap the reward that waits on our discharge of our high duty; shall we occupy new markets for what our farmers raise, our factories make, our merchants sell-aye, and please God, new markets for what our ships shall carry?

Hawaii is ours; Puerto Rico is to be ours; at the prayer of her people Cuba finally will be ours; in the islands of the East, even to the gates of Asia, coaling stations are to be ours at the very least; the flag of a

liberal government is to float over the Philippines, and may it be the banner that [General Zachary] Taylor unfurled in Texas [in the Mexican-American War, 1846-1848] and Fremont carried to the coast [during the California revolt against Mexico in 1846].

The Opposition tells us that we ought not to govern a people without their consent. I answer, The rule of liberty that all just government derives its authority from the consent of the governed, applies only to those who are capable of self-government. We govern the Indians without their consent, we govern our territories without their consent, we govern our children without their consent. How do they know that our government would be without their consent? Would not the people of the Philippines prefer the just, humane, civilizing government of this Republic to the savage, bloody rule of pillage and extortion from which we have rescued them?

And, regardless of this formula of words made only for enlightened, self-governing people, do we owe no duty to the world? Shall we turn these people back to the reeking lands from which we have taken them? Shall we abandon them, with Germany, England, Japan, hungering for

them? Shall we save them from those nations to give them a self-rule of tragedy?

They ask us how we shall govern these new possessions. I answer: Out of local conditions and the necessities of the case, methods of government will grow. If England can govern foreign lands, so can America. If Germany can govern foreign lands, so can America. . . . Why is it more difficult to administer Hawaii than New Mexico or California? Both had a savage and an alien population; both were more remote from the seat of government when they came under our dominion than the Philippines are today.

Will you say by your vote that American ability to govern has decayed, that a century's experience in self-rule has failed of a result? Will you affirm by your vote that you are an infidel to American power and practical sense? Or will you say that ours is the blood of government; ours the heart of dominion; ours the brain and genius of administration? Will you remember that we do but what our fathers did, we but pitch the tents of liberty farther westward, farther southward—we only continue the march of the flag?

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Senator Albert Beveridge

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The Anti-Imperialist League adopted this platform in 1899.

We hold that the policy known as imperialism is hostile to liberty and tends toward militarism, an evil from which it has been our glory to be free. We regret that it has become necessary in the land of Washington and Lincoln to reaffirm that all men, of whatever race or color, are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We maintain that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. We insist that the subjugation of any people is “criminal aggression” and open disloyalty to the distinctive principles of our Government.

We earnestly condemn the policy of the present National Administration in the Philippines. It seeks to extinguish the spirit of 1776 in those islands. We deplore the sacrifice of our soldiers and sailors, whose bravery deserves admiration even in an unjust war. We denounce the slaughter of the Filipinos as a needless horror. We protest against the extension of American sovereignty by Spanish methods.

We demand the immediate cessation of the war against liberty, begun by Spain and continued by us. We urge that Congress be promptly convened to announce to the Filipinos our purpose to concede to them the independence for which they have so long fought and which of right is theirs.

The United States have always protested against the doctrine of international law which permits the subjugation of the weak by the strong. A self-governing state cannot accept sovereignty over an unwilling people. The United States cannot act upon the ancient heresy that might makes right.

Imperialists assume that with the destruction of self-government in the Philippines by American hands, all opposition here will cease. This is a grievous error. Much as we abhor the war of “criminal aggression” in the Philippines, greatly as we regret that the blood of the Filipinos is on American hands, we more deeply resent the betrayal of American institutions at home. The real firing line is not in the suburbs of Manila. The foe is of our own household. The attempt of 1861 was to divide the country. That of 1899 is to destroy its fundamental principles and noblest ideals.

Whether the ruthless slaughter of the Filipinos shall end next month or next year is but an incident in a contest that must go on until the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States are rescued from the hands of their betrayers. Those who dispute about standards of value while the Republic is undermined will be listened to as little as those who would wrangle about the small economies of the household while the house is on fire. The training of a great people for a century, the aspiration for liberty of a vast immigration are forces that will hurl aside those who in the delirium of conquest seek to destroy the character of our institutions.

We deny that the obligation of all citizens to support their Government in times of grave National peril applies to the present situation. If an Administration may with impunity ignore the issues

“Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves.”

Anti-Imperialist League

upon which it was chosen, deliberately create a condition of war anywhere on the face of the globe, debauch the civil service for spoils to promote the adventure, organize a truth-suppressing censorship and

demand of all citizens a suspension of judgment and their unanimous support while it chooses to continue the fighting, representative government itself is imperiled. We propose to contribute to the defeat of any person or party that stands for the forcible subjugation of any people. We shall oppose for re election all who in the White House or in Congress betray American liberty in pursuit of un-American gains. We still hope that both of our great political parties will support and defend the Declaration of Independence in the closing campaign of the century.

We hold, with Abraham Lincoln, that “no man is good enough to govern another man without that man’s consent. When the white man governs himself and also governs another man, that is more than self-government that is despotism.” “Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in us. Our defense is in the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men in all lands. Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves, and under a just God cannot long retain it.”

We cordially invite the cooperation of all men and women who remain loyal to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States.

Directions: Use the information in the readings to answer the following questions. If necessary, use the back of this sheet or separate sheets to complete your responses.

A. Comprehension

1. List the economic advantages of imperialism stated by Albert Beveridge.
2. Summarize the position of the Anti-Imperialist League regarding the actions of American military forces in the Philippines.
3. How does Beveridge respond to the argument that overseas colonies will be separated from the mainland?
4. What political actions is the Anti-Imperialist League planning to take?

B. Critical Thinking

1. **Making Comparisons:** How are Beveridge's idealistic arguments different from the Anti-Imperialist League's idealistic arguments?
2. **Recognizing Bias:** Locate two examples of Beveridge's bias in favor of the American system of government.
3. **Drawing Conclusions:** Which of the following people would probably have disagreed with the arguments of the Anti-Imperialist League in 1899? Why?
 - a citizen of the Philippines
 - a citizen of Cuba
 - a citizen of Great Britain