

Republicanism Redefined: The Treaty of Paris, 1899

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The year 1898 is significant in the history of the United States' role in global society. That year, America fought and defeated an Imperial Spain. This short war was vitally important because the United States acquired territory in the Pacific—an acquisition that would thrust America onto the world stage as an imperial power. While the Spanish-American War of 1898 is constantly being studied and remembered by students and historians alike, the treaty which ended the war occupies only a small space within history textbooks. In this treaty, we find something larger than just a provision to formally end a war. A fundamental change in the definition of republicanism emerges among the nation's elite that transforms the United States from being a country founded on anti-imperial beliefs to one that embraces imperialism. This change did not take place during the Paris peace talks, but during the ratification debate on the floor of the U.S. Senate.

At this time, those in control of American government possessed a vague understanding about what was meant by a “republic.” As Gordon Wood has explained, the founders were convinced that, in a republic, “each man must somehow be persuaded to submerge his personal wants into the greater good of the whole. This willingness of the individual to sacrifice his private interests for the good of the community the eighteenth century termed ‘public virtue.’” A republic, then, relied on the proper moral virtue of its citizens to adequately govern themselves. Therefore, it was imperative that only the men with the greatest wisdom and virtue, supplied by a classical education, should preside over the country, thereby protecting liberty and maintaining order.

As the new nation emerged, education was seen as paramount to the success of the republic. Therefore, schools in the early 1800s stressed citizenship training. Educators taught students that a republic was a “representative form of government in which the general will of the people would be refined and articulated by the best men.” Only those citizens who had been properly educated were fit enough to have a hand in the fate of their own republic. It was with this principle that the senators debated the treaty.

Citizenship training would be based on teaching *virtue*, meaning discipline, sacrifice, simplicity, and intelligence. A curriculum based not only on the three Rs, but also on ethics, law, and commerce, was employed. Beyond this, a high emphasis was placed on moral education based on the Protestant Bible. Therefore, Protestant ministers became as important as teachers and parents, in providing the new republic with virtuous citizens. “The survival of the republic depended on the morality of its people.” Young men were taught to be well informed and to vote properly. Young women were prepared for republican motherhood—to aid the schools in the education of their sons. By the late 1800s, however, a new factor would alter peoples' view of the republic.

As elements of the second Industrial Revolution pushed men from their farms and into the crowded cities, they no longer owned the means through which they could control their own economic destinies. They became dependent on profit-driven businessmen and factory owners. Industrial capitalism became the dominant economic system for the republic, leaving control of the nation's wealth in the hands of a few men. Herbert Spencer attributed this class distinction to the fact that certain individuals were destined to rise above the rest. It was this group of men, trained with a classical education, that defined the concept of a republic for their time. Left out were individuals belonging to the lower classes who felt that this government was quickly turning into one made of the wealthy, by the wealthy, and for the wealthy. “To the good Populist, imperialism was doubly accursed—because it was held to benefit the capitalist and the Wall Streeter rather than the nation at large.” Because powerful businessmen ultimately influenced politicians, it was only a short time before economic interests found their way into American foreign policy decisions.

Thomas Paterson points out that there were several groups at work promoting imperialism within the government, such as intellectuals, major financial and industrial corporate executives, and certain members of the executive branch of government. These “cosmopolitans” were empire-builders who used missionaries, merchant capitalists, consumer goods manufacturers, and others to advance their objectives. The cosmopolitans, according to Paterson, cooperated with these “functionals” in order to “build a national consensus for overseas marketplace expansion, empire, and ultimately war.” “Functionals” in the form of Protestant clergymen, such as Josiah Strong, saw Dewey's victory at Manila as a divine summons to spread Christianity into the Philippines and claimed that America's new “destiny” lay in Christianizing the savage cultures of the world. These ideas, offered by industrial capitalists and clergy alike, were now incorporated into republican thought during the last decades of the nineteenth century. The result was that as Americans moved from the Gilded Age to the Imperialism Age, their idea of republic took on a new meaning. From now on, republicanism was to be defined

according to the priority of one's own interests ahead of the nation's. Never was this more evident than during the treaty debate in 1899.

When the treaty came before the Senate in January 1899, it was clear that a quick vote for ratification was not to occur. The Senate became divided along almost completely partisan lines. All of the Republicans in the Senate, save two, favored ratification. Two of the treaty's most outspoken advocates were Republican senators Platt of Connecticut and Lodge of Massachusetts, both of whom were backed by wealthy businessmen and their commercial interests.

Although pro-expansionists typically were members of the party in power, the argument for retaining the Philippines was not confined to one section of the country. Other senators, such as Teller and Wolcott of Colorado, Nelson from Minnesota, and Foraker from Ohio, also favored annexation. Even some southern senators were for annexation. "In the South, businessmen saw in possession of the islands assurance of the continued growth of the marketing of American cotton goods in China." No matter their geographic location, the expansionists, backed by industrialists, saw their chance for exploiting new lands in the Pacific to achieve profits and advance their commercial interests. To justify their claims, pro-expansionists used evidence and testimony from military experts, such as Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, to prove that possession of certain territories in the Pacific, such as Hawaii and the Philippines, were essential for defense. Henry Cabot Lodge argued that "[t]here is much else involved here, vast commercial and trade interests, which I believe we have the right to guard and a duty to foster." By holding on to the Philippines, America's economic interests could be explored in Asia and the threat of competition from European markets eliminated.

On the opposing side were Democrats and Populist senators who rejected annexation for various reasons, including those that were political, constitutional, and even economic. Shortly after the war ended, an Anti-Imperialist League arose, whose platform condemned imperialism as hostile to the concept of liberty. In addition, some senators did not stand to benefit from commercial expansion. They adhered to the old definition of republicanism and were looking to the national interest first. Senator George Vest of Missouri argued against ratification on constitutional grounds. Vest introduced Senate Resolution 191, saying that no constitutional power was authorized to the United States to permanently hold a territory as a colony, rather the territory must have eventual statehood. Vest and other opponents of the treaty felt that imperialism went against the American tradition. It violated the idea of a republic because the nation "could not acquire territory beyond her borders not intended to be organized into states."

Senator Mason of Illinois continued this argument, introducing a similar resolution that stated annexing territory while not permitting the Filipinos a voice in their government was in violation of the tradition of a republican form government based on the consent of the governed. Mason thought that the meaning of the republic, or representative government, would be lost. Mason and Vest argued that it was the greed and commercial interests of the money-making classes that were dominating the position of the imperialists, citing a "conspiracy among exporters of liquor, tobacco, and textiles and importers of sugar."

Anti-expansionists who rejected treaty ratification cited other examples of why the annexation of the Philippines would not be in the best interest of the nation. Senator Hoar of Massachusetts went one step further than Mason and introduced a resolution of his own, recalling the republic as known by the founding fathers, and particularly the elements of a republic as stated in the Declaration of Independence. Senator Platt argued with him extensively over what was meant by the phrase, "consent of the governed" as stated in the Mason and Hoar resolutions. Senator Teller added that even in this country, not all Americans are able to actively participate in their government, citing examples such as women, children and criminals. He believed the Filipinos fell into this same category.

Like expansionists, the anti-expansionists also took advantage of this new definition of republicanism by promoting their own selfish interests yet claiming that their motives were in the best interest of the nation. For example, Senator Chilton of Texas, even though not opposed to expansion, was not inclined to accept the treaty because he worried that the interests of American labor would be in danger. America might become embroiled in Asian conflicts and be unable to morally uphold the Monroe Doctrine.

South Carolina's Senator Tillman spoke out against ratification of the treaty on racial grounds. To him, it was wrong to take on the Philippines because he (and other Southern Democratic senators) opposed the introduction of yet another race into the American society. The Filipinos were seen as savages to be dealt with like the Native Americans. Senator Daniel of Virginia joined Tillman by declaring the Republic as "our great, broad, Christian, Anglo-Saxon, American land." It was clear that the idea of Protestantism and Anglo-Saxon superiority were at work. Hiding his prejudices, Tillman said, "I would save this country from the injection into it of another race question which can only breed bloodshed and a costly war and the loss of the lives of our brave soldiers." He justified his arguments by claiming that only chaos and war would result if the mixing of the races occurred, and that was not in the best interest of the nation.

The senator from South Carolina was more prophetic than he realized. Ironically, just before the treaty was to be voted on in the Senate, a war broke out in the Philippines. America's old ally, Emilio Aguinaldo, became our enemy and a three-year conflict ensued that would cost the lives of thousands on both sides. Because of the last-minute intervention on behalf of popular Democrat (and soon to be presidential candidate) William Jennings Bryan, certain Democrats ended up

voting for ratification. The vote stood at 57 to 27, just one vote more than the two-thirds majority necessary for ratification.

Although economic motives played a little role in bringing on the war, they were very visible when shaping the peace. Expansionists claimed it was their destiny, duty, and religious responsibility to acquire the Philippine Islands. Anti-expansionists countered all of these arguments, yet promoted their own interests ahead of the nation's. On both sides, it was clear that the idea of a republic had been significantly changed through this senatorial debate. As the definers of republicanism approached a new age, one thing was clear to them—the United States had now emerged as an imperial empire, one that would forever be committed to world affairs. New markets as well as new conflict awaited the United States in the twentieth century.