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Review Article

Response to Imperialism

JOSÉ S. ARCILLA, S.J.

RESPONSE TO IMPERIALISM: THE UNITED STATES AND THE PHILIPPINE-AMERICAN WAR, 1899-1902. By Richard E. Welch, Jr. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978. xvi+215 pages.

The American setback in Vietnam may not have been as traumatic for the American people as it has been portrayed, but it has occasioned a corporate self-examination and a reassessment of the foreign policies of the United States. Academicians were in the forefront of this probing of the national conscience, and some historians have identified the roots of U.S. involvement in Vietnam with the Philippine-American military confrontation at the turn of the century. But, as Welch writes in the monograph being reviewed, "American soldiers did not wage war in the Philippines in order to provide precedents for American policy makers or parallels for American historians" (p. xvi). The Vietnam War, just like the Philippine experience of 1899-1902, has its own logical (illogical?) explanation, and each is best understood "only when assessed within the context of its own times" (p. xiii). Such a context, Welch argues, and this reviewer agrees with him, provides a disconcertingly unglamorous background against which are understood the key decisions which started the whole sequence of events that brought the north American flag to the Philippines.

The first is President McKinley's tacit approval of Dewey's mission in the Far East. When the U.S. Congress authorized the President to declare war on Spain in April 1898, the Commodore had already been detailed and on red alert in Hongkong, awaiting orders for the next move. The President could have recalled him, but he did not. There was nothing grandiose about this, nor was there a preconceived plan to promote U.S. ambition and self-interest in Asia. This was merely the most basic war strategy that seeks to strike at the enemy where he is vulnerable, in this case, the Spanish navy at anchor in Philippine waters. Crippling Spain's naval power and depriving her of a poten-

tial source of revenue and reinforcements in the event of war would be no mean accomplishment.

Then, following Dewey's unexpectedly easy victory, McKinley had to make a second decision regarding the islands suddenly placed in his hands. By mid-September 1898, when the American commissioners were leaving for the Paris peace conference, he instructed them to secure the island of Luzon. Having rejected a few other options, he had been seriously considering only two choices: either to keep only one island, Luzon; or to include the other islands of the archipelago. But five weeks later, on 28 October, he revised his instructions and sent word to the commissioners to demand the entire Philippine archipelago for the United States.

Welch notes that these five weeks were actually a period of political testing for McKinley. The latter had felt it was unwise to control only a portion of the Philippines while leaving the other islands as booty for the strongest claimant. He had also seen that the Philippines would not altogether be an economic liability for his country. Above all, he had correctly guessed that it would be to the "political advantage of his party and administration" (p. 10) if the United States government annexed all of the islands. However, he wanted assurance that this decision was not unpopular and, accordingly, he allowed himself an "escape hatch" when he issued his September instructions to the commissioners. Many groups influenced his decision: the Navy, which wanted to strengthen its Pacific arm; church groups, filled with evangelical zeal to preach the "true gospel" to their Far Eastern brothers; business agents, who dreamed of future gains in the acquisition of the Islands. But, McKinley was a "politician and the most important influence was his calculation that annexation promised the greatest political gain and offered the fewest political dangers" (p. 10). And so, between September and October 1898, he publicly assumed a posture of indecision, while closely following the trend of voter opinion in the electoral campaign late in 1899.

Because the acquisition of the Philippine Islands was largely an act by the President — is it too strong to call it an act of political expediency? — the subsequent reaction against it was doomed to failure because it lacked the political clout that the President's Office enjoyed.

The first dissenters, naturally, were the Filipinos themselves, who finally expressed their indignation by battling the American troops in a war that dragged on for a little less than four years. It will never be known for certain whether Dewey promised independence to Aguinaldo or not; what is clear is that both leaders suddenly found an ally to exploit, that both were unwittingly set on a collision course against each other. Significantly, McKinley never entertained the possibility of an independent Philippines whose neutrality would be guaranteed either unilaterally by the United States, or by an international convention, although precedents were not lacking for such a solution — e.g., the neutrality of Belgium or Switzerland guaranteed by European

conventions. McKinley may have interpreted correctly the mind of his countrymen, but he was woefully ignorant of the Filipinos and he misjudged them "with tragic persistence" (p. 10). On 21 December, he issued an executive order to the American military government in the Philippines, extending its jurisdiction all over the islands. Strictly speaking, this was a violation of international law, for, by that date, the senate debate to ratify the Treaty of Paris had barely begun and the Armistice of 13 August 1898 limiting American jurisdiction to the "harbor, city, and bay of Manila" (p. 17) had not been abrogated and was still in force. It is probable that he was invoking his emergency powers as the Chief Executive of his government, and, having no knowledge of the political maturity of the Filipinos, he had determined to use the full force of his office to "protect" the natives in their religious and political rights, lead them to enjoy the "mild sway of justice and right" (p. 18), or assimilate them "benevolently" to the American way of life.

Just before Christmas 1898, then, American presence in the Philippines had been decided by one man — the President of the United States. The subsequent ratification of the Treaty of Paris two months later, on 6 February 1899, must also be attributed to McKinley's "ability to persuade" and win the necessary two-thirds majority vote. The arguments he used with members of the U.S. Congress were similar to the reasons he had earlier had for demanding the cession of the entire archipelago: native incapacity for self-government; American duty to uplift and train the Filipino in modern democratic rule; the value of the Philippines to the American economy, defense, and diplomacy; discredit to the United States and its president in the eyes of the world if the treaty were rejected; pride in the capacity of the nation to face up to the demands of an expanding America in a new century. But, as Welch notes, McKinley had laid claim to the Philippines in the name of the Republic, and the Senate was not faced "with the decision to acquire the islands, but with a decision whether or not to repeal their annexation" (p. 19). The president had orchestrated everything, such that "psychological inertia as well as the calls of duty, profit, and strategic advantage favored ratification" (p. 19). Any effort, then, to oppose annexation of the Philippines was, right from the start, condemned to failure.

It is this failure that forms the bulk of *Response to Imperialism*. Against the political machinery which had its candidate elected to the presidency of the United States, the best organized and best publicized counter-propaganda proved unavailing. This was true of the Anti-Imperialist League, which had both men and money to make its voice heard all over the country. Founded to block the slightest possibility of perverting the Spanish-American war into a "war for colonial spoils" (p. 43), the League was not originally aimed as a protest against the military subjection of the Filipinos. But with the outbreak of hostilities two days before the Treaty of Paris was ratified, it acted as the vehicle and voice of the movement to rid America of the Philippines. It

sought an immediate end of the war and the withdrawal of the United States from the Philippines, after aiding in the establishment of an effective government in the islands. American imperialism was self-destructive, and the army that had fought in the name of humanity in Cuba should not be a tool of aggression in the other half of the globe. Unfortunately, both in the conduct of military campaigns in Luzon and on the administrative desks in Washington, the League failed to make any impression. Besides internal dissension among its own writers and spokesmen, the League was hurt more by the full-page cartoons and ill-concealed jibes of the pro-expansionist press. And when, in its efforts to stop the war, some of its members sought to undermine the morale of the American troops in the Philippines, and the League was accused in the press of treason, its cause was doomed. The greatest weakness of the Anti-Imperialist League, however, lay in its failure to command the "political authority that could coerce the administration to change its policy" (p. 56). In its debates about the justice or legality of the American take-over of the Islands, they may have asked basic questions and provoked clarification of the fundamental tenets of the American constitution; but they were not good politicians and they lacked the political base from which to "defeat the inertia of congressional politics or inspire among the urban middle class apprehensions sufficient to overcome sentiments of national pride and optimism" (p. 57).

The same failure attended the efforts of the other groups that reacted negatively to the annexation of the Philippine Islands. McKinley was a Republican, and his party insisted that the Philippine-American war had been provoked by the duplicity of Aguinaldo. The Republicans denied that expansion to the Western Pacific departed from American tradition, and they justified the decision to rule the Islands on the grounds of honor, duty, and necessity. Whatever answer the Democrats could have offered by way of rebuttal was blunted by their fear of being labeled the copperhead party. They refused to be identified with the Anti-Imperialist League, although in the election of 1900, they wanted to make opposition to imperialism the main campaign issue. But the "institutional response of the Democratic party . . . was neither emphatic nor consistent. It was characterized by uncertainty, selective criticism, and sectional differences" (p. 61). Perhaps, what might be summed up as the official Democratic position was their insistence that if the Filipinos were promised independence after a stable government had been established, the war would come to its end. All this, however, does not constitute the real difficulty. The real problem lay in the fact that American presence in the Philippines was a political decision, and it should have been an analogous political act that dissolved it. This, however, the Democrats and other anti-expansionists did not provide.

Welch divides his essay into ten chapters, of which the chapter "Scholars and Writers" is noteworthy. American action in the Philippine Islands found

justification in the alleged ideals of the American nation, and one would expect that these had received form and expression from the members of the American *Akadeemeia*. But, as with the others, there was, first, a lack of unanimity in the scholars' appraisal of the Philippine policy of their government; and, second, a sense of futility that they were engaged in "an endless and fruitless exercise" (p. 132). Certainly, despite counting among the opposition distinguished poets, novelists, belle-lettristes, scholarly professors, and college presidents, they influenced neither public policy nor the conduct of the Philippine-American war. On the other hand, the decision-makers and their public supporters received little or no inspiration from the writings of the pro-expansionist minority among the academic and literary communities. The mood of pessimism, Welch writes, "that characterized so much of the writing of the anti-imperialist intellectuals in the years 1901-2 would support the belief that they had little immediate impact on American policy in the Philippines" (p. 132).

A good example of the impotence of the academician was Jacob Gould Schurman. He was president of Cornell University when McKinley tapped him to head the first Philippine Commission in 1899. Described correctly perhaps as a "reluctant expansionist" (p. 118), he soon changed his mind after seeing for himself the situation in the islands. But, in the few years he could have been most influential in the formation of public policy, he was wavering between admiration for American policy and doubt as to its practical results. When at last he was convinced that the American government should recognize the goal of Philippine independence, it was already too late. The Philippine-American war had already been waging for more than two years, and in a few months, Aguinaldo's capture would end formal military resistance to American rule in the Philippines.

It is the last chapter that sums up Welch's thesis. Against the often strident rhetoric of the debate over the Philippines, he calmly concludes that the annexation and control of the Philippine Islands was neither an aberration in American foreign policy nor merely a chapter in the expansion of the American military presence in the Pacific, but it permanently affected American military planning. There was no Anglo-American alliance for the duration of the Philippine-American war, but American presence in the Philippines — which two other nations, Germany and Japan, were interested in acquiring — led to a more friendly relationship between Great Britain and her former colony. Despite high hopes of American control of a limitless China market, the acquisition of the Philippines occasioned neither a sharp increase in the trade with China nor in American political leverage in the disentanglement of the often intricate relations of China with the Western powers.

Implicit in Welch's essay is the question regarding the impact of the American experience in the Philippines on the subsequent course of American diplomacy. Without saying so, Welch is uncomfortable with the current

theories that hold up the Philippine-American war of 1899-1902 as a model for American military and diplomatic moves in the Pacific from the cold war days to the present; or, as the "paving ground" for American economic initiatives in these days of the multinational corporations; or, yet as a "climactic episode in fashioning a foreign policy consensus in behalf of open door imperialism" (p. 153). Such facile comparisons he characterizes as perhaps tantalizing to one's aesthetic tastes, but "rhetoric is not a proper substitute for proof, and the policy errors of McKinley furnish neither cause nor explanation for the difficulties and policies" of succeeding administrations (p. 153). Historical "cause and effect" are not as simple as that, and just as one must learn to distinguish past regret from present recrimination of dead agents of history, so also must one beware of superficial judgments not based on fact. If history is the mental discipline that seeks to understand how things came to be, its field of investigation is as extensive only as its briefest sources. But within the limits imposed by the existing evidence, the historian has a rather wide field of investigation, provided he does not select from a "very mixed bag" only what suits his biases. This is the reason why Welch cannot accept an interpretation of the Philippine policy of the United States as suggested by William Appleman Williams. The latter claims that the annexation of the Philippines had never been the real question at issue. The debate really centered on how American presence in the Philippines could lead to the "uninterrupted development of American industrial and agricultural markets throughout the world." It was a foregone conclusion that the United States would occupy the Philippine Islands, because such a policy was an expression of "economic ambition joined with self-serving moralism . . . to which all politically significant economic interest groups could pledge allegiance" (p. 154). This theory, Welch indicates, "deserves respect but not adoption," as it denies the "diversity of membership and the complexity of motives of both the anti-imperialists and their opponents." And to "make American policy in the Philippines the exemplar of open door imperialism is to ignore the essential distinctions of political control" (pp. 154-5).

In conclusion, Welch insists that the conquest of the Philippines barely affected American life. Its real significance is in the response of the American people to that war, a response that clearly indicated the beliefs and ambitions of American society at the turn of the century. The response to that war was as varied as the people who gave that response. There was patriotism and racism, confusion and optimism, religious zeal and self-serving moralism. In a word, it was a people that showed itself still uncertain of its national interest while convinced of its national superiority.

One or two minor observations to conclude this review. The chapter entitled "The Press, Military Atrocities, and Patriotic Pride," analyzes the press reports of American brutality and torture in the Philippines. Welch says these reports are "of the more perplexing" among the various incidents of the Phil-

ippine-American war. Some of the perplexities the author indicates are: the limited criticism and general emotional reaction to the reports of American misconduct in the islands; the hesitation of the press to report such misconduct; the apparent distinction between the reaction of the newsmen and that of the readers at large. The present reviewer has only one comment to add, namely, that by their very nature, the data with which this chapter deals demand *quantitative* judgment, but there seems to be no effective measure for it. One, therefore, is left with a feeling of incompleteness, although such a lack does not seriously affect the message of the book.

In chapter six, the author alludes to the optimism and sincerity evident in the missionary impulse that American occupation of the Philippines occasioned, especially among Protestant church groups. Catholics, no less than the other anti-expansionists, did not present a united opposition, and perhaps one can sum it all up by saying that they spoke in one voice only when they denounced Protestant proselytising in a country they knew was already Catholic. But as far as opposing the policy of the government, it would be a misreading of the sources to say that there was an identifiable Catholic anti-expansionist movement. This was the age when the Catholics were hard put to show that the Catholic Church was also a loyal American institution. The author quotes Fr. Algué who pointed to the "dangerous and impolitic nature" of Protestant evangelism, which apparently proved more of a liability than a help to the American soldier and government functionary. After all, in the Philippines, some of the staunchest supporters of the new regime were prominent and devout Catholics. And so, in Algué's opinion, the American priest was America's "truest and best ally" in the Philippines. And Welch concludes that Algué is an "excellent example of the somewhat troubled Catholic version of the missionary impulse" (pp. 93-94). One wonders whether the author knew that Father José Algué was a Spanish Jesuit who had been a resident in the Philippines some years before the Americans arrived, and knew what he was talking about.

Besides the author himself for his scholarly work, the publishers ought to be congratulated: the present reviewer has found only one printing error, and that in the bibliography, page 190, where *Blumentritte* should be *Blumentritt*.