Unorthodox Diplomacy: Understanding America's Deviation from its Normal Foreign Doctrine, 1898-1903

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Throughout the history of the United States, the founding fathers' vision of a nation born from the revolution against an empire has been the most important consideration in the decisions made by those in charge of the nation. When George Washington stepped down as president, he advised the country to not involve themselves in European affairs, lest they become an empirical nation like those across the Atlantic. Into the 19th century, the Monroe Doctrine upheld the country's abstinence in such involvements. However, from 1898 to 1903, the United States involved itself in foreign affairs in the Philippine, Cuban, and other islands to an extent that had not been seen before. This era stands out in history as especially imperial for the United States, is key in understanding the country's relationship to the concept of "empire" and has numerous implications in the understanding of American history going forward. The evidence shows that the deviation from the normal standard for American foreign affairs was a moment to be noted as especially empirical for the United States, and thus the country's relationship to "empire" should be understood this way.

Yale historian Samuel Flagg Bemis writes in chapter 26 of *A Diplomatic History of the United States* about this key period in the nation. His analysis of this period asserts that these actions in the far east were due to "the expansionists of 1898, the new imperialists, the Roosevelts... the exponents of a 'large' policy". He states that before the war, "there had not been the slightest demand for the acquisition of the Philippine islands", going as far as to quip "The average American citizen could not have told you whether Filipinos were far eastern aborigines or a species of tropical nuts".[1] This quip rings true for the era, up to America's own executive branch. President William McKinley himself could not point out the Philippines on a

[1] Samuel Flagg Bemis, "The Great Aberration of 1898," in *A Diplomatic History of the United States*, (Henry Holt and Company, 1950), 469.

map. He stated in his 1897 address that annexing Cuba was immoral for the United States. Yet, once the war in the Philippines began, McKinley had no trouble keeping what the United States gained in the conflict.[2] In 1903, addressing a group of clergymen, McKinley defended his decision by claiming the Philippine islands had "dropped into our laps" and "did not know what to do with them". Ultimately, McKinley, through divine intervention, decided that the best thing to do with the islands was to "Christianize and educate them."[3] President McKinley's change of opinion about the foreign nations that spotted the bordering oceans of the continental United States showcases a sudden shift towards imperial behavior. Just a year before the war began, McKinley had recognized the annexation of Cuba, an island soon to be a fantasy of acquisition in the minds of the American government, as wrong in the normal doctrine of American policy. America had not, to this point, involved itself heavily in specifically European foreign affairs. However, the placement of generals in the far east and the pressure of approaching German ships enticed McKinley to flex the rising influence of America to its European counterparts.

Many Americans interpreted this sudden aggressive imperialism as out of character and completely against the American way of diplomacy, as McKinley himself had ascertained in 1897. Prominent American psychologist and philosopher William James was one among them. In 1903, he spoke on behalf of the American people, stating "We used to believe then that we were of a different clay from other nations, that there was something deep in the American heart that answered to our happy birth, free from that hereditary burden which the nations of Europe bear..." James goes on to deride McKinley's actions in the far east, calling it "pure Fourth of July

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[2] Bemis, "The Great Aberration of 1898," 469.
[3] General James Rusling, "Interview with President William McKinley," *The Christian Advocate* 22 January 1903, 17. Reprinted in Charles Sumner Olcott, *The Life of William McKinley, Volume 2* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), 109-111.

fancy, scattered in minutes at the first temptation." James concludes by scoffing at the audacity of McKinley's decisions; that they were purely anti-American in nature. "The country has once for all regurgitated the Declaration of Independence and the Farewell Address...We are objects of fear to other lands."[4] James' assessment of McKinley's affairs in the far east indicates that up to this point, a matter such as this had never been privy in the minds of American citizens or the decision makers in Washington as anything important. His tone of utter disgust at how quickly and unorthodox McKinley's actions were undertaken highlights how exceptional this point in history was.

Furthermore, among the American citizens, there was a split in those interested in enlisting to support the government. No greater was this divide recognized than in the African American community across the country. On recruiting efforts for the Spanish-American war, the black newspaper the *Indianapolis Freeman* indicated that some men enlisted with great excitement to take up arms for the country, while others harbored doubts about the hypocrisy of the recruitment endeavors. The *Freeman* ponders "The government of the United States will allow some of her most loyal and true citizens to be burned and shot to pieces, like dogs, without protection, and go right on ignoring their rights and claims as if all were peace and happiness in the family; and yet, when a foreign war is threatened, these same ill-treated citizens are wont to be rushed to the front in the name of protecting the nation's honor."[5] The author implies that the country is suddenly ready to recognize her derided citizens as capable soldiers for a new foreign experiment. While the author's words can be interpreted as a continuation of empirical behavior

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[4] William James, "Report of the Fifth Annual Meeting of the New England Anti-Imperialist League, November 28, 1903 and Its Adjournment Nov. 30" (Boston, Mass.: New England Anti-Imperialist League, 1903), 21-26.
[5] "They Are Ready to Enlist" *Indianapolis Freeman,* March 19, 1898, 1.

domestically, the change in behavior by those conscripting for the war indicates new ideals for foreign involvement that have permeated the government and its needs for an army capable of handling this new affair, as well as a newfound hope in those that were eager to enlist themselves. The split caused some African Americans to see this as reparation, while others saw through the tactics.

In this short period from 1898-1903, the United States acted in a way that had not been seen before nor replicated since. Suddenly, America felt a desire to compete with European nations for global supremacy in the way those same nations would; by claiming and presiding over them. Since this period, the US has reverted to a distinctly American form of diplomacy. All these undertakings from this 6-year period are distinctly imperial in nature. When assessing American history in this context, it can be seen as the point where America reached their limit in terms of executing global authority and how the nation reacted. Despite everything that occurred in the far east, the opinion of the American citizens still prevailed, indicating that democracy still played a crucial role in the fabric of the country. Interpreting the country's history in this way allows us to better understand how and why those in power in the United States acted as they did.

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