

GREAT DEBATES IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Unit 7: Should the United States Pursue a Foreign Policy of Isolationism or Interventionism?

The Issue

In April 1898 the United States went to war with Spain. America easily won the war, taking possession of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines in the process. But when the Filipinos rejected United States control, the nation became involved in a bitter guerrilla war. Since the stated purpose of the war with Spain had been to free the Cuban people from colonial domination, the Philippine insurrection sparked a heated debate among Americans over the merits of overseas expansion.

Background

Since the War of Independence, many Americans have believed that their nation was unique, a vast democratic republic destined to play a major role in world politics and commerce. This vision has served as the basis for two recurrent yet contrary foreign policies: isolationism and interventionism.

Isolationists insisted that the United States should take advantage of its geographic good fortune and concentrate on governing itself well, while avoiding the rivalries and conflicts between other nations. They believed that America would emerge as a world leader by setting an example of neutrality, economic development, and democratic ideals.

Interventionists believed that American expansion across the continent was a natural right, an economic necessity, and a crucial factor in the maintenance of national security. They argued that America's remarkable growth was evidence of its superiority and claimed that overseas expansion would bring the benefits of the American system to the less developed countries of the world.

The Spanish-American War and the brutality of the Philippine insurrection triggered a bitter confrontation between Americans who supported one or the other of these two foreign policies. The interventionists argued that America was entitled to an overseas empire. The isolationists believed the nation was abandoning its democratic ideals in favor of imperialism.

The Readings

The following debate begins with a campaign speech, delivered in September 1898, prior to President McKinley's decision to keep the Philippines. Albert J. Beveridge's "The March of the Flag" immediately caught the attention of the nation. A year later Beveridge was elected to the Senate from the state of Indiana at the young age of 36. Beveridge was a gifted speaker, and his speech has been widely studied by students of oratory.

Americans who opposed the acquisition of overseas territories created a national anti-imperialist movement in the years between 1898 and 1900. The platform of the American Anti-Imperialist League was adopted at a national meeting held in Chicago in October 1899. The movement faded after McKinley's reelection in 1900.

Update

The debate between isolationists and interventionists has continued to have an impact on the development of American foreign policy to the present day. This debate became particularly intense before the two world wars and during the Vietnam War, and is apparent in current political discussions of the regional conflicts in Central America, the Middle East, and Asia.

Should the United States Pursue a Foreign Policy of Isolationism or Interventionism?

Albert Beveridge, *Senator from Indiana, delivered this campaign speech in Indianapolis in 1898.*

It is a glorious history our God has bestowed upon His chosen people; a history whose keynote was struck by Liberty Bell; a history heroic with faith in our mission and our future; a history of statesmen who flung the boundaries of the republic out into unexplored lands and savage wildernesses; a history of soldiers who carried the flag across the blazing deserts and through the ranks of hostile mountains, even to the gates of sunset; a history of a multiplying people who overran a continent in half a century; a history of prophets who saw the consequences of evils inherited from the past and of martyrs who die to save us from them; a history divinely logical, in the process of whose tremendous reasoning we find ourselves today.

Therefore, in this campaign, the question is larger than a party question. It is an American question. It is a world question. Shall the American people continue their resistless march toward the commercial supremacy of the world? Shall free institutions broaden their blessed reign as the children of liberty wax in strength, until the empire of our principles is established over the hearts of all mankind? . . .

Hawaii is ours; Puerto Rico is to be ours; at the prayer of the people, Cuba will finally be ours; in the islands of the East, even to the gates of Asia, coaling stations are to be ours; at the very least the flag of a liberal government is to float over the Philippines, and I pray God it may be the banner that Taylor unfurled in Texas and Fremont carried to the coast—the stars and stripes of glory. . . .

The march of the flag! . . .

Distance and oceans are no arguments. The fact that all the territory our fathers bought and seized is contiguous is no argument. . . . The

ocean does not separate us from lands of our duty and desire—the oceans join us, a river never to be dredged, a canal never to be repaired.

Steam joins us; electricity joins us—the very elements are in league with our destiny. Cuba not contiguous! Puerto Rico not contiguous! Hawaii and the Philippines not contiguous! Our Navy will make them contiguous. . . .

But today we are raising more than we can consume. Today we are making more than we can use. Today our industrial society is congested; there are more workers than there is work; there is more capital than there is investment. We do not need more money—we need more circulation, more employment. Therefore we must find new markets for our produce, new occupation for our capital, new work for our labor. And so, while we did not need the territory taken during the past century at the time it was required, we do need what we have taken in 1898, and we need it now. . . .

“We cannot fly from our world duties . . . We cannot retreat from any soil where Providence has unfurled our banner.”

Albert Beveridge

Ah! as our commerce spreads, the flag of liberty will circle the globe and the highways of the ocean—carrying trade to all mankind—be guarded by the guns of the republic. And as their thunders salute the flag, benighted peoples will know that the voice of liberty is speaking, at last, for them; that civilization is dawning, at last, for them—liberty and civilization, those children of Christ’s gospel, who follow and never precede the preparing march of commerce. . . .

We cannot fly from our world duties; it is ours to execute the purpose of a fate that has driven us to be greater than our small intentions. We cannot retreat from any soil where Providence has unfurled our banner; it is ours to save that soil for liberty and civilization. For liberty and civilization and God’s promise fulfilled, the flag must henceforth be the symbol and the sign to all mankind—the flag!

Source: Thomas B. Reed, ed. *Modern Eloquence*, Volume 11 (Philadelphia: 1903).

Should the United States Pursue a Foreign Policy of Isolationism or Interventionism?

The Anti-Imperialist League *adopted this platform in 1899.*

We hold that the policy known as imperialism is hostile to liberty and tends toward militarism, an evil from which it has been our glory to be free. We regret that it has become necessary in the land of Washington and Lincoln to reaffirm that all men, of whatever race or color, are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We maintain that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. We insist that the subjugation of any people is "criminal aggression" and open disloyalty to the distinctive principles of our government.

We earnestly condemn the policy of the present national administration in the Philippines. It seeks to extinguish the spirit of 1776 in those islands. We deplore the sacrifice of our soldiers and sailors, whose bravery deserves admiration even in an unjust war. We denounce the slaughter of the Filipinos as a needless horror. We protest against the extension of American sovereignty by Spanish methods.

We demand the immediate cessation of the war against liberty, begun by Spain and continued by us. We urge that Congress be promptly convened to announce to the Filipinos our purpose to concede to them the independence for which they have so long fought and which of right is theirs. . . .

Imperialists assume that with the destruction of self-government in the Philippines by American hands, all opposition here will cease. This is a grievous error. Much as we abhor the war of "criminal aggression" in the Philippines, greatly as we regret that the blood of the Filipinos is on American hands, we more deeply resent the betrayal of American institutions at home. The real firing line is not in the suburbs of Manila. The foe is of our own household. The attempt of 1861 was to divide the country. That of 1899 is to destroy its fundamental principles and noblest ideals.

Whether the ruthless slaughter of the Filipinos shall end next month or next year is but an inci-

dent in a contest that must go on until the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States are rescued from the hands of their betrayers. . . .

We deny that the obligation of all citizens to support their government in times of grave national peril applies to the present situation. If an administration may with impunity ignore the issues upon which it was chosen, deliberately create a condition of war anywhere on the face of the globe, debauch the civil service for spoils to promote the adventure, organize a truth-suppressing censorship, and demand of all citi-

zens a suspension of judgment and their unanimous support while it chooses to continue the fighting, representative government itself is imperiled.

We propose to contribute to the defeat of any person or party that stands for the forcible subjugation of any people. We shall oppose for re-election

all who in the white house or in congress betray American liberty in pursuit of un-American ends. We still hope that both of our great political parties will support and defend the Declaration of Independence in the closing campaign of the century.

We hold with Abraham Lincoln, that "no man is good enough to govern another man without that other's consent." When the white man governs himself, that is self-government, but when he governs himself and also governs another man, that is more than self-government—that is despotism. Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in us. Our defense is in the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men in all lands. Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves, and under a just God cannot long retain it.

We cordially invite the co-operation of all men and women who remain loyal to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States.

*"Those who deny
freedom to others
deserve it not for
themselves."*

Anti-Imperialist League

Source: *Platform of the Anti-Imperialist League* (Chicago: 1899).

GREAT DEBATES WORKSHEET 7

Directions: Use the information in the Unit 7 debate to answer the following questions. If necessary, use an additional sheet of paper.

A. Comprehension

1. List the economic advantages of imperialism stated by Albert Beveridge.

2. Summarize the position of the Anti-Imperialist League regarding the actions of American military forces in the Philippines.

3. How does Beveridge respond to the argument that overseas colonies will be separated from mainland America?

4. What political actions is the Anti-Imperialist League planning to take?

B. Critical Thinking

1. **Making Comparisons:** How are Beveridge's idealistic arguments different from the Anti-Imperialist League's idealistic arguments?

2. **Recognizing Bias:** Locate two examples of Beveridge's bias in favor of the American system of government.

3. **Drawing Conclusions:** Which of the following people would probably have disagreed with the arguments of the Anti-Imperialist League in 1899? Why?
 - a. a citizen of the Philippines
 - b. a citizen of Cuba
 - c. a citizen of Great Britain_____

4. **Testing Conclusions:** Evaluate the arguments on both sides of the debate. Which side's arguments are most effective and convincing? Use specific reasons and examples to support your positions.

