BARBARA W. TUCHMAN

THE FIRST ANTI-IMPERIALISTS

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Although in 1895 the name Anti-Imperialist had not yet come into use, President Cleveland was one in principle. Robustly opposed to expansion by America, he was no less ready to resist it by any other country. His Venezuela Message of 1895 emphatically asserting the Monroe Doctrine in defiance of Britain, touched off a burst of chauvinism and jingoism that revealed America in a mood of startling pugnacity. No question of gain, territorial or otherwise was involved in Venezuela; it was simply a question, as it seemed to Cleveland, of asserting an American right.

The surge of militancy evoked by the Venezuela Message shocked people who still thought of the United States in the terms of its founders, as a nation opposed to militarism, conquest, standing armies and all the other bad habits associated with the monarchies of the old world. This tradition was strongest in New England and stronger among the older generation—roughly those who were over 50 in 1890—than among the new. They were closer to Jefferson who had said, "If there is one principle more deeply rooted in the mind of every American, it is that we should have nothing to do with conquest." They took seriously the Declaration of Independence and its principle of just power deriving from the consent of the governed. They regarded the extension of American rule over foreign soil and foreign peoples as a violation of this principle and a desecration of the American purpose. The original American democracy was to them a torch, an ideal, an example of a brave new world that had set its face against the old. They wanted nothing to do with titles of rank and nobility, knee breeches, orders or any of the other insidious trappings of monarchy and when in the Navy the title of Admiral was first proposed, an officer fumed, "Call them Admirals? Never! They will be wanting to be Dukes next."

First-generation immigrants who had come to the United States beckoned by the American dream were as deeply devoted to the founding principles as those in whom they had been bred for generations. Some came out of the balked revolution of 1848, seeking Liberty, like Governor Altgeld’s father and like Carl Schurz, now 66, who as journalist, editor, cabinet minister and senator, had been a power and reformer ever since Lincoln’s administration. Some came to escape oppression or poverty and to seek opportunity, like the Scottish weaver who arrived in 1848 with his twelve-year-old son, Andrew Carnegie, or

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like the Dutch-Jewish cigar maker who came from a London slum in 1863 with his thirteen-year-old son, Samuel Gompers. Some came like E. L. Godkin, editor of The Nation and the New York Evening Post, not as a refugee from oppression but as a voluntary exile from the old world, lured by America as a living demonstration of the democratic ideal. To them, as to men whose ancestors had come in the 1630s, America was a new principle and they saw the new militancy as its betrayal.

Godkin, filled with “anxiety about the country,” determined to oppose the Cleveland message even at the risk of jeopardizing his paper with the “half-crazed public.” Son of an English family settled since the 12th century in Ireland where he had been born and brought up, he had served as correspondent for English papers during the Crimean War and the American Civil War. He became editor of The Nation when it was founded in 1865 by a group of forty stockholders who supplied $100,000 with the stated purpose of championing the laboring class, the Negro, the cause of popular education and “true democratic principles in society and government.” In 1883, while remaining at The Nation, he succeeded Carl Schurz as editor of the Evening Post and through the medium of these two organs made himself, as William James said, “a towering influence on all thought concerning public affairs.”

He was a handsome, bearded, hot-tempered Celt, delighting in combat, brooding in melancholy, vivacious, pugnacious and a muckraker before Roosevelt invented the name. So unrelenting was his pursuit of corrupt practices by Tammany politicians that on one occasion they had him arrested for criminal libel three times in one day. James Russell Lowell agreed with the opinion of an English journalist that Godkin had made The Nation “the best periodical in the world” and James Bryce, already famous as the author of The American Commonwealth, declared the Evening Post to be “the best paper printed in the English language.” Closer to home opinion was hotter. Governor Hill of New York said he did not care about “the handful of mugwumps” who read the Post in New York City. “The trouble with the damned sheet is that every editor in New York State reads it.” This was what accounted for Godkin’s pervasive influence; that other makers of opinion took their opinions from him—though not, to be sure, all. “What fearful mental degeneracy results from reading it or The Nation as a steady thing,” wrote Theodore Roosevelt to Captain Mahan in 1893. Roosevelt tended to confuse the desire for peace with physical cowardice and harped curiously on this subject: “I abhor men like [Edward Everett] Hale and papers like the Evening Post and The Nation in all of whom there exists absolute physical dread of danger and hardship and who therefore tend to hysterical denunciation and fear of war.”

In 1895 Godkin was 64 and feared the future. The United States, he wrote to a friend, “finds itself in possession of enormous power and is eager to use it in brutal fashion against anyone who comes along without knowing how to do so and is therefore constantly on the brink of some frightful catastrophe.” Indeed, as the United States had at this moment exactly one battleship in commission, Godkin was not unwarranted in thinking the Jingoes “absolutely crazy.” He believed the new spirit of “ferocious optimism,” as he strikingly described it, would lead to eventual disaster.

William James, Professor of Philosophy at Harvard, was equally disquieted. “It is instructive to find,” he wrote apropos of Venezuela, “how near the surface in all of us the old fighting spirit lies and how slight an appeal will wake it up. Once really waked, there is no retreat.” More outspoken was his colleague at Harvard, Charles Eliot Norton, Professor of Fine Arts and one of the forty stockholders who founded The Nation. Regarded as the exponent and arbiter of culture in American life, Norton protested the war spirit at a meeting in the Shepard Memorial Church in Cambridge. “The shout of brutal applause, which has gone up from every part of this nation,” he said, makes every rational lover of his country feel the “greatest apprehension” for the future.

The white-haired, slender, stoop-shouldered figure, the husky yet musical voice speaking in its Boston Brahmin accent, the charm of that “supremely urbane and gentle presence” was never so at home as when against the herd Born in 1827, only a year after Jefferson and John Adams died, Norton represented the puritan and militantly liberal conscience of an older generation. He was the son of Andrews Norton, “Unitarian Pope” of New England and Professor of Sacred Literature at Harvard, who had married Catherine Eliot, daughter of a wealthy Boston merchant, and who himself descended through a long line of ministers from John Norton, a Puritan divine who had emigrated to America in 1635.

Norton believed in the dominance of an aristocratic class which to him meant a class founded not in land-owning but in a common background of culture, refinement, learning and manners. He saw it disappearing and protested regularly against encroaching vulgarity in his lectures. In parody of his manner a student said, “I propose this afternoon to make a few remarks on the hor-ri-ble vul-gar-ity of EVERY-THING.” One of his students at Radcliffe in her diary for 1895 described him looking “so mildly
happy and benignant... while he gently tells us it were better for us had we never been born in this degenerate and unhappy age.”

Writing to Godkin about the Venezuela Message, Norton thought it made “a miserable end for this century” and had done much to increase the “worst spirit in our democracy... a barbaric spirit of arrogance and unreasonable self-assertion.” What disturbed him more bitterly was the “deeper consideration” that the rise of democracy was not proving, after all, “a safeguard of peace and civilization” because it brought with it “the rise of the uncivilized whom no school education can suffice to provide with intelligence and reason.” Norton felt the bitterness of a man who discovers his beloved to be not as beautiful—nor as pure—as he had believed. “I fear that America,” he wrote to an English friend, “is beginning a long course of error and wrong and is likely to become more and more a power for disturbance and barbarism... It looks as if the world were entering on a new stage of experience in which there must be a new discipline of suffering to fit men for the new conditions.”

Occasionally, however, Norton would allow himself moments of optimism when he suspected that the loss of the values he loved might be the cost of a compensating gain in human welfare. “There are far more human beings materially well off today than ever before in the history of the world,” he wrote in 1896 and he could not resist the thought, “How interesting our times have been and still are!”

Thomas B. Reed of Maine, formerly Speaker of the House and now Republican Minority Leader, belonged to the same tradition. During the Venezuela crisis he said little publicly, kept the Republicans in the House under firm control and trusted to Cleveland’s basic antipathy for foreign adventure which he shared, to withstand the Jingoes’ eagerness to annex this and that. Reed believed that American greatness lay at home and was to be achieved by improving living conditions and raising political intelligence among Americans rather than by extending American rule over half-civilized peoples difficult to assimilate. To him the Republican Party was the guardian of this principle and expansion was “a policy no Republican ought to excuse much less adopt.”

Following the Republican victory and election of McKinley, supported by The Nation, in 1896, “Czar” Reed resumed the Speakership. Still firm in command of the Republican members, he could subdue any unhealthy lust among them for annexation but as Speaker he was bound to pilot Administration policy through the House. The question was, what was Administration policy: the soft reluctance of McKinley or the “outward” drive of Lodge and Roosevelt powered by the ideas of Mahan and the persuasions of the Sugar Trust? The answer came in June when a treaty of annexation was concluded with the Hawaiian Government, signed by McKinley and sent to the Senate for ratification. Although there was little likelihood of assembling two-thirds of the Senate in favor of it, the anti-expansionists were worried. Carl Schurz, whom McKinley, always anxious to please, had earlier assured of his lack of interest in Hawaii, faced him with the issue after dinner in the White House, over cigars. Very uncomfortable, McKinley pleaded that he had sent the treaty to the Senate only to get an expression of opinion. Nevertheless Schurz left with a heart “heavy with evil forebodings.” In England the Spectator said somewhat nervously that the treaty marked “an end to the historic policy of the Republic since its foundation... and will mean its gradual evolution into a less peaceful and possibly militant power.”

With the shrieks of the newspapers mounting over the “butcheries” of Spain and over the spirit of ’76 reborn in the cry Cuba Libre!, the country was becoming increasingly excited. Reed regarded the Hearst-fabricated furor over Spain’s oppression of Cuba with contempt and Republican espousal of Cuba’s cause as hypocrisy. He saw his party losing its moral integrity and becoming a party of political expediency in response to the ignorant clamor of the mob. Without compunction he suppressed a resolution recognizing the belligerence of the “Republic” of Cuba. He took to the magazines to argue against expansion in an article whose title, “Empire Can Wait,” became a rallying cry for the opponents of Hawaii’s annexation. It spoke the awful name; as yet the outright words “empire” and “imperialism,” which connoted the scramble for Africa then at its peak among the European powers, were not being used in the United States. James Bryce, perhaps the only Englishman who could have been allowed to give advice, urged Americans to have nothing to do with a policy of annexation. America’s remote position and immense power, he wrote in the Forum, freed her from the burden of armaments crushing the European powers. Her mission in the world was “to show the older peoples and states an example of abstention from the quarrels and wars and conquests that make up so large and lamentable a part of the annals of Europe.” To yield to the “earth-hunger” now raging among the European states would be “a complete departure from the maxims of the illustrious founders of the republic.”

On February 15, 1898, the United States armored cruiser Maine blew up and sank in the harbor of Havana with the loss of 260 lives. Although the cause of the explosion was never ascertained, it was im-
possible in the mood of the time to assume other than a dastardly Spanish plot. The proponents of war burst into hysteria; the peace-minded were outshouted. McKinley hung back, but fearful of a split in his party, soon gave way to clamor. Speaker Reed did not. During the two months while negotiations aimed at forcing Spain into war were being pursued, he did his best to hold back the wave, limiting time for debate and quashing resolutions recognizing Cuban independence. When Senator Proctor who owned marble quarries in Vermont made a strong speech for war, Speaker Reed commented, "Proctor's position might have been expected. A war will make a large market for gravestones." He was attacked by the pro-war press and his rulings aroused resentment in the House which, on the whole, like the country, wanted war. "Ambition, interest, land-hunger, pride, the mere joy of fighting, whatever it may be," acknowledged the Washington Post, "we are animated by a new sensation. . . . The taste of Empire is in the mouth of the people even as the taste of blood in the jungle." War on Spain was declared on April 25.

On April 30 Admiral Dewey's squadron of four cruisers and two gunboats steamed into Manila Bay and with a day's bombardment, loosed by the classic order, "You may fire when ready, Gridley," destroyed or put out of action all ten ships of the Spanish squadron as well as the shore batteries. Never had the country felt such a thrill of pride. "Greatest Naval Engagement of Modern Times" was one headline. People went wild with excitement and hero-worship.

A NEW PROBLEM suddenly faced the country which none but a few had thought of: what to do about the Philippines. The American people on the whole, as Mr. Dooley said, did not know whether they were islands or canned goods and even McKinley confessed "he could not have told where those darned islands were within 2,000 miles." The disciples of Mahan knew well enough where they were and what must become of them. Within four days of Dewey's victory Lodge wrote, "We must on no account let the islands go. . . . The American flag is up and it must stay." Since there had been a Filipino independence movement in existence for thirty years for which many had fought and suffered prison, exile and death, Senator Lodge's simple solution took little account of the consent of the governed.

In America the outbreak of a war to be carried to the enemy and posing no danger to the homeland, did not silence but galvanized the war's opponents. Suddenly they became an entity with a name: the Anti-Imperialists. Professor Norton, now over 70, brought upon himself torrents of abuse and threats of violence to his house and person by urging his students not to enlist in a war in which "we jettison all that was most precious of our national cargo." Although an Irish politician of Boston proposed to send a lynching party for him and the press called him a "traitor" and even Senator Hoar denounced him, Norton's grief at his country's course was too great to be contained. At a meeting of the Congregational Church in Cambridge he spoke of how bitter it was that now, at the end of a century which had seen the greatest advance in knowledge and the hope of peace, America should be turning against her ideals and "plunging into an unrighteous war."

OTHERS IN BOSTON spoke out. Moorfield Storey, President of the Massachusetts Reform Club and Civil Service Reform League, and a former President of the American Bar Association, was one; Gamaliel Bradford, a rampant critic of government known for his one-man crusades through a flow of letters to newspapers, was another. The first Story (minus the "e") had settled in Massachusetts in 1635 and Bradford was descended from the first Governor of the Plymouth Colony. Together they assembled a meeting of protest as Faneuil Hall and there on June 15, 1898, three days after Aguinaldo in the Philippines issued a declaration of independence, the Anti-Imperialist League was founded. Its president was the 80-year-old Republican George S. Boutwell, former Senator from Massachusetts and former Secretary of the Treasury under President Grant. Its stated purpose was not to oppose the war as such but to insist that having been undertaken as a war of liberation, it not be turned into one for empire. The quest for power, money and glory abroad, the League maintained, would distract from reform at home and bring in its train a strong central government destructive of traditional states' rights and local liberties. Americans had enough to do to solve the problems of municipal corruption, war between capital and labor, disordered currency, unjust taxation, the use of public office for spoils, the rights of the colored people in the South and of the Indians in the West, before taking alien peoples under their rule.

These were the problems that absorbed reformers many of whom, together with independents and dissenters of various kinds and distinguished Democrats who had perforce become the anti-expansion party, now banded together under the banner of the League. Its 41 vice-presidents soon included ex-President Cleveland, his former Secretary of War William Endicott and former Secretary of the Treasury, Speaker Carlisle, Senator "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman, President David Starr Jordan of Stanford, President James B. Angell of the University of Michigan, Jane Addams, Andrew Carnegie, William James, Samuel
Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, and numbers of other congressmen, clergymen, professors, lawyers and writers. The novelist William Dean Howells thought the war "an abominable business" and when his friend Mark Twain came home from an extended trip abroad, he became a member of the league.

On the side of the Anti-Imperialists was a strong sentiment, growing out of the troubles with the Negroes—after the Civil War, of reluctance to take on new colored populations. Nothing but more trouble would accure, said Godkin harshly in The Nation, from "dependencies inhabited by ignorant and inferior races" with whom Americans had no union "other than would be necessary for purposes of carpet-baggery and corruption." Carl Schurz used the same argument against the Isthmian Canal, saying that "once fairly started on a career of agrandize-ment" the imperialists would insist that the canal be bordered on both sides by American territory and would want to annex countries "with a population of 13,000,000 Spanish-Americans mixed with Indian blood" who would flood Congress with 20 Senators and 50 or 60 Representatives. Hawaii, where orientals greatly outnumbered the whites, posed the same threat.

The Anti-Imperialists did not sweep up with them the Populists and followers of William Jennings Bryan and those soon to be known as Progressives. While these groups opposed standing armies, big navies and foreign entanglements and were in theory anti-imperialist, anti-militarist and anti-European, they were simultaneously imbued with a fever to fight Spain as a cruel European tyrant stamping out liberty at America's doorstep. Bryan called for war as loudly as Theodore Roosevelt and in sincere flattery, if less promptly, had himself appointed Colonel of the Third Nebraska Volunteers, too late to see action in Cuba.

The Battle of Santiago in July brought the war in Cuba to an end. Since it had been undertaken with the stated purpose of "liberating" the Cubans from Spanish rule, annexation would have been awkward. But as fruit of conquest Puerto Rico, at least, was available. Required to renounce Cuba and cede the smaller neighbor, Spain was eliminated from the Western Hemisphere. Preliminary peace terms were signed in Washington on August 12 leaving the more troublesome question of the Philippines to be negotiated by peace commissioners who were to meet in Paris to conclude a final settlement.

At home the Anti-Imperialists through meetings, protests, speeches, articles, petitions and public conferences were attempting to hold their country back from plucking the archipelago in the Pacific which seemed to glow with the fatal evil of the apple in the Garden of Eden. Carl Schurz urged McKinley to turn the Philippines over as a mandate to a small power such as Belgium or Holland so that the United States could remain "the great neutral power of the world." In France it was the "Dreyfus summer" and Americans, too, in those months felt that their country had reached a moment critical for its character and future. In public and private the debate raged whether to keep the Philippines or turn them back to self-government by the Filipinos. A three-day conference on foreign policy to consider "some of the most momentous problems in the history of the Republic" was convened at Saratoga in August by leaders in public life both for and against expansion. The favored theme of the expansionists which called forth their most energetic arguments was a vision of the vast untapped markets of the Orient with their limitless opportunities for American enterprise. Speaking for the Anti-Imperialists, Henry Wade Rogers, President of Northwestern University and Chairman of the Conference on opening day, forcefully made the point that it was not necessary to annex territory in order to trade with it. But he could not summon passion equal to Judge Grosscup, notorious as the man who had issued the injunction in the Pullman strike, who delivered an exuberant paean to "the new career of commercial activity upon which I trust we are about to enter." The Philippines must be retained, in addition to Puerto Rico and Hawaii, so that the United States would have "clear across the Pacific a line of naval stations and home ports in every sense our own," leading to Asia, a whole continent with "doors swinging inward that will lead us to one half the desirable territory and one third the population of the earth." Samuel Gompers spoke against conquest of foreign lands not only as a betrayal of American principles but as a danger to the standards of American wage earners. Strange combinations were wrought in the cause of Anti-Imperialism. When at a later meeting in Chicago Gompers declared that retention of the Philippines would show that "our war was without just cause," Andrew Carnegie sent him a telegram of congratulations saying, "Let us stand together to save the Republic."

The annexationist tide was too strong. At Paris the United States demanded "cession of the whole Archipelago," coupled with offer of a token payment to Spain of $20,000,000 to grease the acceptance of the inevitable. On December 10 the Treaty of Paris was signed transferring sovereignty of the Philippines to the United States with the $20,000,000 to follow upon ratification. "We have bought ten million Malays at $2.00 a head unpicked," remarked Reed
acidly, and in the most prescient comment made by anyone at the time, he added, “and nobody knows what it will cost to pick them.”

That winter in the Senate’s battle over ratification of the Treaty of Paris, the Republicans needed every vote they could collect to muster the necessary two-thirds majority. In the delicate balance that prevailed, the most important issue since Secession depended on the votes of one or two vacillating Senators. Suddenly Bryan arrived in Washington and to the amazement of his followers urged them to vote for the treaty. Preparing to run again for President in 1900 he realized he could not win on a repetition of the silver issue and was perfectly prepared to give it up in favor of Imperialism, a new crown of thorns. To make acquisition of the Philippines a raging issue, it had to be consummated first. Consequently, he told his party, it would not do to defeat the treaty. Besides, he argued comfortably, to ratify the treaty would end the war.

At this moment the Filipinos rose in their own war of independence. Their forces attacked the American lines outside Manila on the night of February 4. In Washington the news intensified the frenzied speculation over the vote on the treaty but no one could be certain what effect it would have. A last-minute petition signed by ex-President Cleveland, President Eliot of Harvard and twenty-two other men of national prominence was addressed to the Senate, protesting the treaty unless it included a provision against annexing the Philippines and Puerto Rico. “In accordance with the principles upon which our Republic was founded we are in duty bound to recognize the rights of the inhabitants . . . to independence and self-government,” it said, and pointed out that if, as McKinley had once declared, the forcible annexation of Cuba would be “criminal aggression by our code of morals, annexation of the Philippines would be no less so.”

When the Senate voted on February 6 Bryan’s work told: the treaty won by a one-vote margin. “The way the country pucked up its ancient principles at the first touch of temptation was sickening,” wrote William James in a private letter. The saddest thing for such men was the parting with the American dream. “We are false to all we have believed in,” wrote Moorfield Storey. “This great free land which for more than a century has been a refuge to the oppressed of every land, has now turned to oppression.”

Hearing the sound of “ignoble battle” coming “sullenly over the Pacific seas,” William Vaughn Moody wrote his “Ode in a Time of Hesitation” which appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in May, 1900. Are we still the “eagle nation” he asked, or shall some less lordly bird be set apart? Some gross-billed wader where the swamps are fat? Some gorer in the sun? Some prowler with the bat? This was the conscience of the few, felt too by Godkin who in his disillusion said a strange and clairvoyant thing at this time. “The military spirit,” he wrote to Moorfield Storey in January, 1900, “has taken possession of the masses to whom power has passed.”

In the election of 1900 the Anti-Imperialists were caught in an agonizing dilemma. McKinley represented the party of imperialism; Bryan, in Carl Schurz’s words, was “the evil genius of the anti-imperialist cause.” Nevertheless his reasoning had succeeded and as he was necessarily the champion of the Philippine cause, the Anti-Imperialists had nowhere else to go. They were called the “Hold-your-nose-and-vote” group but even by this technique Bryan could not be made acceptable to The Nation. Opposed to McKinley because of imperialism and to Bryan as irresponsible, it scolded both and supported neither.

The campaign represented the zenith of the Anti-Imperialists’ effort but they were hampered by a tarnished candidate and a cause out of joint with the time. What a people thinks at any given time can best be measured by what they do. McKinley and Roosevelt were elected by 53 per cent of the votes cast and with a greater margin over Bryan than in 1896. Expansion and conquest were accepted and the break with the American past confirmed. Still at war in the Philippines, America moved into the 20th century.

Professor Norton voiced the elegy of the Anti-Imperialists. “I reach one conclusion,” he wrote to a friend, “that I have been too much of an idealist about America, had set my hopes too high, had formed too fair an image of what she might become. Never had a nation such an opportunity; she was the hope of the world. Never again will any nation have her chance to raise the standard of civilization.”
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