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Retentionist in Chief: William Howard Taft and the Question of Philippine Independence, 1912–1916

Adam D. Burns

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Retentionist in Chief William Howard Taft and the Question of Philippine Independence, 1912–1916

Between 1900 and 1913, Republican William Howard Taft maintained a keen interest in preserving a US imperial connection with the Philippines. Following defeat in his presidential reelection campaign of 1912, Taft became the unofficial leader of a “retentionist” movement to stop the US Democratic Party from making any firm promise of future independence for the islands, which he saw as a “policy of scuttle.” This article brings light to the underexplored role Taft played in this movement, which proved a marked contrast to the route the US ultimately took in its interventions across the globe in the twentieth century and beyond.

KEYWORDS: US–PHILIPPINE RELATIONS · PHILIPPINE INDEPENDENCE · JONES ACT (PHILIPPINE ORGANIC ACT) · US IMPERIALISM

William Howard Taft was an integral figure in the history of the American–Philippine relationship from the very beginnings of the US imperial experiment in the Philippines. When the United States annexed the Philippines following their rout of the former imperial master of the archipelago, Spain, the question of how exactly the new US–Philippine relationship would function remained to be answered. Pres. William McKinley appointed two consecutive Philippine Commissions to explore the question. The second of these commissions was tasked in 1900 with paving the way from military to civilian rule, following the investigations and recommendations of the first commission that had been sent out the year before.¹ McKinley selected the Ohio circuit court judge William H. Taft to head the second commission. Taft later went on to become the islands’ first US civil governor, taking office on 4 July 1901. For more than a decade Taft was to remain in control of Philippine affairs at various levels: as governor-general of the Philippines until the end of 1903, then as Theodore Roosevelt’s secretary of war between 1904 and 1908 (under whose jurisdiction lay the Bureau of Insular Affairs), and finally as US president until early 1913.

Unlike a number of more prominent Republican politicians at the turn of the century, typified by Theodore Roosevelt and Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge, Taft did not think it wise to seek to extend US influence by acquiring strategic possessions. For the so-called Large Policy advocates such as Roosevelt there were clear geopolitical gains to be made from a policy that saw the US expand its possessions and prestige into previously underdeveloped corners of the globe (Holmes 2006, 143). By contrast, Taft stated in early 1900: “I am not and never have been an expansionist. I have always hoped that the jurisdiction of our nation would not extend beyond territory between the two oceans. We have not solved all the problems of popular government so perfectly as to justify our voluntarily seeking more difficult ones abroad” (NYT 1900, 3). However, Taft did accept that by 1900 the annexation of the islands was a fait accompli and also conceded, with hindsight, that President McKinley had had little option in taking the islands given the alternatives on offer.

The alternatives to annexation as Taft saw them were primarily independence for the islands or the maintenance of a US protectorate. The first of these, Taft thought, would leave the islands open to other “less benevolent” powers with imperial ambitions or, perhaps worse, the perils

of self-government. The second option, a protectorate, would entangle the United States in the convulsions of Far Eastern politics for many years without any clear benefits. Taft felt that Filipinos were not fit for independence and that chaos and corruption would reign if they achieved premature liberty. In 1904, when asked by the Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts, William Lawrence, why the US should not just “declare” their aim of ultimate independence for the islands, Taft replied:

I am as convinced as possible that nothing can do more harm than that declaration. It is not that I object to independence when [the Filipino people] are fit for it. It is, first, that I object to our binding ourselves to doing anything which may have to be done 100 or 150 years hence. It is not that I object to our agreeing with them, or letting them agree when they are fit for it, what government they shall have; but it is that the agitators, the gentlemen that are engaged in looking for office under an independent government, have very little concern about independence that is to come after they are dead; and if you permit them independence and make it a definite promise you will have continued agitation as to when they ought to have independence; and as a consequence, you will have the attention of the people fixed on something in the future, and not on the success of the present government; and if the present does not succeed, independence cannot be a success. (Willis 1905, 186)

By the end of his time in the Philippines, Taft had concluded that the prospect of independence was sure to create instability within the country, marking a modification of his earlier analysis. It was this theory that would continue to underpin his thinking throughout the period that is the focus of this article.

Taft came to envisage a long-term period of trusteeship over the Philippines lasting perhaps a century or more, whereby, as he saw it, the islands would be taught American principles until they were capable of responsible self-government. Central to his emerging policy was that the Philippines should not be offered, or even provisionally promised, independence in the future. Meanwhile, the US Democratic Party, under the leadership of anti-imperialists such as William Jennings Bryan, had maintained a commitment to promise the Philippines independence should it return to power in the

1912 presidential election. Taft felt that if the independence issue could be deferred for long enough, then the Philippines would become more fully aware of US benevolence and grow to celebrate their imperial relationship. Taft foresaw the Philippines becoming a permanent dominion of the United States (like Canada or Great Britain at that time) and a beacon of US enlightenment to the rest of Asia (Burns 2010, 19).

In his final State of the Union address in December 1912, Taft warned that proposed Democratic Party plans for Philippine independence from US rule constituted a “policy of scuttle” that would make the Philippines the “football of oriental politics.” With only three further months in the White House, Taft was fully aware that his ability to influence Philippine policy was coming to what he considered a dangerously premature end. During the years that followed his departure from the White House, Taft, still an influential figure in this period, involved himself politically in a continued fight against the Democratic-sponsored Jones Bill that, if successful, would promise the islands their future independence.

Although Taft was not a “natural expansionist,” during the years that followed his posting to the Philippines he advocated policies that would see the United States embrace a supposedly “benevolent” form of imperialism and assume what he regarded as his nation’s duty to the Filipino people. Taft’s imperial vision was a blueprint for US foreign policy of rejecting further expansionism but committing all the more firmly to those possessions already under their control. The period 1912–1916 was a fatal one for Taft’s vision, and instead ushered in a still-continuing phase in which, as Niall Ferguson (2004, 294) argues, the United States has become an “empire in denial.” Ferguson suggests that the most important failure of the United States’ inability to admit to itself to being an empire has been in attempting “economic and political transformation in an unrealistically short time frame” (ibid.). Taft’s imperial vision and its defeat in this period were in many respects the beginning of the end for the nascent attempt at establishing a formal empire outside of the realms covered by the Monroe Doctrine (Burns 2011).

This article explores Taft’s continued role in the Philippine debate after his presidency and up until the passage of the Jones Act in 1916. Most scholars overlook the period after 1913 when considering Taft’s role in the imperial relationship. The majority of biographical studies focus on Taft’s presidency, and those that go beyond the presidency tend to focus on either

his involvement in international peacekeeping at the end of the Great War (Burton 2003, 2004) or his later Supreme Court career (Hicks 1945; Mason 1965; Burton 1998).² Rene Escalante (2007), whose work centers entirely on Taft’s role in the Philippines, argues that, although most historians date the so-called Taft Era as a period of concerted influence from 1900 to 1913, it might be better refined to as short a period as 1900 to 1903. Escalante argues that after 1903 Taft was preoccupied with affairs elsewhere and delegated the matter of the Philippines to the Philippine Commission, a clear point of departure from what is argued here. In his useful article on the Philippine independence debate between 1912 and 1916, John Beadles (1968, 427) accepts that Taft was a “very effective spokesperson” for the retentionists, but does not go into any real depth concerning the role of the former president. The leading monographs on the period (e.g., Stanley 1974; Karnow 1990; Kramer 2006) all inform this article very usefully, but these authors devote only a small portion of time to Taft’s role in the retentionist movement in the broader scheme of US–Philippines relations.

Although the wide-ranging literature on the US–Philippine imperial experiment certainly takes into account the period 1912–1916, the role of Taft and others campaigning to retain the islands is given relatively short shrift.³ This article seeks to reestablish the significance of this final concerted effort to maintain a long-term formal empire in the Philippines. Although the retentionist movement was not successful, its failure was significant in marking a final shift in the nature of US interventionist foreign policy outside of the Americas.

The 1912 Election and the Jones Bill

Most books analyzing the run-up to the 1912 presidential election have little, if anything, to say about the Philippines. As Garel Grunder and William Livezey (1951, 147) put it, the Philippines in 1912 was simply not “one of the issues of the election.” The lack of focus on the Philippines as an election issue was evident in the Republican Party Platform (1912), which gave only one line to the issue: “our duty toward the Filipino people is a national obligation which should remain entirely free from partisan politics.” The Democratic Party Platform (1912) seemed to pay more attention to the issue, but really just reiterated the sentiments of prior platforms, condemning the experiment with imperialism, and promising “an immediate declaration of the nation’s purpose to recognize the independence of the Philippine

Islands.” Despite its low profile as an election campaign issue, when the Democrats achieved a clean sweep of Congress and the presidency in the November 1912 elections, the time had finally arrived for the Philippine debate to gain some very rapid momentum.

During the run-up to the 1912 election, a bill, which would later become the focus of the Philippine debate, was making its debut before Congress. The main sponsor of the new Philippine bill was Rep. William Atkinson Jones of Virginia. The Democrats had retaken control of the House of Representatives in the 1910 elections, and in 1911 Jones became the new Democratic chair of the House Committee on Insular Affairs. Although he had made minority reports on the subject of Philippine independence since 1902, Jones was about to become far more prominently associated with the debate over the islands’ future (Stanley 1974, 173). In March 1912 Jones introduced the first of two “Jones bills,” drafted by Filipino nationalist Manuel Quezon, setting out a timetable for independence after eight years and subsequently a US military presence for twenty. However, as Paul Kramer (2006, 353) has noted, the bill was very unlikely to succeed at this stage when the Republicans still controlled the Senate. But there seemed to be little doubt that, although the Philippines did not play much of a role in the 1912 election campaign, the Democratic Party’s clean sweep would herald the most significant change of direction in Philippine policy since the islands were annexed. As the *Washington Post* (1912a, 6) reported on 13 November 1912, the election results gave a new vitality to the dormant Jones proposals and caused some Democratic congressmen to call for the “speedy enactment” of the bill.

In his fourth and final annual message given on 3 December 1912, Taft spoke at length about the Philippine question, and the focus of most of his ire was the proposed Jones Bill. Taft expressed his views one final time on an auspicious stage, even if he would not be in office beyond 4 March 1913. He argued that the bill “revolutionizes the carefully worked out scheme of government under which the Philippine Islands are now governed.” He alleged that the belief that Filipinos were ready for total self-government and national sovereignty was “absolutely without justification,” and that the Filipino people would be among the biggest losers from such a change in policy. Taft’s warnings over the incoming Democrats’ plans echoed many of his speeches from the previous decade. He argued that a

present declaration even of future independence would retard progress by the dissension and disorder it would arouse. On our part it would be a disingenuous attempt, under the guise of conferring a benefit on them, to relieve ourselves from the heavy and difficult burden which thus far we have been bravely and consistently sustaining. It would be a disguised policy of scuttle. It would make the helpless Filipino the football of oriental politics . . . (Taft 1912)

Taft was not breaking new ground with his message, but it was consistent with the line he had held on the issue of Philippine independence for more than a decade and demonstrated his intent to remain constant on this issue for years to come.

Following Wilson’s election, Manuel Quezon, recently reelected as resident commissioner in Washington, DC, pledged to fight for a promise of independence in the US Congress. The *Washington Post* (1912b, 3) noted Quezon’s belief that Wilson was “exceptionally committed to the carrying out of the independence policy.” Grayson Kirk (1936, 44) suggested that, with “canny foresight,” Quezon had made prior contact with Wilson as early as March 1912, when Wilson “had previously not known or cared a great deal about the Philippine question.” In August 1912 Wilson accepted his party’s nomination for the presidency with a statement that the United States was keeping the Philippines “in trust” for the Filipinos. In a speech at Staunton, Virginia, in December 1912 the president-elect stated that “the Philippines are at present our frontier but I hope that we presently are to deprive ourselves of that frontier,” leading some to read into these words Wilson’s endorsement of a Jones-style independence policy (Brands 1992, 106). On 28 December 1912 the *Boston Daily Globe* (1912, 2) offered a different interpretation of the president-elect’s Philippine policy, suggesting that, although Jones was sure Wilson “heartily indorsed” his bill, Wilson appeared less than desirous of putting this opinion on record.

Taft made it abundantly clear that he intended to hinder the Jones Bill for as long as he was able to. Just under a week after his annual message, on 9 December the *New York Times* (1912a, 3) reported that several prominent Democrats were preparing for the bill’s consideration in the House, in spite of Taft’s “vigorous disapproval.” The *New York Times* (1912b, 11) later noted that Taft had “made no secret of his intention to fight the Jones Bill with

all his might, whether in Presidential office or out of it. He has said that he would veto it should the bill be passed by both houses before his term ends . . . he would direct a propaganda with the object of preventing the Filipinos from obtaining independence,” in his “desire to take a foremost part in keeping the Philippines under the control of the United States.” Taft made his intention not to abandon the Philippine question after he had left the White House very clear, although how he would seek to influence matters after 4 March 1913 was yet to become clear.

On 14 January 1913 the *Christian Science Monitor* (1913, 5) reported a sense of unity among Filipino politicians in support of the Jones Bill, with Quezon denouncing Taft’s opposition to the bill at a luncheon held in his honor by the Anti-Imperialist League. The following day the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1913, 1) reported that the former Filipino leader Emilio Aguinaldo was calling for “peace and mutual help” during the period of changeover provided for in the bill. As the end of Taft’s presidency approached, the outgoing president did not drop the issue of the Philippines in the face of such pressures, but maintained his stance firmly against the proposed Democratic policy. In a speech before the Ohio Society of New York, Taft declared that the US had a duty to the Philippines that went beyond political point scoring. Taft argued, “I could ask nothing better than the passage [sic] of the Jones bill, but I have the interest of the Islands at heart, and I do not believe that the United States should separate from the Philippine Islands at least within two or three generations, and then only if the Filipinos desire the separation.” Taft claimed that the Filipinos had “no desire to have their independence. So let us wait until they have that desire, and by so doing fulfill the promise we made when Admiral Dewey destroyed the Spanish fleet” (NYT 1913a, 11).⁴

On 28 January 1913 Representative Jones delivered a speech in Congress denouncing Taft’s criticisms of the Democrats’ plans for Philippine independence. Jones (1913, 3–4) questioned the constitutional appropriateness of Taft’s denunciation of pending legislation and argued that a declaration of future independence would in no way subject the Filipino masses to oligarchic exploitation, and that such a supposition was “opposed to the enlightened opinion and best judgment of a vast majority of the American people.” Jones then went on to attack Taft’s imperial vision for the Philippines and the idea of a future dominion-style relationship, suggesting that Taft had only recently come up with such an idea and noting that it bore

no resemblance to the existing relationship between the US and the islands. Jones (ibid., 22) argued that it was futile to bow to the suggestions of a man

whose administrative policies have been so emphatically discredited and repudiated by the voters of every State of the Union, save only those of Utah and Vermont. . . [W]hilst I recognize President Taft’s great ability and most cheerfully concede the purity of his motives, it must be admitted, I think, by his most ardent political followers that he has not achieved great success as a political prophet.

Although critical of Taft, Jones’s comments did point toward the influence Taft’s views still had in the US, where he was acknowledged as an expert on Philippine affairs.

Coming from a man who had staked his name on backing Philippine independence, especially against a president who was attached to the islands’ retention as a US colony, Jones’s words were not surprising. In his attempt to undermine Taft’s views on the Philippines, Jones was acknowledging Taft as the leading voice on Philippine retention. Jones dismissed those who supported Taft’s imperial vision as figures solely interested in saving their jobs: he reasoned that they supported Taft for “purely personal reasons,” fearing a reduction in the size of the armed forces and navy, or a reduction in the need for US administrators, if the Philippines would be given independence. In response, Philippine Gov.-Gen. William Cameron Forbes, who was also criticized sharply by Jones, publicly defended his and Taft’s policies. Forbes (1913, 25–26) claimed that Jones had been “a willing and credulous listener” to “soreheads,” or people who bore personal grievances against himself or the administration. Forbes accused Jones of attempting to discredit the Philippine administration with “misrepresentations” that were “plainly malicious.”

Overall, both Jones and Forbes were clearly arguing from partisan positions. Neither man was particularly concerned about presenting a balanced appraisal of the US–Philippine relationship, for both were attempting to secure the future for the Philippines that would best serve themselves. Forbes sought to defend his record and his future career, while Jones sought to further the prospects of the bill that bore his name (Karnow 1990, 241–42). However, as an outgoing president, Taft did not have any immediate political gain to make from embroiling himself further in the

Philippine question and felt he had an intellectual rationale for his vision for the Philippines. Then again, upon handing over the presidency—and much of his political influence—to Woodrow Wilson, Taft did not so freely hand over the issue of Philippine independence.

Beyond the Presidency

Although not alone in his quest to maintain a form of US control over the Philippines, Taft became the most prominent figure in this retentionist movement after his departure from the White House and the subsequent arrival of the Democrats in March of 1913. Peter Stanley (1974, 188) has portrayed figures such as Taft and Forbes as stubborn to the point of delusion: “Having committed themselves to a policy, they refused to be budged from it even by the most manifest evidence that it would fail to achieve its ends.” Indeed, Stanley (*ibid.*) picks out Taft for particular criticism, arguing that his persistence “in the conceit that Filipinos could be attracted more successfully by evading the issue of independence than by facing it was to ignore the last two years of Philippine history.” Although it is evident that the Filipino people and even Filipino politicians were united in calling for independence, it might have appeared that Taft simply wanted to wish reality away in a fit of self-delusion.

However, Taft was not as out of touch with reality as his contemporary opponents and some historians might present him. Granted, Taft’s preference had been to avoid the issue of independence altogether, but in this regard he had failed. Although he was slow in recognizing this change, Taft was a skilled operator and did eventually come to terms with it, and focused instead upon the next best thing: rather than evade the independence issue, he attacked the subject head on. Taft’s last months in office saw him focus his efforts on what he set up as the most crucial aspect of policy: not to *promise* independence. Taft might have recognized that his policies as governor had failed to kill talk of independence in the islands, but this acknowledgment did not prove to him that, were his policies given a full two generations to come to fruition, the situation might not alter. To this end, Taft had conceded more openly that independence was one of a number of possible options for the future of the Philippines, just not the one he would recommend.

As a figurehead of the retentionist movement, Taft stood at the head of a diverse band of special interest groups. Paul Kramer (2006, 357) breaks down the bulk of the retentionist movement into three primary groups: US colonial

officials, the Philippine–American business lobby, and the Catholic Church in the United States. Kramer sees the “former high-level colonial officials” as the center of the movement, and among them he specifically mentions Taft, Forbes, and Dean Worcester (another former Philippine Commissioner), “whose transfer, hiring, or resignation returned them to centers of media and public opinion in the United States, full of resentment for Democratic Filipinization and independence legislation” (*ibid.*). Although Kramer’s observations are fair, Taft’s situation and profile were markedly different from either Forbes’s or Worcester’s. As secretary of war in Theodore Roosevelt’s cabinet and especially after his own term as commander-in-chief, Taft had gained a public profile that dwarfed those of other former US-appointed Philippine officials. That historians of the Philippines commonly label the period from 1901 to 1913 the “Taft Era” is testimony to the fact that Taft’s influence was paramount during those years. So, even if Taft represented to many the archetypal partisan on the Philippine question, there can be no doubt that his stature and prominence differed markedly from that of other retentionists and that his views had a complexity that the opinions of others on both sides of the argument usually lacked.

For anti-imperialists at the time, such as the president of the Anti-Imperialist League, Moorfield Storey (1913, 6), it best suited their needs to present Taft as simply another retentionist:

We can not expect that the defeated party will cease to argue, to protest, and to prophesy all manner of evil, but we have no right on that account to falter. Those men like President Taft are responsible in large measure for the retention of the islands, and who like him have been especially prominent in their administration, naturally will not admit that they have been wrong . . . but we must remember that they are not impartial. They are pleading their own case, they are insisting that they have succeeded, and their own reputations are at stake. All their arguments must be taken with that allowance.

Much of what Storey said was true. Taft saw his reputation at stake in the Philippines and had committed himself to the policies of the previous years, in most cases policies that he had initiated or guided directly. Taft was not blind, however, to attacks such as those from Storey that aimed at painting him as an embittered partisan. The former president spent much time in the

following years attempting to present a picture of himself as something of a postpolitical statesman. After all, unlike many of the Republican appointees ousted from the islands by the incoming Democratic administration, Taft was unlikely to seek a place back in Philippine or American political office.

Taft's ultimate personal ambition had always been a US Supreme Court justiceship, and the humiliating nature of his defeat in 1912 meant that running for the presidency in 1916 or afterwards was virtually out of the question. The Supreme Court target might have been expected to moderate Taft's behavior, especially in trying not to appear an overt partisan. Nevertheless, Taft was aware that the possibility of a position in the Supreme Court was going to have to wait at least until the Republicans regained the White House.

In the meantime, Taft retired from politics to become a professor of law at Yale University. During this period, Taft devoted part of his time to supporting various interest groups, not only retentionist groups, but groups aimed at international arbitration and peacekeeping, such as the League to Enforce Peace. Indeed, this latter organization offered perhaps the clearest example of Taft's putting principle before party—when Wilson adopted the existing idea of a League of Nations as a key to his postwar strategy, Taft acted as an unusually vocal Republican supporter of the president. Such behavior fitted with Taft's attempt to present himself as a postpolitical elder statesman, whose words and ideas could be vented through political pressure groups that supported his worldview, rather than directly through political office. However, as the years from 1913 to 1916 would bear testimony, when it came to the Philippines, Taft had little time for Wilson's inklings of early self-determination.

The Retentionist Campaign

On 13 November 1912, just three days after the press reported Taft's vow to fight against Philippine independence during his lame-duck presidency, a bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church, Rev. Samuel Fallows of Chicago, wrote to Taft in reference to this subject. Fallows declared himself "thoroughly in accord" with Taft's policies, adding that there was "no more important question before our country today, for which you have offered the only solution." In this sense Reverend Fallows was one among many citizens who agreed with Taft as to a continued American presence in the Philippines. However, Fallows—aside from his position in the church—

was also noteworthy because his son, Edward, had recently organized a "commercial club of leading business and professional men in different parts of the country . . . for the development and for the uplifting of the Filipino people," and, as Fallows (1912) was keen to note, not for their "exploitation." This company was called the American–Philippine Company, and Fallows enclosed a brochure about the organization for Taft's perusal, possibly with the hope that Taft might take an interest in his son Edward's enterprise.

After leaving the White House, Taft recognized the need to forge links with potential new allies in his retentionist campaign who might well be driven by self-interest much more than him. Kramer (2006, 358) describes the American–Philippine Company as "an umbrella organization created to develop subordinate companies in specific commercial areas in the Philippines," which was "meant to provide a revolving door between the colonial state and private enterprise." Such a company would appear even to neutral observers in the imperial debate as an example of an organization that had aims based entirely around American commercial exploitation of the Philippines. Edward Fallows was eager to develop a relationship with someone of Taft's stature, who shared his openly retentionist views, and was a keen supporter of US investment in the islands. In the months that followed the letter from his father, Edward Fallows wrote frequently to Taft, reassuring him that he was not alone in his retentionist beliefs. In December 1912 Fallows claimed that the American–Philippine Company had located "sixty-one geographically dispersed newspaper editorials on the independence issue," claiming that only nine supported Wilson's intention to withdraw eventually from the Philippines (Sullivan 1991, 182). Taft was politically astute enough to realize the potential pitfalls of publicly endorsing a primarily economically driven venture such as the American–Philippine Company, but he did maintain relatively regular contact with Fallows during this period, perhaps sensing that Fallows's organization might prove a useful—if unofficial—retentionist ally.

Although Taft was not a member of the American–Philippine Company, he was a member of another retentionist organization of the time, the Philippine Society. According to one press report, the Philippine Society was formed "to diffuse among the American people a more accurate knowledge of the islands and their people" and was seeking additional members "interested in the welfare of the inhabitants of the Philippines" (NYT 1913b, 9). When the Society was formed in April 1913, Taft was named

as the honorary president, Luke E. Wright as acting president, and Forbes as honorary vice-president.⁵ The first secretary of the Society was the vice-president of the American–Philippine Company, Richard E. Forrest, who, according to Kramer (2006, 358), personified the “close ties” between the two organizations. Unsurprisingly, the similarities in the membership lists of the two groups were quite substantial, and the organizational letterheads contained similar executive committee members. In the period during and after the formation of the Philippine Society, Taft corresponded regularly with Forrest as well as with Martin Egan, the former editor of the *Manila Times* who was also closely associated with both organizations.

Taft (1913a) wrote to Egan in October 1913 that, although unfortunate, increased Filipinization—or the gradual replacement of American officials with Filipinos—was surely “better than promising freedom, because if we left the Islands, we would have to go back there and do the work over again.” In recognition of the real danger that the Jones Bill posed to his imperial vision, Taft suggested here that, *if* the Democrats were successful in passing the bill, the Republicans might have to reimpose imperial control at some point in the future. The policy of Filipinization was one that dated back to Taft’s time as civil governor (Burns 2011). Although Taft would have preferred to keep the number of Filipinos in government to a minimum until, as he saw it, they were properly prepared for it, he accepted the practice on a small scale as a pragmatic attempt to win over the support of pro-US elites in the islands. However, Taft disagreed with taking ultimate control out of US hands in the foreseeable future.

When Francis Burton Harrison replaced Forbes as the governor-general in 1913, the Democratic appointee moved quickly to speed up the process of Filipinization. H. W. Brands (1992, 107–9) has argued that Wilson’s appointment of Harrison was largely due to the machinations of resident commissioner Manuel Quezon, who had recognized early on Harrison’s sympathy with Filipino moves toward independence. On his arrival Harrison promised immediately to “give to the native citizens of the Islands a majority in the Appointive Commission,” handing control of both houses in the Philippine legislature to Filipino majorities. In addition, just as Taft and Forbes had expected and feared, Harrison replaced Americans in many bureaucratic positions with Filipinos, as well as a number of able Republican appointees with Democrats (Karnow 1990, 245). Taft told Egan of a discussion he had had with Wilson’s secretary of war, Lindley M.

Garrison, in which apparently Garrison had told Taft that “he did not believe in independence but that they must do something.” In reply Taft (1913a) had told Garrison that it was not necessary to do anything at all, as the Republicans would support the maintenance of the status quo. Taft seemed keen to stress the possibility that the Democrats were not necessarily going to promise the Philippines independence, even though the Democrats would need to make some moves that Taft deemed unwise. Taft’s words seemed to suggest that he was already looking to a future when the Republicans would return to power and undo what the Democrats had done, and he expressed his earnest hope that this return would not include undoing a promise of independence.

Taft, who wrote articles on various subjects, consulted Egan regularly with regard to writing and publishing strategies. On 28 October 1913 Taft wrote Egan for suggestions about a speech he was preparing on the Philippines, and the latter replied:

May I suggest that you sound a general warning in your Brooklyn address about the new administration at Manila? Harrison is going very fast and his course has further broken confidence there. He does not know conditions and rides to a fall with both Filipinos and Americans. He has demoralised the civil service by ruthless removals and seems quite in the hands of Quezon. Everything out there depends on American stability and confidence is broken. I believe you can sound an effective warning. I believe you should let the Associated Press and United Press have advanced copies of your Brooklyn speech. (Egan 1913)

Delivered on 19 November 1913, Taft’s address at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, New York, was the most high-profile speech of his retentionist campaign since leaving the White House. In Brooklyn Taft “took the attitude of a man who was seeing his own work endangered . . . [F]or thirteen years with hardly a break he had built up a civil service in the islands, and now he saw Governor-General Harrison refusing to take advice from those who knew the country” (NYT 1913c, 1).

Taft’s speech was overtly critical of Wilson’s appointees and general policy in the Philippines, as well as of Secretary of War Garrison. It seemed a far cry from the nonpartisanship he had suggested he was seeking to provide. Taft

warned listeners that the “penalty for mistakes in the Philippines is always severe jolts,” and that he was not simply being a political partisan, but rather knew “so much more about the Philippine problem and its difficulties than any of the gentlemen in this Administration that I have a duty and a right to call their attention to some of the dangers that beset them.” Taft focused his attacks on Democratic Party policy in terms of inexperience, a theme that would prove recurrent in future discourse, and argued that he had a genuine desire to create a dialogue with Democrats and share with them the lessons of his own experience. However, such utterances merely added intensity to the criticisms rather than giving any real credibility to the idea that Taft was discussing—rather than attacking—Democratic Party policy (*ibid.*, 1–2).

Taft’s speech in Brooklyn addressed the issue of Philippine independence in a slightly different manner from that of previous speeches. He said:

The present declaration of the Administration that they are looking forward to ultimate independence has been accepted by the politicians of the Philippine Islands as a great boon, although Mr. McKinley, Mr. Roosevelt, and I have always promised it; but we were always a little more definite in saying that we did not think it was coming for a generation, and probably not for more than that time. (*ibid.*)

During the previous thirteen years, Taft had campaigned ardently against any promise of independence, but he avoided making this absolute by suggesting that after a few generations of imperial rule the Philippines should be given the *option* of independence (Burns 2010, 188–89). Here again, Taft was careful to note that no *specific* promises had been made, which to him was a critically important factor in the independence debate.

Taft’s younger brother Horace wrote to him following the Brooklyn speech: “I see that you are after Wilson and Harrison on the Philippines. That is a subject on which I cannot forgive Wilson . . . [He] must understand thoroughly down in his heart what an idiotic and destructive course he is inaugurating there” (H. Taft 1913). Taft’s (1913b) own opinion becomes clearer in a letter to his son Robert written on the same day in which—although his patience for the Wilson administration seems limited—his anger at the betrayal of Roosevelt in 1912 still seemed far more prominent in his mind:⁶

There is nothing I take more pride in than what has been done in the Philippines, and to have the result of thirteen years of hard work botched with an axe by a conceited pedagogue and an opportunist in politics, a one track [sic] mind that is so bent on getting his legislation through that he thrusts aside other important issues that deserve his full attention, is a bit trying. I want to maintain a friendly attitude toward the Administration, because I prefer its success so much to the danger of Rooseveltism that I sincerely hope Mr. Wilson may be reelected if the Orthodox Republicans are not to come in, but when they make such asses of themselves as they are now making in the Philippines, I have to speak out in a mild way, but I should think myself derelict in duty if I did not give a friendly warning.

Evidently Taft felt even more strongly in private against Wilson’s policy in the Philippines than he allowed himself to illustrate in his Brooklyn speech, despite its critical tone. Even Taft’s dislike for Roosevelt was not enough to temper an attack on Wilson—where this letter shows his feelings better than the speech—but the letter also shows that only the Philippine issue was enough to rouse his passion against Wilson so fully.

The Brooklyn address was widely reported in the national press, but Taft’s correspondence reveals a further avenue of opportunity through which he wished to press home his message. As can be gleaned from the correspondence, Taft’s address was published in full in the *Brooklyn Eagle*. And he was happy to encourage the ever-willing Edward Fallows (1913) to help disseminate further the article as a retentionist pamphlet for his membership. Taft was keen to have his attack on Democratic Party policy in the Philippines, couched in terms of a hope for greater nonpartisanship, distributed to as many willing readers as possible. Taft himself sent copies to correspondents he saw as likely to sympathize with his point of view. Without the pulpit of the presidency Taft knew that he had to find new ways to try and influence policy, and he recognized that the American–Philippine Company and like-minded, well-funded organizations were a good opportunity to achieve this end—even if he had to keep relations largely informal to avoid being tarred with the brush of exploitation. However, there were obvious limits to such a letter campaign as it was primarily preaching to the converted.

Taft's speech drew a raft of responses from his associates and like-minded individuals. The Taft-nominated US Supreme Court Associate Justice Mahlon Pitney (1913) commented in a letter to Taft that it was "particularly distressing to observe the readiness of the new Governor-General in committing this country to a radical change of policy." Henry Stimson (1913), former secretary of war, informed Taft the same month: "Almost everyone I meet speaks of it and has read it, and it really seems to awaken again our sleeping national interest in the Philippines. More power to your elbow." That the speech was widely talked about would certainly have heartened Taft. Among the main figures whose opinions Taft respected most was Republican Sen. Elihu Root.⁷ On sending Root a copy of the Brooklyn speech a week after he delivered it, Taft (1913c) warned the senator that "It is sufficiently long to consume a year in its reading, but you ought to be primed on the subject with reference to the latest phases of it, because I expect it will be made the subject of discussion by the introduction of something like the Jones bill." Taft's speech sought to stress retention, at least until the long-term US mission was accomplished. Nevertheless, Taft's greatest fear remained: the possibility that Democrats would promise independence before Republicans had a chance to regain control of Philippine policy.

The Last Crusade Against the Jones Bill

By the summer of 1914 the Jones Bill, now back before the House of Representatives, was one of the concerns on the minds of Richard Forrest and his fellow retentionists. On 16 July Forrest (1914) informed Taft that there was "nothing new" in the new Jones Bill, for it was "the same policy in a different binding." Two days later Martin Egan (1914) warned Taft that "it has several glaring defects and I am hopeful we can induce our friends to change or modify the measure to put it in better shape." Taft replied to Forrest on 21 July, stating resolutely that he was "opposed to the Jones bill," and described it as "only another deceit of the Filipinos" who would "take the promise as something immediate." As ever Taft's concern focused on the question of promising independence and the too-rapid pace of Filipinization. He also indicated that he could no longer trust the Democrats to see sense:

I have no confidence that working with the present administration will do any good. They have injured the cause most seriously by their present course, and the only thing that I can hope for is that we will knock them out at the end of four years, and laboriously retrace our steps to the path they have so recklessly abandoned. I hope your call will accomplish good. (Taft 1914a)

The new Jones Bill, it seemed, had destroyed what limited hope Taft had that the Democrats might drop the promise of independence after some time in power.

On 31 July Forrest (1914b) sent Taft some press clippings from the Philippines pertaining to the Jones Bill, pointing out that most of them "indicate that the editors believe Quezon and Osmeña are traitors to the cause, and that the bill is not far different from the former attitude of the Republican party." This comment also suggests, of course, that the same editors were hostile to Republican Party policies. Forrest (ibid.) noted that in terms of the Philippine Society working with the Democratic administration "no steps in this direction will be taken without referring them to you in detail, for our Executive Committee, of course, rely upon your judgement." The August edition of the society's journal, the *Philippine Bulletin* (1914), gave substantial coverage of the new Jones Bill, including a review of press coverage and its reception by the American and Filipino public. Among those cited as criticizing the measures in the Jones Bill and favoring a more Taft-like approach were US-based *Outlook*, the *New York Herald*, and the *Brooklyn Eagle*, although an element of selective quotation was readily apparent. Most criticism in the Filipino press took the opposite position, being concerned generally, in the eyes of the *Bulletin*, with the lack of a definite date for independence. The *Bulletin* presented a view that reaction to the bill was decidedly mixed, but generally critical; however, the nature of the criticism was very different, split between those who favored immediate independence and those who disagreed with the idea of independence at any time in the foreseeable future. Such a reaction, although predictable, suggested that, as extreme as Taft and his supporters saw the changes proposed in the Jones Bill, to many in the Philippines it was regarded as a document of disappointing compromises, although of course this vision was of Filipino sentiments through a US lens.

On 31 October 1914 Taft (1914b) told Forrest that he saw the best chance for an end to the Jones Bill in the Senate and that he advocated a lobbying operation aimed at both Republican and Democratic US senators. This correspondence illustrates that the retentionists were waging more than a simple propaganda campaign and also shows the importance of figures like Taft to the hopes of the movement. With his high profile and impressive list of contacts, Taft provided the retentionist movement with hopes of influencing congressmen to delay the Jones Bill until the Republicans regained power. In early 1915 Taft was given an opportunity to influence the Senate in a far more direct way than letters or private chats. Given his stature and experience in Philippine affairs, Taft was invited to speak before the Senate Committee on the Philippines on 2 January 1915. The purpose of these hearings was to gather information to help decide upon the latest Jones Bill, which aimed to declare the US purpose to recognize Philippine independence eventually and increase the level of autonomy in the islands. The Senate certainly could not have found a more willing speaker on such an issue than the former president.

In these hearings Taft told the Senate Philippine Committee that he saw three paths as to the future course of US policy in the Philippines. The first was the policy of leaving entirely; the second, the policy of remaining in control indefinitely; and the third, his preferred policy of gradual devolution over the course of decades with the ultimate *option* of a permanent dominion-style link in the end. Coming from Taft, this rhetoric was familiar, although on this occasion Taft cited President Wilson's own words on "the long apprenticeship of competence" to support the third option (Senate 1915, 364–66). The phrase was a citation from his 1908 work *Constitutional Government in the United States*, where Wilson (1908, 53) stated that "Self-government is not a thing that can be 'given' to any people, because it is a form of character and not a form of constitution. . . . Only a long apprenticeship of obedience can secure them the precious possession, a thing no more to be bought than given." To this end, Lewis Gleeck Jr. (1984, 185) noted that Wilson's "formula for achieving Philippine independence, as expressed in his textbook . . . was stricter than any proposed or exercised by President Taft or his successors." However, Wilson's view—as Gleeck suggested—was one to which Harrison paid utterly no heed. The main focus of the Senate hearings, as Taft was only too aware, was on a bill that would provide for

a concrete promise of independence for the Philippines, supported by the administration and far more akin to the first option rather than to the third.

In his testimony, Taft recapped Republican Party policy in the islands over the previous fourteen years, declaring that the Democratic Party's promise of independence had always been "the great obstruction to the carrying out of our plans" and that anarchy would ensue were independence granted. When questioned on the nature of desire for independence in the islands, Taft reasserted his sentiments of the previous decade: that most Filipinos wanted it, but did not understand what it would entail or its possible negative consequences. However, Taft went on to point out that a number among the very Filipino elite who advocated independence also feared its consequences, and this included Manuel Quezon. As he had for many years, Taft held—with some foundation—that many Filipino politicians secretly feared immediate independence but were unable to express this view publicly for it would mark the end of their careers (US Congress 1915, 374).

As was to be expected, Taft's primary criticism of the bill before the Senate was that it promised independence. He felt that the Democratic Party platform's policy of proclaiming ultimate independence would "hit with an ax" the policies of education and reform that had garnered the Republican administration much praise and heralded in Taft's mind "one of the grandest works that the United States has ever undertaken" (ibid., 376). Taft argued that promising ultimate independence was the same as promising immediate independence, and that once the issue was on the government's agenda it would dominate all: "In other words, they are constantly thinking of the government to come and not the government that you are using for the purpose of fitting them for self-government" (ibid., 384). Taft concluded that only a consistent policy, a continuation of *his* policy at that, could bring about a fitting end when the Philippines would call the United States "blessed" (ibid., 400).

Following on from the committee hearings on 12 January 1915, Forrest (1915a) assured Taft that "the testimony you offered in Washington has been filling the newspapers. . . . The reports we now have . . . indicate the effectiveness of your attack on the Jones' [sic] Bill, and I am among the hundred million Americans who owe you a deep gratitude for being a capable executioner . . ." An undoubted Taft supporter, Forrest seemed to believe that Taft's testimony might have a positive effect in the mission to delay the Jones

Bill, though an element of flattery is also clear. The newspaper reportage of Taft's comments would certainly have helped spread the message of retention among both citizens and politicians, although whether most would agree with him was another matter altogether.

When Congress amended the Jones Bill, Forrest (1915b) sent Taft a copy on 1 February 1915, praising "the excellent marksmanship of the big guns which shot to pieces the original bill." Taft (1915b) agreed to some extent in his reply the next day, commenting that the bill was "improved," but adding that "it still needs a great deal of amendment to make it in any degree useful." On the same day Taft (1915c) wrote to Henry Stimson, confessing that he was still "sad all over about Philippine policy." A further indication that the Jones Bill looked increasingly likely to succeed—Taft was beginning to lose the guarded optimism of 1913 and 1914—came in a letter to his friend Mabel Boardman in mid-February 1915. In this letter Taft (1915d) claimed that the Democrats "have produced a condition which I think will lead to disturbance whatever happens whether the [Jones] bill passes now or not, but it is a great deal better not to pass the bill and take what disturbance may come than to pass it and put ourselves in a permanent condition of helplessness." On 1 March Taft, keeping Boardman updated on the Jones Bill, noted that he had learned from acquaintances that some Republicans in Congress might be willing to compromise on the Jones Bill in order to defeat a shipping bill. Taft (1915e) told Boardman that he had sent telegrams to congressmen, informing them of his hope that "the Philippine bill will not be allowed to come up. It will be a vicious step," and had also telegraphed Senator Root that morning, noting that if the bill had to be amended until Taft would advise its passage then "there would not be anything left in the bill."

On 6 September 1915 Taft addressed the Commonwealth Club of California in San Francisco, where he criticized the administration of Governor-General Harrison. Gleck (1984, 198–99) saw this speech as the major blast of the "last Republican offensive" against Harrison and the Jones Bill. Taft suggested—in line with his testimony to the Senate Committee earlier in the year—that the continuation of Harrison's policies would only lead to the need for "intervention" of the American government in the future and that passage of the Jones Bill "would make the work of deterioration complete" according to the *New York Times* (1915a, 4).

Harrison replied to criticisms in Taft's San Francisco speech, arguing somewhat misleadingly that Taft was anything but a model of consistency. As the *New York Times* (1915b, 8) reported on 8 September 1915: "Governor Harrison declared that when Mr. Taft was in the Philippines he was the most prominent among those advocating Filipino independence, but was 'the leader of the retentionists' when in America." Several months later, Secretary of War Garrison joined Harrison in attacking Taft, describing Taft's statements on the Philippine issue as "mendacious in character and mischievous in intent" (NYT 1915c, 1). Garrison went on to charge that "Republican politicians are attempting to lay the foundation for campaign material with respect to the Philippine Islands" (ibid.).

Garrison's criticisms focused on an introduction that Taft had written for a pamphlet attacking the Democratic Party policies in the Philippines, whose present unhappy conditions Taft (1915a) attributed to the "blind and foolish policy of President Wilson and Governor-General Harrison." In his introduction to the pamphlet, Taft had addressed the issue of the politicization of independence: "The independence campaign was only political. What the Filipino politicians want is the offices. Now that they are dividing these with some Democratic politicians, equally inefficient, they are not quite so eager for independence." Taft warned that, if the Republicans regained control of government, then the system that had been in place prior to Wilson's presidency would have to be retraced and slowly rebuilt, which in turn would incite the anger of Filipinos who had been given office too hastily. The "evil effects" of Harrison's policy in the islands, Taft (ibid., iii–v) warned, would "take years to remedy."

Garrison accused Taft of double standards and "blind partisanship," alleging that the pamphlet's author had written an equally powerful account praising the Democratic administration in the islands, but which he had found no luck in getting published (NYT 1915c, 4). Garrison concluded that Taft had illustrated his blind partisanship by failing to check corroborating evidence for the charges in the pamphlet, a clear sign of unrestrained "partisan zeal" (ibid.). Whether or not Taft truly made an effort to be nonpartisan on the Philippine issue rather than simply claim that he was nonpartisan, it was clear that his opponents certainly did not believe he was anything of the sort.

Conclusion

On 29 August 1916, despite Taft's best efforts as "retentionist in chief" during the previous few years, Congress finally passed the Jones Act, also known as the Philippine Organic Act, complete with its controversial preamble containing the promise of independence. Taft's campaign of the last three years to delay the bill until the Republicans could return to power was at an end. Kendrick Clements (1999, 139) has pointed out that the passage of the Jones Act represented the Democrats making good on an "old promise," and this promise was one that Taft had hoped would never be made. By contrast, from Taft's point of view, as Peter Stanley (1974, 250) has noted, the preamble "seemed an almost irredeemable error: a promise of independence." The part of the preamble to which Taft objected the most read as follows: "it is, as it has always been, the purpose of the people of the United States to withdraw their sovereignty over the Philippine Islands and to recognize their independence as soon as a stable government can be established therein," and to accomplish this end "it is desirable to place in the hands of the people of the Philippines as large a control of their domestic affairs as can be given them" (US Congress 1916).

No doubt Taft would have been unsurprised, though not encouraged, by the reaction of the Filipino people to the news that the bill had finally passed. Stanley Karnow (1990, 247) has given details of a huge party thrown by Manuel Quezon in Washington, DC; while in Manila "forty thousand people marched through the streets, and the city sent Wilson a silver tablet inscribed with words of gratitude." With the passage of the Jones Act and the victory of Wilson in the presidential election of 1916, Taft's hopes that postponement could save his vision for the Philippines were left in tatters. The Jones Act sealed the future independence of the Philippines and ended Taft's vision of a long-term imperial link.

Taft's campaign to prevent the passage of the Jones Act and its all-important promise of independence proved the beginning of the end for the experiment of long-term US formal colonization outside of the Americas. The retentionist campaign's failure set in motion a pattern of US short-term intervention overseas that has come to characterize US "democracy building" until this day. In many respects the period explored here marked the true beginning of US twentieth-century foreign interventionism when the idea of openly acknowledged, formal imperial rule was consigned—at least in name—to history books.

Notes

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- 1 The first Philippine Commission was headed by Dr. Jacob Schurman, president of Cornell University. Schurman's commission reported back to McKinley in January 1900 and advised a transfer of power from military to civilian rule over the islands.
- 2 Aside from the excellent works cited within this essay to which I owe a great debt, other works which merit particular note for those interested in the period prior to 1913 are: Miller 1982; Salamanca 1984; May 1980; Burton 2004. In addition there are numerous works on Taft himself, but the most complete study is still Henry Pringle's two-volume 1939 work. Cf. Anderson 1973; Coletta 1973; Minger 1975; Anderson 1981; Burton 1986, 1988, 2005; Gould 2009; Lurie 2012.
- 3 There are a number of excellent works on the nature of US policy in the Philippines during the period. Some excellent collections of essays can be found in: Owen 1971; Kaplan and Pease 1993; McFerson 2002; Go and Foster 2003. Recent monographs not directly cited here include: Gleeck 1986; Golay 1997; Go 2008.
- 4 Here Taft is referring to the historically debated promise of independence given by the US military when Filipino nationalists and American troops were fighting together against the Spanish in 1898.
- 5 Both Wright and Forbes served as governor-general of the Philippines after Taft.
- 6 Roosevelt fell out with Taft on a grand scale when the latter assumed the presidency, particularly after Taft's dismissal of Gifford Pinchot following the Ballinger Affair. In 1912, when Taft was renominated as the Republican Party candidate for the presidency, Roosevelt split from his party and ran as a Progressive against his former friend.
- 7 Root had been secretary of war when Taft was civil governor of the Philippines and secretary of state when Taft was head of the War Department. At this point Root was a US senator representing New York state.

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Adam D. Burns is teacher of History and Politics at Marlborough College, Bath Road, Marlborough, Wiltshire, SN8 1PA, United Kingdom. He completed his postgraduate studies in History at the University of Edinburgh in 2010. His research has appeared in *American Nineteenth Century History*, *Comparative American Studies*, and *History & Policy*. He has also contributed a chapter to *A Companion to Theodore Roosevelt*, edited by Serge Ricard (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). He taught previously at the University of Edinburgh and Newcastle University. <adb@marlboroughcollege.org>