

Analysis papers



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The Philippines: American Imperialism At the end of the Spanish-American War in August 1898, U. S. President William McKinley proposed the annexation of the Philippines under the Treaty of Paris. This led to the formation of the American Anti-Imperialist League in June 1898, in opposition to this move. Both the imperialists and the anti-imperialists were represented by well-known politicians, intellectuals and writers who advocated their respective arguments based on moral, legal and economic grounds. While the anti-imperialists certainly occupy the moral high ground, it is the practical economic case made out by those in favor of keeping the Philippines which carries the most conviction.

The moral ground on which the imperialists base their stand is founded on the unequivocal assumption of U. S. racial superiority. The Filipinos are considered to be “ a race which civilization demands shall be improved” (Beveridge, Paragraph 6). It is therefore the moral duty of America to “ uplift and civilize and Christianize them” (McKinley). This so-called moral duty, connoted to be “ the White Man’s Burden” by Kipling, does not stand scrutiny, especially in the light of the letters from the soldiers fighting in the Philippines, which confirm U. S. atrocities, such as arbitrary executions, torture, a scorched earth campaign and the establishment of concentration camps. As James L. Blair rightly asserts, the moral responsibility cited by the imperialists is based on the “ very tenuous assumption” (P. 12) that U. S. withdrawal would inevitably lead to anarchy. The anti-imperialists’ stand that moral duty requires the U. S. to free the Filipinos is more convincing than the imperialist’s mantel of racial superiority.

Legally, the imperialists justify their stand on the presumption that the Filipinos “ are not capable of self-government” (Beveridge, P. 16). Lack of

experience in government, Spanish misrule and, yet again, the assumed inferiority of Orientals, are cited as reasons for circumventing the “ consent of the governed,” which the American Declaration of Independence holds to be mandatory. According to the imperialists, as the Filipinos are too uncivilized to understand the concept of government, their consent is not legally required. The anti-imperialists question the constitutional right of the U. S. to forcibly annex any territory and caution that the constitutional guarantee of citizenship and the vote will lead to future legal complexities. Soldiers Davis and Fetterly reiterate the Filipinos right to independence, and the anti-imperialist stand that any legal government must rest on the consent of the governed cannot be repudiated.

However, when it comes to economic grounds, it is the imperialists who carry the day. Commercially, relinquishing the Philippines would certainly be “ bad business” (McKinley). The Philippines grants easy access to “ China’s illimitable markets” (Beveridge, P. 1), is in the vicinity of India and “ is located at the most commanding commercial, naval and military point in the Pacific” (P. 6). The imperialists cite the wealth of natural resources to further bolster their arguments. Theodore Roosevelt also emphasizes the importance of the Philippines as a naval and commercial vantage point. The counter -argument of the anti-imperialists, that “ commercial supremacy is wholly due to the cheapness and merit of manufactures” (Blair, P. 7), and not due to the ownership of colonies, does not repudiate the advantages of a captive market. The economic costs of war cited by the anti-imperialists –“ You have wasted six hundred millions of treasure” (Hoar, P. 2) are justified by patriotism by the imperialists.

The imperialist’s blatant assumption of Filipino inferiority is difficult to accept

and smacks of bigotry. Likewise, it cannot be denied that, under the American constitution, the consent of the governed is essential for the establishment of a legal government. Therefore, it can be argued that the imperialist policy of the U. S, which led to the annexation of the Philippines, was guided by commercial interests and the underlying desire to assert American influence on the world stage. The annexation of the Philippines can be considered the first step taken by the U. S. to end the isolationism of the past and begin a new policy of active participation in the affairs of other nations.

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must. This was ever the language of Austria to the Hungarian and Italian States; the kind of liberty which resulted from it to them is hardly desirable.

Contrasting this situation with the Presidents statement that "forcible annexation" would be "criminal aggression," suggests further reason for explanation.

The first question which arose in this controversy was as to the constitutional right of our government to acquire any foreign territory. Many able lawyers maintain that the government has no such power. The better opinion seems to be, however, that as a sovereign State it has. But even if we have not, there is no doubt that we may so amend our constitution as to acquire this power and so the argument is narrowed down to the question as to whether or not the proposed policy is a wise one.

At the outset of this question we are met by the assertion of those who believe in the expansion idea that it is no longer necessary to inquire whether we will or will not take this territory because the thing is already accomplished. It is ours, and it is simply a question as to what we are going to do with it. This proposition I deny, because under our constitution the President alone cannot complete a treaty; to become a law of the land the treaty must be ratified by the Senate. It is held by some that it is the duty of the Senate to ratify since to do otherwise would discredit our national representatives at Paris and the Administration. This view seems to me to be begging the question, and if it is the correct one, then we should discard our constitutional fiction and by amendment lodge the power

of making treaties solely with the President. No harm could come from a rejection of the treaty for stated reasons. Whereupon the President could re-open negotiations and modify its terms in accordance with the will of the people as expressed through their representatives.

The view that the President alone should have the treaty-making power would transfer the law-making functions of Congress to the Executive.

The arguments in favor of expansion are substantially as follows:

We need more territory for our national development;

England has demonstrated that a colonial policy is a wise one;

That this particular territory is specially desirable;

That its acquisition will extend our commerce and enrich our people :