

5.1 Imperialism and the Spanish-American War

What were the costs and benefits of the United States becoming a global power?

Explore

Taking the Philippines

Why did anti-imperialists question annexation of the Philippines?

During the [Spanish-American War](#), U.S. forces had traveled to Hong Kong and the Philippines. A U.S. fleet, led by then-Commodore George Dewey, destroyed the Spanish fleet at the Battle of Manila Bay on May 1, 1898. President McKinley then ordered U.S. troops that were stationed in nearby Hong Kong to engage the Spanish army in the Philippines. They arrived in August, forced the Spanish army to surrender, and occupied the capital city of Manila. Meanwhile, in June, after Dewey's victory, Filipinos proclaimed their independence.

After the Spanish-American War, Spain agreed to give up the Philippines for \$20 million. The United States paid this sum in December 1898, and President McKinley found himself in a difficult situation. The U.S. Army and Navy were protecting the Philippines. McKinley was concerned that, if the United States left the Philippines, another global power would come in and take over, erasing any economic, religious, or military gains the United States had accomplished there.

Annexation

Instead of simply leaving the Philippines, McKinley sought to [annex](#) the territory. This would mean that, instead of keeping their newly declared freedom, Filipinos would be subjects of the foreign U.S. government. Their land would be U.S. property. At the time, McKinley said that continuing U.S. occupation was "necessary" to "uplift" the Filipinos and bring Christianity to the area. Like many other Americans, McKinley was oblivious to the fact that most of the country was already Roman Catholic.

Aside from the religious motivation, the annexation of the Philippines was also motivated by a need to answer the problems raised by Turner's "frontier thesis." If the United States could successfully expand into the Pacific and East Asia, then, in fact, the U.S. frontier was not closed. Americans could continue to mine the new opportunities provided by new lands beyond the Pacific on the Asian mainland. This expansion would also boost the national superiority of the United States and lead to demands for an increase in its naval power.



Is there a geographical interpretation to the Constitution? . . . Does a thousand miles of ocean diminish constitutional power more than a thousand miles of land? The ocean does

not separate us from the field of our duty and endeavor—it joins us. . . . There is in the ocean no constitutional argument against the march of the flag, for the oceans, too, are ours.

—Senator Albert J. Beveridge, 1898



Anti-Imperialist Response

Some Americans objected to the proposal to annex the Philippines and were growing more critical of U.S. [imperialism](#). In 1898, a group of powerful politicians and business leaders who disagreed with expansion created the [American Anti-Imperialist League](#). The American Anti-Imperialists condemned the annexation of the Philippines, declaring it “hostile to liberty,” immoral, and unjust. Group members, including steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, said that annexation squashed the rights of the free men of the Philippines and violated the American ideals of limited government and self-determination. They thought imperialism was contrary to democracy.

Another voice of opposition to annexation stemmed from racism. In the view of some, Filipinos were nonwhite and inferior. Many anti-imperialists feared annexation would lead to a major influx of nonwhite immigrants. They feared immigrants would burden the U.S. labor system, taking jobs from white citizens and depressing wages. Some feared that Asians and Pacific Islanders were not intelligent enough to operate factory machinery or be productive members of U.S. society.