

The Rhetoric of Empire: President William McKinley's Justification for the Annexation of the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Following the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States faced a major decision that would influence its future as a global power: whether to annex the Philippine archipelago. This paper examines how President William McKinley justified annexation to the US public despite widespread public opposition and a deeply divided Senate. It argues that McKinley justified annexation by presenting it as a moral responsibility, which masked his broader geopolitical interests in the region. Drawing on primary sources including McKinley's own recorded statements, his Benevolent Assimilation Proclamation, Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden," and the public statements of the Anti-Imperialist League, alongside a range of secondary historical scholarship, the paper traces McKinley's path from indecision to full annexation. It also considers how events such as the outbreak of the Philippine-American War influenced congressional support for ratifying the Treaty of Paris. Rather than being driven by a single motive, the decision to annex the Philippines reflected a combination of geopolitical ambitions, racial ideology, and beliefs about America's role in the world. By examining the arguments used to gain public and congressional support, this paper illustrates how moral justifications were used to defend American imperial expansion at the turn of the twentieth century.

Keywords: William McKinley, Philippine annexation, American imperialism, Benevolent Assimilation, Spanish-American War, Treaty of Paris, Anti-Imperialist League, civilizing mission, The White Man's Burden, Manifest Destiny, US foreign policy, Filipino sovereignty

The rapid industrialization of the United States following the Second Industrial Revolution transformed overseas expansion from a distant ambition into a realistic political objective. In fact, many American expansionists argued that the United States was on a course of inevitable destiny to conquer the world and spread American ideals of democracy (Castañeda, 2016). Motivated by the prospect of expanding American influence and power through imperialism, President William McKinley was aware that he needed to portray US imperialism as a humanitarian effort rather than an attempt at economic and strategic gain (Rusling, 1903). After the United States defeated the Spanish army in the Spanish-American War in August 1898, the US had a key opportunity to establish American dominance in the Pacific by annexing the Philippine archipelago. Although initially hesitant to pursue annexation due to his own unpreparedness and pressure from the Anti-Imperialist League, President McKinley ultimately secured congressional approval by framing annexation as an act of benevolent assimilation, which concealed his strategic and economic objectives beneath humanitarian rhetoric.

MCKINLEY'S DECISION TO ANNEX THE PHILIPPINES

After the Spanish-American War ended in 1898 with the signing of the Treaty of Paris, President McKinley remained uncertain about whether the US should annex the Philippines, leading to a delay in his final decision. The Spanish-American War was relatively brief, lasting five months from April 1898 to August 1898. To Americans, the war became known as “the splendid little war” due to the fact that it was a decisive American victory with little sustained American casualties (Burns, 2023). As the war came to a close, however, it became evident that President McKinley was not confident in a decision regarding the Philippines. In an interview, on November 21, 1899, McKinley admitted, “When I next realized that the Philippines had dropped in our laps, I confess I did not know what to do with them” (Rusling, 1903, para. 1). McKinley’s initial goal in attacking the Philippines during the war was to destroy Spain’s naval fleet in the Philippines to propel the US to victory (Love, 2007). After the US won the Spanish-American War, however, McKinley lacked a clear strategy for the islands. His initial proposal was to establish a naval base in either Manila or Cavite, believing that such a position would secure American influence in the Pacific region without overextending the US military and US resources (Love, 2007). Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt supported McKinley’s idea for a naval base in the archipelago, as he believed it could serve as a vital coaling station for the US Navy in the Western Pacific (Vaughan, 1995). Seeking additional guidance, McKinley convened with members of his cabinet in late August 1898 to discuss possible next steps for the Philippines. Cornelius Newton Bliss, John W. Griggs, and James Wilson were in favor of controlling the entire archipelago to establish US sovereignty and control over the islands, while John Davis Long, William R. Day, and Lyman J. Gage supported control over just Manila Bay in order to limit financial costs and military commitments (Merry, 2017). This cabinet debate further reinforced McKinley’s uncertainty. The US had never acquired territory in Asia as large as the Philippines before, and McKinley remained hesitant to commit to an official decision (Merry, 2017).

As President McKinley contemplated what to do with the Philippines, he developed a deeper understanding of the economic value of the islands from fellow government officials, which made full annexation more appealing to him. In September 1898, McKinley met with General V. Greene, a US military officer familiar with the Philippine islands, to discuss possible economic ventures in the islands if the US were to take full control (Merry, 2017). Greene emphasized the abundance of resources and commodities available in the Philippines such as gold, coal, and sugar (Merry, 2017). With the

combination of US technology and Philippine resources, Philippine annexation, in Greene's mind, would provide an essential flow of goods, resources, and laborers for the growing American population and booming industrialization sector (Merry, 2017). He therefore urged McKinley to annex the entire archipelago in order to fully capitalize on the economic potential of the islands. These considerations were further supported by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, McKinley's floor leader. Lodge believed that the Philippines could serve as a key gateway to accessing Chinese markets, greatly expanding US business (Castañeda, 2016). A number of imperialist powers had already established spheres of influence in China, and Lodge believed that full annexation would allow the US to compete more effectively in the region (Vaughan, 1995). Together, Greene's assessment of the Philippines' natural resources and Lodge's vision of expanded trade convinced McKinley that he would have to assume at least partial control of the archipelago in order to take advantage of the resources and markets available in the Philippines. In McKinley's eyes, letting the Philippines go would be a wasted opportunity to stimulate the US economy. As McKinley considered the possible economic benefits the Philippines had for the US, he began to view full annexation as a true possibility. However, he remained hesitant to commit to a full annexation, as he anticipated strong opposition from the Anti-Imperialist League, an organization vehemently opposed to the annexation of the Philippines (Vaughan, 1995).

Ultimately, foreign influence and competition became the decisive factors in McKinley's decision to pursue full annexation of the Philippines. Although the geopolitical advantages of the archipelago had become increasingly apparent to him, McKinley remained cautious to commit to a final decision due to his concern about the Anti-Imperialist League. Following the Spanish-American War, the Anti-Imperialist League gained significant traction by exposing the immorality of Philippine annexation and receiving endorsements from well-known business leaders such as Andrew Carnegie (Castañeda, 2016). McKinley recognized that full annexation could provoke significant public opposition to the Republican Party and his administration (Castañeda, 2016). Nevertheless, growing concerns about foreign competition convinced him that full annexation was necessary to protect American interests despite knowing that it could lead to widespread public resentment. In terms of competition, President McKinley reckoned with the fact that other imperialist nations were interested in establishing bases in the Philippines and was concerned about how this would affect US influence in the region. Through further discussions with General Greene in September 1898, McKinley reasoned that controlling only a single island or city in the archipelago would lead to a power gap in the areas free of US control, which could lead to a scramble for power in the region between competing nations (Love, 2007). Germany, France, and Japan were all interested in the economic potential of the Philippines, and McKinley was afraid that they would establish bases in the areas of the territory not occupied by the US if the US only annexed a portion of the islands (Love, 2007). To McKinley, full annexation appeared to be the only way to ensure that the US would be the sole power reaping the benefits of the Philippines' natural resources and proximity to China. McKinley also rejected the possibility of joint occupation due to a previous conflict in Samoa in 1888, the Samoan Crisis (Love, 2007). An agreement over territory in Samoa between the US, Germany, and Britain failed when Germany attempted to overthrow the Samoan King and establish supremacy over the islands (Love, 2007). This experience convinced McKinley that a joint occupation of the Philippines would be unstable and incompatible with US interests. Therefore, by late 1898, he concluded that full annexation of the islands would be the most secure option to assure peace in the region and establish the US as a major competitor in the race for global influence.

CONSTRUCTING THE CASE FOR ANNEXATION

Once McKinley committed to full annexation, he recognized that securing public support required framing the intent of annexation as one of civilization rather than colonization, which he did through his Benevolent Assimilation Proclamation. McKinley was well aware that he needed to tread carefully and provide sufficient reasoning for annexation, as public opinion varied on the topic. The Anti-Imperialist League continued to maintain a strong influence at the time, and some Americans believed that full annexation would restrict the freedoms of the Filipinos who had already been subjugated to Spanish colonial rule for over three centuries. To overcome this opposition, McKinley sought to portray American rule as both humanitarian and necessary. McKinley envisioned that this would persuade the public into thinking that annexation was the right decision in order to gain support for Senate ratification of the Treaty of Paris, which would formally recognize the annexation of the Philippines. On December 21, 1898, McKinley issued the Benevolent Assimilation proclamation, declaring that American intervention would “assure them [Filipinos] the full measure of individual rights and liberties which is the heritage of free peoples, and prove to them that the mission of the United States is one of benevolent assimilation” (McKinley, 1898, para. 8). By framing annexation as an effort to protect and prepare the Filipino people for eventual self-government, McKinley succeeded in convincing many Americans that annexation was an act of moral responsibility rather than forceful domination. This strategy proved effective as it aligned with the widely accepted ideology of the “civilizing mission,” the idea that the US had the duty to conquer “inferior races” in order to teach them civilization (Merry, 2017). By promising the Filipinos “the full measure of individual rights and liberties,” McKinley equated annexation to an effort to help protect and govern the Filipinos as they transitioned from Spanish colonial rule to eventual independence. This appealed to the US public as a majority of the nation was passionate about the civilizing mission and therefore susceptible to the idea that the Filipinos needed to be “uplifted” and taught “civilization” by the US (Francia, 2021).

Through racial caricatures and pro-expansionist rhetoric, the US press endorsed McKinley’s idea of civilizing and uplifting the Philippines. One of the most influential works frequently referenced by pro-annexationist newspapers was Rudyard Kipling’s poem “The White Man’s Burden.” Published in February 1899, the poem encouraged the US to annex the Philippines on principles of racial superiority and manifest destiny. It gained traction in newspapers across the US as it utilized racialized language to portray the Filipinos as “sub-human,” appealing to many Americans who fervently supported white supremacist ideologies. By describing Filipinos as the Americans’ “new caught sullen peoples, Half devil and half child,” Kipling advanced the notion that Anglo-Saxons were racially superior to Filipinos and therefore possessed a moral obligation to uplift their “savage” counterparts and spread American ideals of democracy, liberty, and self-governance across the globe (Kipling, 1899, para. 1). The poem’s publication in several prominent New York newspapers, such as the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Sun*, helped legitimize racial assumptions that portrayed Filipinos as racially inferior to Caucasian Americans. These racial representations strengthened public support for annexation by suggesting that the Philippines were incapable of achieving stable self-government without US supervision (Vaughan, 1995). Furthermore, these themes were reinforced by the *Washington Post*, which circulated racial caricatures depicting Filipinos as ragged, miniature figures attacking a towering Uncle Sam with spears (Vaughan, 1995). The physical size difference between Uncle Sam and the Filipinos, combined with the Filipinos’ violent

portrayal, suggested that they were hostile and needed to be taught obedience and civilization by the US government.

OPPOSITION AND RATIFICATION

Although McKinley's plan for Benevolent Assimilation bolstered support for annexation in the public sphere, the Anti-Imperialist League worked to undermine McKinley's plan for annexation in the Senate. Despite the release of McKinley's executive order in December 1898, the treaty still required a two-thirds approval vote in the Senate on February 6th, 1899, before annexation could become official (Kramer, 2006). Composed largely of Democrats, the Anti-Imperialist League sought to block the ratification of the Treaty of Paris and, with it, Philippine annexation. Much like McKinley's cabinet, the Senate was closely divided over the future of the Philippines. Generally, Republicans (members of McKinley's party) were in favor of annexing the Philippines and planned to grant the Philippines independence when they deemed it appropriate (Kramer, 2006). On the other hand, Democrats were against annexation, as they believed it denied the Filipinos the right to self-government (Kramer, 2006). In an attempt to convince Senators and the broader American public that annexation was unnecessary, the League released a statement which read, "We earnestly condemn the policy of the present national administration in the Philippines. It seeks to extinguish the spirit of 1776 in those islands... We urge that Congress be promptly convened to announce to the Filipinos our purpose to concede to them the independence for which they have so long fought and which of right is theirs" (Francia, 2021). The Anti-Imperialists argued that the annexation of the Philippines was hypocritical as it directly contradicted the nation's founding principles of liberty, self-governance, and personal freedom. Furthermore, the statement asserted that the Filipinos had already demonstrated their capacity for independence after enduring three centuries of Spanish colonial rule before the creation of the Malolos Constitution on January 21, 1899 which established a democratic constitutional republic in the archipelago (Francia, 2021). The US formally ignored the Malolos Constitution and the creation of a legitimate Filipino government, which the Anti-Imperialists exposed as inconsistent with American principles of self-government.

Ultimately, the outbreak of the Philippine-American War on February 4th, 1899, became the decisive turning point in the Senate's debate over Philippine annexation, convincing Senators to ratify the Treaty of Paris as quickly as possible (Kramer, 2006). As Filipinos realized that the US planned to establish hegemony in the archipelago rather than recognize their independence, tensions between Filipino and American troops escalated (Kramer, 2006). Fighting erupted on February 4, 1899, in the city of Manila and resulted in a decisive American victory (Kramer, 2006). Ensuing violence in the archipelago quickly shifted the annexation debate in the Senate from one of speculative expansion to one of urgency, as Senators believed they had a duty to support American troops and punish the Filipinos for attacking the US military. Senators believed withdrawing from the archipelago was not an option as it would make the US appear weak and incapable of suppressing a rebel force. Consequently, in a Senate vote on February 6, 1899, a mere two days after the start of the Philippine-American war, the Treaty of Paris was officially ratified by vote of 57 to 27, exceeding the required two-thirds majority by a single vote (Kramer, 2006). The outbreak of violence amplified McKinley's claim that Filipinos were "uncivilized" and needed to be uplifted and guided by the US, making his policy of Benevolent Assimilation more persuasive to enough senators to secure ratification (Kramer, 2006).

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CONCLUSION

By effectively crafting a narrative that the Filipinos were not yet ready for independence, McKinley and his allies successfully rationalized the annexation of the Philippines and secured Senate approval for annexation. Following ratification, the Philippines entered a period of American colonial rule, culminating in the establishment of the Taft colonial government in 1903, which expanded infrastructure and boosted American industry at the expense of Filipino sovereignty (McCoy, 2009). Although McKinley publicly framed annexation as a humanitarian effort intended to prepare the Filipinos for eventual self-government, his rhetoric ultimately served to obscure the US's true strategic and economic objectives in the region. The annexation of the Philippines, therefore, exposes the tension between America's commitment to its own democratic ideals of liberty, freedom, and self-governance and the strategic ambitions that increasingly shaped US foreign policy at the turn of the twentieth century.

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