

The Philippines Tangle

William James

Introduction

The American Anti-Imperialist League formed shortly after the outbreak of the War of 1898. Founding members included the novelist Mark Twain, noted sociologist William Graham Sumner, Samuel Gompers, and Andrew Carnegie¹. The group opposed American imperialism, particularly the escalating war in the Philippines.

William James, a prominent psychologist and philosopher during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, was a founding member of the League. Born into a wealthy, prominent albeit somewhat exoteric New York City family, James travelled around the world, studied medicine and art, wrote poetry and painted. James taught at Harvard from 1873 (still Reconstruction) through 1907. He started in the physiology and anatomy department before creating the psychology Department, one of the first in the country. James trained four generations of psychologists. Teddy Roosevelt took James' class while at Harvard. So did W.E.B. Du Bois.

The Anti-Imperialist League argued that the War in the Philippines was inhumane and betrayed the principles of the country for nothing more than greed. James published this essay in 1899 as the War in the Philippines escalated².

Primary Source

An observer who should judge solely by the sort of evidence which the newspapers present might easily suppose that the American people felt little concern about the performances of our Government in the Philippine Islands, and were practically indifferent to their moral aspects. The cannon of our gunboats at Manila and the ratification of the treaty have sent even the most vehement anti-imperialist journals temporarily to cover, and the bugbear of copperheadism³ has reduced the freest tongues for a while to silence. The excitement of battle, this time as always, has produced its cowering and disorganizing effect upon the opposition.

¹ Mark Twain wrote such classics as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*; William Graham Sumner was the first professor of sociology in the United States. He taught at Yale from 1876 to 1909. Like James, he trained 4 generations of sociologists; Samuel Gompers was one of the founders, and long-time President. of the American Federal of Labor; Andrew Carnegie, we know.

² William James, "[*The Philippines Tangle*](#)," *Boston Evening Transcript*, March 1, 1899, is believed to be in the public domain.

³ Copperheads were Northern Democrats who opposed the Civil War. James' implies that opposition to war was out of favor as a political position by the late nineteenth century.

...The process of education has been too short for the older American nature not to feel the shock. We gave the fighting instinct and the passion of mastery their outing; we let them have the day to themselves, and temporarily committed our fortunes to their leading last spring, because we thought that, being harnessed in a cause which promised to be that of freedom, the results were fairly safe, and we could resume our permanent ideals and character when the fighting fit was done.

We now see how we reckoned without our host. We see by the vividest of examples what an absolute savage and pirate the passion of military conquest always is, and how the only safeguard against the crimes to which it will infallibly drag the nation that gives way to it is to keep it chained forever, is never to let it get its start. In the European nations it is kept chained by a greater mutual fear than they have ever before felt for one another. Here it should have been kept chained by a native wisdom nourished assiduously for a century on opposite ideals. And we can appreciate now that wisdom in those of us who, with our national Executive at their head, worked so desperately to keep it chained last spring.

But since then, Executive and all, we have been swept away by the overmastering flood. And now what it has swept us into is an adventure that in sober seriousness and definite English speech must be described as literally piratical. Our treatment of the Aguinaldo⁴ movement at Manila and at Iloilo is piracy positive and absolute, and the American people appear as pirates pure and simple, as day by day the real facts of the situation are coming to the light.

What was only vaguely apprehended is now clear with a definiteness that is startling indeed. Here was a people towards whom we felt no ill-will, against whom we had not even a slanderous rumor to bring; a people for whose tenacious struggle against their Spanish oppressors we have for years past spoken (so far as we spoke of them at all) with nothing but admiration and sympathy. Here was a leader who, as the Spanish lies about him, on which we were fed so long, drop off, and as the truth gets more and more known, appears as an exceptionally fine specimen of the patriot and national hero; not only daring, but honest; not only a fighter, but a governor and organizer of extraordinary power. Here were the precious beginnings of an indigenous national life, with which, if we had any responsibilities to these islands at all, it was our first duty to have squared ourselves. Aguinaldo's movement was, and evidently deserved to be, an ideal popular movement, which as far as it had had time to exist was showing itself "fit" to survive and likely to become a healthy piece of national self-development. It was all we had to build on, at any rate, so far—if we had any desire not to succeed to the Spaniards' inheritance of native execration.

And what did our Administration do? So far as the facts have leaked out, it issued instructions to the commanders on the ground simply to freeze Aguinaldo out, as a dangerous rival with whom all compromising entanglement was sedulously to be avoided by the great Yankee business

⁴ Emilio Aguinaldo (1869-1964), was a Filipino resistance leader, who fought against Spain alongside US soldiers during the War of 1898. US military leaders, particularly Navy Admiral George Dewey, supported Aguinaldo's election as President of the Philippines in 1899, and promised Filipino independence. By 1901, the United States was at war with the Philippines to stop their independence. Aguinaldo was captured by US troops in 1901, and the war ended in 1903. The United States retained imperial control of the Philippines until after WWII, in 1946.

concern. We were not to "recognize" him, we were to deny him all account of our intentions; and in general to refuse any account of our intentions to anybody, except to declare in abstract terms their "benevolence,"⁵ until the inhabitants, without a pledge of any sort from us, should turn over their country into our hands. Our President's bouffe-proclamation⁶ was the only thing vouchsafed: "We are here for your own good; therefore unconditionally surrender to our tender mercies, or we'll blow you into kingdom come."

Our own people meanwhile were vaguely uneasy, for the inhuman callousness and insult shown at Paris and Washington⁷ to the officially delegated mouthpieces of the wants and claims of the Filipinos seemed simply abominable from any moral point of view. But there must be reasons of state, we assumed, and good ones. Aguinaldo is evidently a pure adventurer "on the make," a blackmailer, sure in the end to betray our confidence, or our Government wouldn't treat him so, for our President is essentially methodistical⁸ and moral. Mr. McKinley must be in an intolerably perplexing situation, and we must not criticize him too soon. We assumed this, I say, though all the while there was a horribly suspicious look about the performance. On its face it reeked of the infernal adroitness of the great department store, which has reached perfect expertness in the art of killing silently and with no public squealing or commotion the neighboring small concern.

But that small concern, Aguinaldo, apparently not having the proper American business education, and being uninstructed on the irresistible character of our Republican party combine, neither offered to sell out nor to give up. So the Administration had to show its hand without disguise. It did so at last. We are now openly engaged in crushing out the sacredest thing in this great human world—the attempt of a people long enslaved to attain to the possession of itself, to organize its laws and government, to be free to follow its internal destinies according to its own ideals.

War, said Moltke⁹, aims at destruction, and at nothing else. And splendidly are we carrying out war's ideal. We are destroying the lives of these islanders by the thousand, their villages and their cities; for surely it is we who are solely responsible for all the incidental burnings that our operations entail. But these destructions are the smallest part of our sins. We are destroying down to the root every germ of a healthy national life in these unfortunate people, and we are surely helping to destroy for one generation at least their faith in God and man. No life shall you have, we say, except as a gift from our philanthropy after your unconditional submission to our will. So as they seem to be "slow pay" in the matter of submission, our yellow journals have

⁵ President William McKinley called his agenda for US control of the Philippines "benign assimilation."

⁶ Bouffe refers to a comical opera, or, a farce. The implication here is that McKinley's declaration of benign assimilation was comically melodramatic.

⁷ The Treaty of Paris formally ended the War of 1898, and the US assumed formal control of Spain's former colonies – Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam. This should be in your notes.

⁸ Methodistical means "pertaining to Methodists," or in this case, the inference is that McKinley thinks like a Methodist/Protestant, and thus, trustworthy.

⁹ Helmuth von Moltke the Younger was Chief of the General Staff for Germany from 1906 until his death in 1916 (The US office of "Joint Chiefs" of Staff is based on Moltke's position). Moltke was the architect of Germany's military operations during the first years of WWI and as a result, is held largely responsible for Germany's loss in the war by military historians. This was evident early on – the first major battle of the Western Front, the Battle of Marne in 1914 (the first year of the war), was led by Moltke, and resulted in a major loss for the Germans. Some historians - Moltke himself - argue that Germany never recovered from this early strategic loss (which prevented Germany from taking Paris in WWI). The war went on for another 4 years despite the German loss at Marne.

abundant time in which to raise new monuments of capitals to the victories of Old Glory, and in which to extol the unrestrainable eagerness of our brave soldiers to rush into battles that remind them so much of rabbit hunts on Western plains.

It is horrible, simply horrible. Surely there cannot be many born and bred Americans who, when they look at the bare fact of what we are doing, the fact taken all by itself, do not feel this, and do not blush with burning shame at the unspeakable meanness and ignominy of the trick?

Why, then, do we go on? First, the war fever; and then the pride which always refuses to back down when under fire. But these are passions that interfere with the reasonable settlement of any affair; and in this affair we have to deal with a factor altogether peculiar with our belief, namely, in a national destiny which must be "big" at any cost, and which for some inscrutable reason it has become infamous for us to disbelieve in or refuse. We are to be missionaries of civilization, and to bear the white man's burden, painful as it often is. We must sow our ideals, plant our order, impose our God.

The individual lives are nothing. Our duty and our destiny call, and civilization must go on. Could there be a more damning indictment of that whole bloated idol termed "modern civilization" than this amounts to? Civilization is, then, the big, hollow, resounding, corrupting, sophisticating, confusing torrent of mere brutal momentum and irrationality that brings forth fruits like this! It is safe to say that one Christian missionary, whether primitive, Protestant or Catholic, of the original missionary type, one Buddhist or Mohammedan of a genuine saintly sort, one ethical reformer or philanthropist, or one disciple of Tolstoi¹⁰ would do more real good in these islands than our whole army and navy can possibly effect with our whole civilization at their back. He could build up realities, in however small a degree; we can only destroy the inner realities and indeed destroy in a year more of them than a generation can make good.

...The issue is perfectly plain at last. We are cold-bloodedly, wantonly and abominably destroying the soul of a people who never did us an atom of harm in their lives. It is bald, brutal piracy, impossible to dish up any longer in the cold pot-grease of President McKinley's cant at the recent Boston banquet surely as shamefully evasive a speech, considering the right of the public to know definite facts, as can often have fallen even from a professional politician's lips. The worst of our imperialists is that they do not themselves know where sincerity ends and insincerity begins...The impotence of the private individual, with imperialism under full headway as it is, is deplorable indeed. But every American has a voice or a pen, and may use it. So, impelled by my own sense of duty, I write these present words. One by one we shall creep from cover, and the opposition will organize itself. If the Filipinos hold out long enough, there is a good chance (the canting game being already pretty well played out, and the piracy having to show itself henceforward naked) of the older American beliefs and sentiments coming to their rights again, and of the Administration being terrified into a conciliatory policy towards the native government.

¹⁰ Leo Tolstoy was a Russian writer, best known for *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1877). During the 1870s, Tolstoy had an existential awakening of sorts, and embraced Christian ideology and pacificism, but rejected organized religion, especially the Russian Orthodox Church. Tolstoy was an outspoken critic of imperialism, including the US war in the Philippines.

The programme for the opposition should, it seems to me, be radical. The infamy and iniquity of a war of conquest must stop...Until the opposition newspapers seriously begin, and the mass meetings are held, let every American who still wishes his country to possess its ancient soul—soul a thousand times more dear than ever, now that it seems in danger of perdition—do what little he can in the way of open speech and writing, and above all let him give his representatives and senators in Washington a positive piece of his mind.

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