

Albert Beveridge | the march of the flag speech



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Albert Beveridge, an enthusiastic imperialist, was campaigning for the Indiana senator seat in 1898 when he delivered The March of the Flag speech. The speech, which was published later in the Indianapolis Journal, was pronounced one month after the signing of armistice. The speech aimed at promoting US imperialism both as a divine and national mission that originated with Thomas Jefferson. In the speech, he used religious rhetoric and invoked God eleven times to appeal to an audience. The audience expected politicians to know the Holy Scriptures and took divine Providence as Manifest Destiny. He envisaged the US taking a colonial which he defined in terms of a divine mission.

Running as the party of prosperity, economic stability and the gold standard, Republicans won the 1896 presidential election. William McKinley easily defeated the populist Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan, having gotten enormous campaign contributions mainly from big businesses. He was to usher in a long period of republican dominance in the country's politics. During the period, Cuba was experiencing a humanitarian crisis and the US intervened by attacking Spain in April 1898, quickly acquiring Cuba, the Philippines and Puerto Rico. However, in the Philippines, it took a long and brutal war to quell mounting internal rebellion. When the speech was being delivered, the status of the new territories had not been settled. Through the speech, Beveridge put forward the idea that the US was obligated to extend civilization to the conquered territories as a key platform for bolstering American economic strength.

The speech aimed at celebrating American victory. However, behind the enthusiasm lay a burning desire to counter the critics of the imperialist move

who Beveridge referred to as “ they” in the speech (paragraph 10). The critics, who constituted the great proportion of the electorate, were adamantly opposed and very reluctant to embrace an idea of an imperial America. The speech starts with adulation of his country in epic terms (paragraphs 1-3). Later, he puts across the main issue behind the campaign in paragraphs 4 to7: the decision to or not to pursue an imperialist policy. In paragraphs 8-11, he justifies his country’s pursuance of the imperialist policy and answers objections of anti-imperialists. The objections, he says defies the notion of patriotism and celebration of America’s power.

Beveridge’s first argument was founded on the fact that his county’s geographical position gave it political and economic power – in terms of resources, size and location dividing “ the two imperial oceans.” This assertion implied that America’s superiority was beyond that of all European powers. In paragraph 3, he refers to myth of the west in relation to the unexplored land or wilderness (paragraph 3). He mentions the heroes of expansionary wars and puts forward a mythic observation of the western conquest of the 1840s (paragraph 7).

Beveridge’s third argument centres on racial superiority. He alludes to the “ blood” (paragraph 2) and evokes the feeling of power associated as evidenced by the virility of the country’s “ multiplying people.” In his view, the increase in American population is due to their virility and is not related to immigration: this illustrates the mythic approach that America gives to its problems. President Roosevelt would pose as an energetic and virile man on several occasions. This cult of force, power and energy suggests a Darwinian twist in Beveridge’s ideas.

He also uses religious arguments to advance his idea of imperialism. Reading through the speech, one can be forgiven for thinking that it is a piece of O' Sullivan's Manifest Destiny. The only variation is that Beveridge's religious propositions were mostly expressed in a scientifically inspired language. To his country, the grace of God is felt as inevitable. He later makes reference to "nature's law" in regard to the divine determinism thereby directing his argument in a pseudo scientific explanation of imperialism. In paragraph 5, Beveridge adds yet another dimension to his argument-that of a historical mission of "duty". This suggests a traditional puritan idea of stewardship as renewed by the Gospel of wealth during the Gilded Age. Stewardship aimed at civilising people and converting them to Christianity at the same time.

Along with the call to stewardship came the need to extend democracy to those perceived to be "oppressed". Ironically, the freedom that the American liberators could bring didn't go as far as extending freedom to all. Beveridge calls it "rules of liberty ... self-government."

Beveridge's insistence on the sense of mission blankets what is a major preoccupation for his country - economical predominance. In paragraph 6, he uses the word "reward" in reference to the parable of Talent. This is a clever marriage of religious economic rhetoric. In his view, rewards were to come in form of new riches and markets- an idea prevalent in the Gospel of wealth that takes wealth for God's blessing. This shows that the real aim behind imperialism is indeed commercial supremacy. The recurrence of the words "domination" and "power" in last paragraph are indicators of this fact.

Contextually, the approaching elections were his country's short term preoccupation. In the long term, the preoccupation was whether the new territories would be annexed to America. Beveridge wanted even more territories to be annexed after the Philippines. His stand was that the values of the American Revolution were not contradictory to the policy of annexation and the views of those living in the annexed territories. To him, the colonised were inferior people who couldn't enjoy the values of American Revolution in equal measure to the Americans. This was a flat rejection of the notion of equality (paragraph 8-10). The constitution should not follow the flag- i. e. the annexed territories shouldn't enjoy the constitutional entitlements of his country's constitution.

His racist mindset clearly comes to the fore in chapter 10 when he describes as inferior the people of foreign lands as " savages and alien populations". He envisaged a colonial America governing the new territories since England did it to America. Besides, he explains that the Indians' experience offered ideas as to how to handle the conquered. In clearly distinctive wording of " we" versus them, he is opposed to assimilation of those " savages" with the mainstream Americans (paragraph 8). His mentality correlates well with that of southerners towards the blacks prior to the Civil War. Finally, he defends the Philippines conquest as a rampart to the then greedy competition for territories by world powers saying that if US didn't do it, other powers would do so.

The article is no doubt a celebration of American mythical and heroic founding. It features an explicit show of force and brutality: economic domination of conquered territories, virility of the American population, racial

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competition and accumulation of wealth at the expense of conquered territories. It evokes the feeling of American supremacy since its founding and the brutal materialism that continues to define American way of life down to the present. The vocabulary indicates both cynicism and naivety. The militant celebration served to convince the deeply cynical electorate to pull in the direction of imperial America. It is naive to the fact that such imperialism deeply violated the values of America as a nation, a fact that could not resonate well with not only the electorate but also the leftist leaning statesmen of the time. To best drive his point home, he insisted on syntactical patterns and repetition of words to bring the audience to his point of focus. His frequent use of questions and answers gave the speech a polemical quality and seemed like a dialogue with his audience. This particularly made the cynical audience evaluate its stand with every posing of a question and giving of a suggested answer. The speech is highly representative of a critical and decisive moment of history in the making of American nation, capturing in great colour the prevalent ideology then. The speech brought out the natural fusion of state policy and Biblical injunction (religion). Implicit in the speech is the ideology that the non-white world was inferior and unable to govern itself. It therefore needed the benevolent Americans' "civilizing affects".

Alexander K. McClure, ed (1902). Famous American Statesmen & Orators. VI. New York: F. F. Lovell Publishing Company. p. 3.