

## Epilogue: Imperialism's Bitter Fruit

Throughout the late summer and fall of 1898, members of the Anti-Imperialist League wrote pamphlets and lobbied for their cause. Advocates of further expansion also tried to draw converts to their ranks. McKinley, for his part, increased pressure on Spain during the negotiations for the peace treaty. By October, he insisted that Spain turn over the entire Philippine island archipelago to the United States. Spain was in no position to resist U.S. demands.

The final treaty, which McKinley signed December 10, 1898, reflected his wishes. It transferred the Philippines, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Guam to the United States. McKinley agreed to pay \$20 million to compensate Spain for Spanish government buildings in the Philippines. The treaty was now ready for consideration by the Senate where a two-thirds majority was needed for ratification.

Debate in the Senate was extremely heated. Senator Lodge described it shortly afterwards as “the closest, hardest fight I have ever known.”

Two days before the Senate vote, an American soldier fired on a Filipino patrol that refused to halt. This outbreak may have influenced some Senators, who were told that the Filipino had fired first.

On February 6, 1899, the U.S. Senate approved the Treaty of Paris by a margin of 57 to 27—just one vote more than the required two-thirds majority. Congress did not pass a proposed amendment to grant the Philippines

independence once a stable government was established.

### Insurrection in the Philippines

Even as the Senate was debating the treaty, many of the worst fears of the anti-imperialists were becoming reality. Tensions between U.S. and Filipino forces had been building for months. The Filipinos had assumed that they would be granted independence after the departure of the Spanish, but U.S. troops had orders to establish control over the islands. Within hours of the shooting incident, fighting had spread to much of the area around Manila. The Filipinos believed they were fighting for their independence.

“Wonder if he can see the point?”



The Minneapolis Journal, 1899.

A U.S. soldier confronts a Filipino insurgent with a “peace” treaty.

***“If, yesterday, we fought against Spain, and, today, are resisting your powerful arms, even though sure to be vanquished, it is because we have been forced as a last resort to an unequal and bloody war for the attainment of an aspiring people’s legitimate ambitions.... Why, then, do you deny us liberty? Why, forgetful of all your history and the noble precepts of your illustrious forefathers, are you fighting against the cause of Independence, of Progress and of Justice, which is our cause?”***

—Filipino Central Committee

### ***How did American forces adapt to a new kind of warfare?***

Over the next three years, U.S. forces in the Philippines fought one of the United States’ most brutal and least remembered wars. Before it ended in mid-1902, battle and disease had killed 4,300 Americans—nearly twice the death toll of the Spanish-American War. Among the Filipinos, fighting as well as starvation and disease caused by the war killed 20,000 soldiers. As many as 250,000 civilians died.

The war in the Philippines was far different than any conflict in which Americans had previously fought. Rather than confronting an organized army, as they had in Cuba, U.S. soldiers faced a quick-striking guerrilla movement. The rules of war that generally prevailed in battles involving Western nations were largely ignored. Both sides tortured and executed prisoners and committed other atrocities. The Filipino insurgents, known as *insurrectos*, easily melted into the civilian population in the countryside.

The Filipinos were commanded by Emilio Aguinaldo, the same nationalist figure who had led the struggle against Spain and had praised the United States as “the friend of our people.” Aguinaldo’s capture in March 1901 marked a turning point in the conflict. He agreed to declare his allegiance to the United

States and, in turn, the U.S. government awarded him a pension.

By then American tactics had deeply scarred relations with the Filipinos. To put down the insurrection, the United States adopted many of the same tactics used by the Spanish in Cuba. U.S. commanders routinely punished civilians in response to attacks by Filipino guerrillas. In one of the war’s bloodiest episodes, U.S. forces imprisoned virtually the entire population of the small island of Samar after guerrillas had wiped out an American garrison. U.S. troops had orders to kill all males on the island above the age of ten who had not surrendered. In other areas, American soldiers executed Filipino prisoners at random whenever an American soldier was killed.

***“I don’t believe the people in the United States understand the conditions of things here.... I have seen enough to almost make me ashamed to call myself an American.”***

—an anonymous soldier

### ***What was the role of black American soldiers?***

As in Cuba, black soldiers played a prominent role in the Philippines. Two regiments of black volunteers were among the nearly seventy thousand U.S. troops who fought in the conflict. In response to demands from the African-American community, the War Department appointed black officers to command the volunteers. In addition, all four of the regular army’s all-black regiments saw action in the Philippines.

The conflict in the Philippines generated little of the pride among black soldiers that was evident in Cuba. At home, African-American leaders were at the forefront of the backlash against the war. They were especially critical of the racist attitudes that typified the military’s view of the Filipinos. Among white troops, officers and enlisted men alike, the Filipinos were often referred to as “niggers.”



Detroit News, 1898.

Uncle Sam is shown babysitting his new and unruly possessions.

***“As long as the impression prevailed in this country that the Filipinos were fighting to throw off the Spanish yoke and seek American annexation, they were called patriots and martyrs, but when they demanded pure and unadulterated independence, they became a set of blood-thirsty barbarians.”***

—*Indianapolis Recorder* (black newspaper)

Moreover, black soldiers in the Philippines were subjected to the same discrimination they faced in the United States. They were barred from restaurants, barber shops, and other facilities marked “white only.” Filipino nationalists openly played on the racial divisions within the U.S. Army. They distributed posters addressed to the “Colored American Soldier” that reminded blacks of the discrimination they suffered. In fact, the rate of desertion among black soldiers in the Philippines was unusually high. Many of the deserters joined the Filipino insurgence. In 1903, a year after the fighting had ended, there were roughly five hundred African-Americans living in the Philippines.

### ***How did U.S. leaders discuss the war in the Philippines?***

Although the war in the Philippines was generally unpopular among Americans, leaders still spoke out in support of the occupation of the islands.

For the 1900 presidential election the Republicans nominated Theodore Roosevelt as McKinley’s running mate. Roosevelt remained an outspoken champion of imperialism. Playing up his reputation as a war hero, he seldom missed a chance during the campaign to boast of U.S. achievements overseas. Roosevelt argued that the United States was justified in pressing ahead with the war against the Filipinos “because they were killing Americans.” He compared the war in the Philippines to the Indian wars in the United States, saying that “It is the idlest of chatter to speak of savages as being fit for self-government.” In the end, McKinley and Roosevelt defeated their Democratic opponents in the election.

Leading figures in the anti-imperialist movement also continued to express their views in the press. Scholars of the time warned that imperialism would increase war and conflict around the world. Among the most effective critics of imperialism was Mark Twain, America’s most famous living writer at the time. Twain used his biting irony and wit to ridicule the stance of the imperialists.

***“We have been treacherous, but that was only in order that real good might come out of apparent evil. True, we have crushed and deceived a confiding people [the Filipinos]; we have turned against the weak and the friendless who trusted us; we have stamped out a just and intelligent and well-ordered republic;...We have debauched America’s honor and blackened her face before the world; but each detail was for the best. We know this. The Head of every State and Sovereignty in Christendom... including our Congress and our***

***...state legislatures, are members not only of the church but also of the Blessings-of-Civilization Trust. This world-girding accumulation of trained morals, high principles, and justice cannot do an unright thing, an unfair thing, an ungenerous thing, an unclean thing.***

—Mark Twain

### ***What legal complications came with new territories?***

Thorny legal questions about the status of the Philippines and its inhabitants further complicated America's role there. Some of these questions had been raised before the United States annexed the islands. Should the Filipinos be given the same rights of citizenship granted to the inhabitants of the western territories? Should they be protected by the Bill of Rights? Should goods from the Philippines be allowed to enter the United States free of tariffs?

From 1901 to 1904, the Supreme Court addressed these and other questions in fourteen separate decisions known as the "Insular cases." The court held that the Filipinos, as well as the inhabitants of America's other overseas possessions, were entitled to the "fundamental rights" of life, liberty, and property, but could not be guaranteed the procedural rights of the Constitution without specific action by Congress. In other words, the local population living in America's newly won empire and in Hawaii did not enjoy the protection of U.S. law.

### ***How did the Philippines gain independence?***

The Filipinos remained intent on achieving independence even after the United States defeated their insurrection. At the same time, the United States rapidly lost its appetite for administering a colony and the American public became increasingly apathetic about the issue. Even Theodore Roosevelt, realizing the difficulties of occupation, said that the people of the United States were not prepared to accept the burdens of empire. He called the islands "America's Achilles heel" in 1907.

In the early 1900s, American officials quickly turned over much of the responsibility for governing the islands to Filipinos. By the 1910s, Filipinos formed a solid majority of their country's bureaucrats. In 1934, the United States granted the Philippines commonwealth status. Under the new arrangement, the Filipinos had nearly complete authority over local issues. Full independence was promised within ten years. Although World War II interrupted the transfer of power, the Philippines finally did gain independence in 1946—fifty years after the outbreak of the revolt against Spain.

## **Domination of the Caribbean**

In the Caribbean, the aftermath of the Spanish-American War produced disappointment among Cubans and Puerto Ricans, but no violence against the United States. The U.S. military occupation of Cuba and Puerto Rico began soon after Spain's surrender. U.S. policy revolved around safeguarding American business and security interests in the Caribbean. At the same time, American technology and administrative expertise contributed to rapid development on the islands. Roads and telegraph lines were built, finances reorganized, schools opened, sanitation improved, and yellow fever stamped out.

In Puerto Rico, local leaders and U.S. officials were often at odds over the extent of self-government on the island. In 1917, Congress made Puerto Rico a territory and granted its people U.S. citizenship, but Puerto Ricans would not win the right to elect their governor and other top officials until 1947.

The Pacific island of Guam, another former Spanish colony transferred to the United States, was administered by a U.S. naval officer until 1950. It then became a territory of the United States and its people gained U.S. citizenship.

### ***How did the United States limit Cuban independence?***

In Cuba, the long nationalist struggle against Spain fueled greater resentment toward

U.S. rule. When Cuba's national assembly issued a call for immediate independence in 1900, the McKinley administration sought to slow the momentum of Cuban nationalism. Under a formula crafted by the U.S. State Department, Cuba was to receive independence only after accepting a number of limitations.

The plan, which formed the basis of the Platt Amendment, gave the United States the right to oversee the Cuban economy, exercise veto power over Cuban foreign policy, and intervene whenever necessary "for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty." The United States was also allowed to build a naval base on the southeastern tip of the island at Guantanamo Bay.

News of the proposed amendment sparked demonstrations and protests in Cuba. Nonetheless, the McKinley administration insisted that the Platt Amendment was the price Cubans would have to pay for ending the U.S. military occupation of their island. In 1901, the Cuban assembly passed the amendment by one vote.

The Platt Amendment opened the door to an upsurge of American investment in Cuba's economy. By 1928, U.S. companies produced 75 percent of Cuba's sugar. Cubans who had fought in the independence struggle found few opportunities in an economy dominated by Americans and recent immigrants from Spain. They came to resent the alliance between foreign businesses and wealthy Cuban plantation owners. Their frustration would later emerge as a powerful force in Cuban politics. Anti-American feelings helped fuel a revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power in 1959. Within two years, Castro seized American businesses in Cuba and established a communist regime.

***What policies did U.S. leaders seek with China and Latin America in the early twentieth century?***

In the years shortly after the Spanish American War, the United States continued to look outward. President Theodore Roosevelt



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A trainload of sugar cane in Cuba at the beginning of the twentieth century.

set the stage for future U.S. involvement in the Caribbean and Central America during his 1904 State of the Union address by adding an additional idea to the Monroe Doctrine. In what came to be known as the Roosevelt Corollary, he warned that the United States would act as an “international police power” to maintain stability in the Western Hemisphere.

Alfred Thayer Mahan’s vision for a canal across the isthmus of Central America finally came into being in 1914. The Panama Canal drew the United States closer to the Caribbean and Central America. As American economic and military power increased in the first decades of the 1900s, U.S. leaders began to view the region as their country’s backyard. The Caribbean and Central America became an area of vital national interest.

In Asia, U.S. Secretary of State John Hay sent a note in 1899 to the foreign powers in China requesting that they maintain an “open door” in their spheres of influence. The Open Door policy held that all countries doing business in China should compete on equal terms. Although no treaties were actually signed, the United States upheld the Open Door as the foundation of U.S. policy toward China for the next half century.

Unlike the expansion across the continent of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which sought to increase U.S. territory for the sake of territory, the expansion overseas in the 1890s and beyond sought to increase territory for the sake of accessing markets somewhere else. The Philippines were a stepping stone to China, just as Cuba and the Panama Canal served as stepping stones for Latin America and elsewhere. An irony of the insurrection in



President Theodore Roosevelt is depicted as “the world’s constable.”

the Philippines is that China never provided the promised outlet for U.S. goods, as the products Americans had to offer were, on the whole, not what the Chinese wanted. Trade with Latin America was much greater in the early twentieth century.

## Conclusion

Despite some calls against intervention and expansion, many U.S. citizens at the end of the nineteenth century sought to increase American power and economic might by acquiring possessions overseas. Coming on the heels of the annexation of Hawaii, the acquisition of Cuba, the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico provided U.S. leaders the opportunity they had been looking for to increase that power. Although the United States claimed to be bringing freedom and civilization to these islands, rarely were the interests and hopes of the inhabitants considered. The decisions that emerged from this period formed the foundation for America’s dominant role in world politics and economics in the twentieth century.