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THE PREDOMINANT ISSUE

[1900]

EACH of the two great parties in the present campaign is trying to force on the other a "predominant issue" to which the other will not agree. The predominant issue, not for a campaign or a year, is expansion and all that goes with it. It will not be settled by speeches or votes. It will have to work itself out in history. The political history of the United States for the next fifty years will date from the Spanish war of 1898. The attempt to absorb into the body politic of the United States communities of entirely foreign antecedents, nationality, religion, language, *mores*, political education, institutions — in short, of a different culture and social education from ours — must be regarded as a far more serious venture than it is now popularly supposed to be. Out of it will arise one question after another, and they will be of a kind to produce political convulsions amongst us. The predominant issue, in a far wider sense than the wranglings of a presidential campaign, is how to let go of what we seized. No discussion such as occurs in a campaign ever clears up an issue; for one reason, because the discussion is carried on, not to get at the truth or wisdom of the case, but to win a party victory. It is an interesting study to notice how such a discussion results in set phrases and stereotyped assertions which bar the way to any real understanding of the issue. Let it be our object now to try to define the issue under expansion, imperialism, and militarism, which stands

before the American people as the chief political interest of the immediate future.

There are few of us who have not heard it said, after the failure of a mercantile or manufacturing firm, that the cause of failure was that they had "spread out too much." The story is generally one of success within a field of effort, then of enthusiasm and ambition overmastering prudence and moderation, then of excessive burdens and failure. On the other hand, we are familiar enough with cases in which business enterprise and courage sustain enormous growth and expansion. It appears, therefore, that expansion, as such, is neither good nor bad. The question is one of conditions, circumstances, powers. It is a question of policy which must be decided by wisdom and prudence. It follows that it is never a question which can be settled by precedent. Every new case of expansion has its own circumstances. Enthusiasm would have no place in the plan if it was to win the confidence of bankers and investors. Impatience of prudent foresight, and irritation at demands to see the grounds for expecting success, would not recommend the project to wise business men. Mere megalomania — a desire to get a big thing to brag about — would not be regarded as a good basis for the enterprise.

At least two of our large cities have recently expanded their boundaries. A leading newspaper of Chicago has explained the financial distress of that city by the extent to which it has included unimproved suburbs.[1] The people of greater New York seem to have many doubts whether their expansion was wise and prudent.[2] No

[1] Chicago Tribune in the New York Times, September 4, 1900.

[2] Comptroller's statements and newspaper comments thereon about September 22, 1900.

doubt both cities were chiefly influenced by megalomania, although it may very probably appear, after twenty-five years, in the case of New York, that it was well to secure the consolidation before greater difficulties accumulated in the way of it, and that the ultimate interest of all concerned was really served by it.

If it is proposed to a railroad company to buy or lease another line, shall they not look to see whether it will be a burden or an advantage? To buy a lawsuit is not always an act of folly. John Jacob Astor did it with great profit, but he took care to get the best information and legal advice which could be obtained before he did it.

Expansion, therefore, is not a disease, of which it can be said that it is always a calamity; nor is it a growth of which it can be said that it is always an advantage. How can it be doubted that territorial expansion for a state presents the same kind of a problem, with similar danger of delusions, fallacies, and pitfalls of vanity? Expansion may lower national vitality and hasten decay.

Any state or nation has life necessities to meet as time goes on. It was a life necessity of the German nation fifty years ago to form a unified state, and the same was true of Italy. The cost was great, but it had to be met. The alternative was stagnation and decay. The Russians say that it is a life necessity for them to get better access to the sea, but the case is by no means so clear. Probably the real philosophy of the American Revolution is that it was a life necessity of the Anglo-American colonies to become independent. It matters little, therefore, that the alleged reasons for the revolt, in history, law, and political philosophy, will not bear examination.

This doctrine of life necessity is dangerous. Unless it be handled with great caution and conscientiousness

and be checked by a close and positive adherence to facts, it may easily degenerate into the old "reason of state" and furnish an excuse for any political crime. It is a grand thing to soar over epochs and periods of history, deducing political generalizations and sweeping "laws of history," but it is futile and to be condemned unless it is done upon a basis of mature scholarship and with great reserve and care. Such deductions deserve no attention unless they are restricted to simple phenomena and are above all suspicion of party interest.

The acquisition of Louisiana by the United States was a clear and simple case of life necessity. If Spain claimed that, as possessor of New Orleans, she might of right close the Mississippi River, it was a life necessity of the people of the United States to take New Orleans from her by purchase or war. Her views of public law and international rights and colonies then brought her into collision with us. The purchase of the whole western half of the valley was never contemplated by anybody here; it was proposed by France. If the purchase was wise, it was because the city could not be obtained otherwise, and we have a case which establishes the doctrine of "meeting the consequences" at the same time that it limits and defines it. The arguments of the Federalists against the purchase were all good, so far as they were not partisan, at that time, but the railroad and the telegraph took away all their force afterwards. Neither party could foresee the railroads or telegraphs. The purchase of Louisiana entailed the question of extending slavery, but the statesmen of 1803, doing what our interests then required, could properly leave the consequences to be met when they arose, and they are not to be blamed if those consequences were unwisely met when they came.

The acquisition of Florida was not in obedience to a State necessity so clear and great as the acquisition of New Orleans, but Florida was geographically a part of our territory and Spain discharged her international duties with respect to it in such manner that our relations with her were always bad. There was a great interest to acquire Florida, if it could be done by peaceful purchase.

The acquisition of Texas and California was a very different matter. The two cases are generally conjoined, but they were very different and the whole story is one of those which a nation ignores in its own annals while vigorously denouncing similar episodes in the history of other states. The current argument now to justify what was done then is to point to Texas and the other states, to the harbor of San Francisco, the gold-mines, and the Pacific Railroad, and to say that we should have had none of these but for what was done in 1848. This is as if a man who had stolen a fortune fifty years ago should justify himself by saying that he would not otherwise have had the land, houses, ships, and stocks, which he has had and enjoyed. Public and private property are not to be put on the same plane, and this comparison is good only for the particular point for which it is adduced; namely, that the pleasure and profit obtained from spoliation never can justify it. Nevertheless, there is some force in the doctrine of "manifest destiny." Manifest destiny is far more sound than the empty and silly talk of the last two years about "Destiny." Manifest destiny includes a rational judgment about the relations which now exist compared with those which will probably arise in the future, but "Destiny" has nothing rational in it. To invoke it in public affairs is a refusal to think or to be governed by reason. Destiny is a name for the

connection which unites the series of consequences upon an act like the war with Spain, and it is invoked to prevent us from going back to see whether the consequences do not prove that that act was wrong and foolish.

There was room to argue, in 1845, that it was the plain course of the future that the United States should occupy and develop California: it was a contiguous territory; it lay between the United States and the Pacific and contained the best harbor on the coast; it was in hands which were not developing it; it was almost uninhabited, so that the subjugation of dissatisfied people, although not entirely absent, was not an important feature. The claim of a group of people to hold a part of the earth's surface is never absolute. Every group holds its territory by force and holds it subject to the obligation to exploit it and make it contributory to the welfare of mankind. If it does not do this it will probably lose the territory by the conquest of a more energetic people. This is manifest destiny. It is another dangerous doctrine, if it is used without a candid heed to its limitations. It has been abused twice recently: first, an absolute right to territory has been set up on behalf of the Boers, who really challenged the English as to the manifest destiny of South Africa; second, in our own relations with Spain we have heard arguments that, if one state thinks that another is not making good use of its territory, the former may dispossess the latter. In so far, then, as state necessity in the weaker form of manifest destiny may be judged to apply to California, that case of expansion could be justified.

If now we turn to our recent expansion and apply the doctrine of state necessity to it, there might be some argument in favor of the acquisition of Cuba. It is

contiguous to our territory and there is a slight but unimportant military advantage in owning it. No necessity for owning it was ever experienced; that is to say, no conviction that we needed it was ever forced upon us by experience of loss, disadvantage, injury, or incapacity of any kind, from not possessing it, as in the case of the Mississippi River. The American people were indifferent to it up to 1898. We had no grievance against Spain. No folly or wrong which she had committed had reached us, as in the case of Florida. Yet it was with reference to Cuba that we went to war with her, and we have bound ourselves to make Cuba independent; that is, to put her out of our jurisdiction and sacrifice any interest which we have in possessing the island. It is as safe as any political prediction can be that we shall never again give up the jurisdiction over Cuba. Our national vanity is at stake in it now, and there is some rational ground for holding it.

As to Puerto Rico and the Philippines the great ground for dissent from what has been done is that action did not proceed from any rational motive connected with the growth and ramifications of the interests of the American people. The action was gratuitous and adventurous. While it was not called for by any care for our interests it involved us in risks and obligations. A new doctrine of constructive obligation has been invented which is false and dangerous. A prominent newspaper recently argued that we are bound to protect the Chinese Christian converts because we allowed missionaries to be sent to China under our protection. This is but a specimen of the way in which false dogmas grow when statesmen begin to act from motives which are entirely foreign to statecraft. The arguments in favor of expansion all have the character of after-thoughts invented

to excuse or defend acts which were resolved upon for other reasons. At the present moment perhaps not a single voter wants the United States to acquire a part of China. Why not? If anyone was asked, he probably would say that it is out of our way, that it would involve us in trouble, that it is not necessary for our interests, that it would be foolish, since it would show a lack of judgment as to when a thing is wise and when it is not. If any voter had been asked on January 1, 1898, whether he desired that the United States should acquire the Philippine Islands, would he not have made the same reply, with impatient scorn that anyone should bother him with such a senseless proposition? How did the battle of Manila Bay alter any factor which entered into the wisdom of acquiring the Philippines as a question of rational statesmanship? If that battle had never taken place, and the Philippine islanders had continued their revolution until they drove out the Spaniards, what would Americans have cared what government they set up or how they got along with it? Why should we care now, even if a naval battle between us and the Spaniards did take place in Manila Bay? No one is so foolish as really to believe in these constructive obligations, if there were no other elements in the case, but the national vanity is now enlisted, and vanity leads nations into folly just as it does individuals.

Upon a positive analysis, therefore, the case of recent expansion is shown to be different from all the earlier cases which are cited to justify it precisely in the most essential fact, the interest of the American people as the efficient motive.

All expansion includes the question whether we shall treat the inhabitants of new possessions as we treat each other, or on some inferior footing; whether we shall

govern them by our will or let them share in governing themselves and us. This dilemma is insoluble under our system of government. We shall struggle with it through the next generation, and it will force a change in our system of government. This is why the present expansion, taking in elements which are foreign and uncongenial, is no parallel to cases of expansion into uninhabited territory. The inhabitants of the new possessions have interests, ideas, tastes, wills, and unless we kill them all, their human traits will enter into the problem. If we take them into full fellowship, imagine what the "Spanish Gang" will be and do in Congress within twenty years! It would be madness to put our interests into such jeopardy, and it would be fatal to the political system under which we have lived to take that course. The other branch of the dilemma is imperialism and it is no less fatal to our political system.

Specifically, it is imperialism for the Congress of the United States to rule any people who are outside of the United States and not under the guarantees of the Constitution of the United States. Congress owes its existence to the Constitution, which defines the rights and duties of Congress. Congress has no existence or authority outside of the sway and the restrictions of the political system to which that document gives order, nor outside of the commonwealth of which that document prescribes the structure and functions. The answer which is made to this statement is that the United States is a sovereign state, like any other state, and with all the powers which any state of the first rank has. That is imperialism, for it disregards the historical and legal facts about the Constitution of the United States and the novel and unique political system created under it, in order to go off and find a basis of interpretation for

the American Federal Commonwealth in the precedents and analogies of the Roman Empire and the modern European military monarchies. Here is an issue which is sharp enough. Here is something which may properly be called "Americanism"; namely, the novel and unique political system under which we have lived and loyalty to the same, and the issue is nothing less than whether to go on and maintain it or to discard it for the European military and monarchical tradition. It must be a complete transformation of the former to try to carry on under it two groups of political societies, one on a higher, the other on a lower plane, unequal in rights and powers; the former, in their confederated capacity, ruling the latter perhaps by military force.

Then again, imperialism is a philosophy. It is the way of looking at things which is congenial to people who are ruling others without constitutional restraints, and it is the temper in which they act. History offers plenty of examples of it and the most striking ones are furnished by democracies and republics. The Greek cities with their colonies and dependent allies, the Roman republic, the Italian city republics, showed what tyranny one commonwealth is capable of when it rules another. We showed it ourselves in the reconstruction period. You cannot get a governing state to listen, think, repent, confess, and reform. It is more vain than a despot. Is it not a "free" government? Can "we" be tyrants or do any wrong? Already we have had ample manifestations of this temper amongst ourselves. We have juggled away so much of our sacred political dogmas as troubles us, although we cling to such as we can still make use of. We fret and chafe now at the "Constitution," of which, two years ago, we made a fetish. We fly into a rage at anybody who dissents and call him

"rebel" and "traitor," as strikers shout "scab" at anyone who chooses to hold an opinion of his own. It is one of the worst symptoms of change that the American sense of humor, which has, in the past, done such good service in suppressing political asininity, now makes default. If it was still efficient we should not hear of "traitors" who choose to vote no, or of "rebels" who never owed allegiance, or of the doctrine that those who oppose a war are responsible for the lives lost in it, or that a citizen may criticise any action of his government except a war. The evil of imperialism is in its reaction on our own national character and institutions, on our political ideas and creed, on our way of managing our public affairs, on our temper in political discussion.

Imperialism is one way of dealing with the problem forced upon us by expansion to embrace uncongenial groups of people. Militarism is a method of carrying out that policy. The President will not wear a crown, and Congress will not introduce universal military service next winter. Derision of such fears is cheap, since nobody entertains them. In this world it is the little beginnings which tell; it is the first steps at the parting of the ways which are decisive. Militarism is a system. It may go with a small armament, or be absent with a large one, as in England. It is militarism when a European king always wears a military uniform. It represents an idea. The predominant idea in the State is, perhaps necessarily, its military strength, and the king, as the representative of the State, keeps this ever before himself and others. This is a way of looking at State affairs, and it colors everything else. Therefore it is militarism when military officers despise civilians and call them "pekins," lawyers, grocers, philistines, etc.;

when they never go about without sabres by their sides; when they push civilians off the sidewalk and cut their heads open with the sabre if they remonstrate. It is militarism when railroads are built as military strategy requires, not as trade requires. Militarism and industrialism are two standpoints which are widely separated, from which the modern State has two very different aspects, and from which almost every question of policy will have two different presumptions to start with. Under militarism the foremost question is: Will it increase our power to fight? Under industrialism it is: Will it increase the comfort of our people? Of every new invention militarism asks: How can it be rendered useful for military purposes? Industrialism asks: How will it increase our power over nature to supply our needs? Militarism is also a philosophy and temper which is accordant with imperialism. It consists in aggression and domination instead of conciliation and concession. It is militarism to "jam things through" without consideration for the feelings and interests of other people, except so far as they can strike back, whether it is done in a legislature or on the field of battle. Militarism is pugnacity, preference for fighting methods, faith in violence, strenuosity, ruthlessness, cynical selfishness as far as one dare indulge it. It is entirely opposed to the American temper which has been developed by industrialism and which does not believe in fighting methods, although it recognizes the fact that men must fight sometimes, and that when the occasion comes they ought to fight with all their might. Militarism means one law for ourselves and another for everybody else; the great dogmas of the Declaration of Independence were good when we wanted to be independent of somebody else; they have no validity when somebody else wants to be

independent of us. Aguinaldo was a patriot when he was fighting Spain; he is a rebel when he is fighting us. Militarism is the neglect of rational motives and interests and the surrender of one's mind and will to whimsical points of vanity and anger.

We have advanced far on this road when we propose to sit in judgment on the fitness of other people for self-government. What are the criteria of this fitness? Who knows whether we possess it ourselves? Any nation possesses it only more or less. The legislature of New York apparently does not think that the city of New York possesses it. In the period of 1783 to 1789 many contemporary observers saw good reason to doubt whether the United States of North America possessed it, and even distinguished fathers of the republic have left on record their own misgivings about it. Thirty years ago we gave the suffrage to newly emancipated negro slaves, and gave them not only self-government, but the political control of the States in which they lived. It was the gravest political heresy of that period to doubt if they were "fit for self-government," and no question of that sort was ever formulated in public discussion. There is something ludicrous in the attitude of one community standing over another to see whether the latter is "fit for self-government." Is lynching, or race-rioting, or negro-burning, or a row in the legislature, or a strike with paralyzed industry, or a disputed election, or a legislative deadlock, or the murder of a claimant-official, or counting in unelected officers, or factiousness, or financial corruption and jobbery, proof of unfitness for self-government? If so, any State which was stronger than we might take away our self-government on the ground that we were unfit for it. It is, therefore, simply a question of *power*, like all the other alleged grounds of interference of one

political body with another, such as humanity, sympathy, neighborhood, internal anarchy, and so on. We talk as if we were going to adjudicate the fitness of another body politic for self-government, as a free, open, and categorical question, when to decide it one way means that we shall surrender *power*, and when not even flagrant civil war could really be held to prove unfitness.

It does not improve the matter any to speak of a "stable government." A leading newspaper recently said that the thing to do is to establish "what may properly be regarded *by us* rather than Cuba as a stable government." This is the attitude of imperialism and militarism, and the issue involved between those of us who approve of it and those who do not is whether the American people ought, in their own interest, to engage in this kind of an enterprise with respect to anybody. All governments perish. None, therefore, is stable beyond more or less. What degree of duration suffices? There is no issue which is capable of adjudication. There is, in fact, no political issue between the parties in respect to their policy. Both use the same phrase. Mr. Bryan would be as slow to wound the national vanity as Mr. McKinley; the patronage and power in the dependencies are as dear to his followers as to Mr. McKinley's.

There is an issue, however, and the chief difficulty connected with it is that it is too deep and philosophical for easy popular discussion. It is nothing less than the standpoint, the philosophy, and the temper of our political system; that is to say, it is the integrity of our political system. Every step we take brings up new experiences which warn us that we are on a wrong path. The irritation and impatience of the expansionists testify to

their own uneasiness at what we are doing. It is not to be expected that any appeal to reason can guide the course of events. Experience of trouble, war, expense, corruption, quarrels, scandals, etc., may produce weariness and anger and determine action. The issue will, therefore, press upon us for years to come.

The expansionists ask what we think ought to be done. It is they who are in power and have our fate in their hands, and it belongs to them to say what shall be done. This they have not done. They are contented with optimistic platitudes which carry no responsibility and can be dropped to-morrow as easily as "criminal aggression" and our "plain duty." It is unquestionably true that there is no fighting against the accomplished fact, although it is rare audacity to taunt the victims of misgovernment with their own powerlessness against it, as if that was an excuse for it. We were told that we needed Hawaii in order to secure California. What shall we now take in order to secure the Philippines? No wonder that some expansionists do not want to "scuttle out of China." We shall need to take China, Japan, and the East Indies, according to the doctrine, in order to "secure" what we have. Of course this means that, on the doctrine, we must take the whole earth in order to be safe on any part of it, and the fallacy stands exposed. If, then, safety and prosperity do not lie in this direction, the place to look for them is in the other direction: in domestic development, peace, industry, free trade with everybody, low taxes, industrial power. We ought not only to grant independence to these communities, which are both geographically and socially outside of us, but we ought to force it upon them as soon as a reasonable time has been granted to them to organize such a political system as suits them. After that they should go on

their own way on their own responsibility, and we should turn our attention to our own interests, and the development of our own country, on those lines of political policy which our traditions set for us and of which our experience has been so satisfactory.