

**COMMONWEALTH OR
EMPIRE: A BYSTANDER'S
VIEW OF THE QUESTION**

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Commonwealth Or Empire: A Bystander's View of the Question by Goldwin Smith

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A BYSTANDER'S VIEW OF
THE QUESTION

BY

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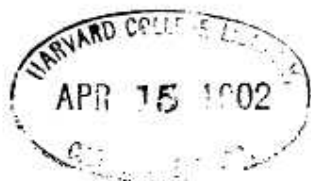
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COMMONWEALTH OR EMPIRE

IN the last Presidential election issues were mixed. The verdict consequently was uncertain. Which issue was paramount was a question greatly debated among Americans. Some said currency was paramount, and voted against a debasement of the coin which would no doubt have led to commercial disaster, and could have attractions only as a measure of partial relief, at a period of depression and suffering from mortgage debt. Alarm was at the same time created and votes probably were determined by language menacing to the Supreme Court and judicial authority in general, as well as by denunciations of the action of the Federal Government in the suppression of labour riots. But let the paramount issue for Americans be what it might, for the world at large it

was and is that between the Commonwealth and Empire. Shall the American Republic be what it has hitherto been, follow its own destiny, and do what it can to fulfil the special hopes which humanity has founded on it; or shall it slide into an imitation of European Imperialism, and be drawn, with the military powers of Europe, into a career of conquest and domination over subject races, with the political liabilities which such a career entails? This was and is the main issue for humanity. Seldom has a nation been brought so distinctly as the American nation now is to the parting of the ways. Never has a nation's choice been more important to mankind.

Against the Commonwealth three forces, distinct but convergent, are now arrayed. They are Plutocracy, Militarism, and Imperialism. The three instinctively conspire; to the plutocrat Imperialism is politically congenial, while he feels that militarism impregnates society with a spirit of conservatism, and may in case of a conflict of classes furnish a useful force of repression.

Puritan New England could not last, though

it formed the foundation and has left traces of itself in the moral force which in this election offered a notable resistance to the tidal wave. The Puritan settlement and the United States in general were bound to undergo the influences of the world's progress, share the advance of thought, and be embraced in the world-unifying influences of electricity and steam. Before the close of the seventeenth century, in fact, vital change had set in. The original elements were largely diluted by foreign inflow, though this has been assimilated to a wonderful extent. Still, the American Republic was the home of democracy and the hope of labour. It promised to do something more than the Old World toward correcting the injustice of nature, equalizing the human lot, and making the community a community indeed. The eyes of the masses everywhere were turned to it. To the enemies of equality and popular government it was an object of aversion and alarm. Loud, almost frenzied, was the shout of exultation with which, at the outbreak of Secession, Aristocracy and Plutocracy in Europe hailed its apparent fall. It had remained

free from Socialism, other than imported, thus proving the soundness of its principle, which is that of freedom, self-help, and self-development under the necessary restraints of the law.

Nowhere is English life better or more attractive than in a country parish, with a kind and conscientious squire, good ladies, an active pastor, a well-to-do tenantry, and a contented peasantry. Yet passing from this to an American village, an observer felt that he had come to something which had more of the true spirit of a community. He felt that by the social equality and general friendliness which prevailed, by the spontaneous obedience to law which had no force to support it but that of a single constable, by the general intelligence and the common interest in public questions, one step at least had been made towards something like the fulfilment of the social ideal. In the great cities, besides the special influences of city life, there were unassimilated immigration and de-Americanized wealth. But, setting aside these two elements, there was more of the community in an American than in a European city, and this in spite of municipal mis-

government carried in some cases to an extent which all deplore.

If the Commonwealth partly lost its old Puritan support in the East, in the West there had been developed a social and political element more energetically democratic, while it was entirely free from ecclesiastical restraint. The thoroughly American spirit of the West was shown by the part which it played on the side of the Union in the Civil War. Its temper is radically opposed to anything monarchical or aristocratic; and if it has on this occasion voted for a policy of aggrandizement and war, the cause seems to be rather a vehemence of character still breathing of frontier life, than anything which would render the West more prone to Imperialism than New England.

There appeared to be the best reason, at all events, for hoping that humanity had here been finally rid of two of its greatest banes in the Old World,—standing armies and State Churches. Of State Churches it had apparently seen the last vestige depart when religious liberty and equality finally triumphed over the