

**AMERICAN IMPERIALISM: THE  
CONVOCATION ADDRESS DELIVERED  
ON THE OCCASION OF  
THE TWENTY-SEVENTH CONVOCATION  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO.  
JANUARY 4, 1899.**

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American Imperialism: The Convocation Address Delivered on the Occasion of the Twenty-seventh convocation of the University of Chicago. January 4, 1899. by Carl Schurz

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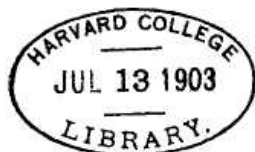
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C. F. Adams

## AMERICAN IMPERIALISM.

THE CONVOCATION ADDRESS, DELIVERED ON THE OCCASION OF THE TWENTY-SEVENTH CONVOCATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO, JAN. 4, 1899.

By inviting me to address its faculty, its students, and its friends upon so distinguished an occasion, the University of Chicago has done me an honor for which I am profoundly grateful. I can prove that gratitude in no better way than by uttering with entire frankness my honest convictions on the great subject you have given me to discuss,—a subject fraught with more momentous consequence than any ever submitted to the judgment of the American people since the foundation of our constitutional government.

It is proposed to embark this republic in a course of imperialistic policy by permanently annexing to it certain islands taken, or partly taken, from Spain in the late war. The matter is near its decision, but not yet decided. The peace treaty made at Paris is not yet ratified by the Senate; but even if it were, the question whether those islands, although ceded by Spain, shall be permanently incorporated in the territory of the United States would still be open for final determination by Congress. As an open question, therefore, I shall discuss it.

If ever, it behooves the American people to think and act with calm deliberation, for the character and future of the republic and the welfare of its people now living and yet to be born are in unprecedented jeopardy. To form a candid judgment of what this republic has been, what it may become, and what it ought to be, let us first recall to our minds its condition before the recent Spanish War.

Our government was, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, "the government of the people, by the people, and for the

people." It was the noblest ambition of all true Americans to carry this democratic government to the highest degree of perfection in justice, in probity, in assured peace, in the security of human rights, in progressive civilization; to solve the problem of popular self-government on the grandest scale, and thus to make this republic the example and guiding star of mankind.

We had invited the oppressed of all nations to find shelter here, and to enjoy with us the blessings of free institutions. They came by the millions. Some were not so welcome as others, but under the assimilating force of American life in our temperate climate, which stimulates the working energies, nurses the spirit of orderly freedom, and thus favors the growth of democracies, they became good Americans, most in the first, all in the following generations. And so with all the blood-crossings caused by the motley immigration, we became a substantially homogeneous people, united by common political beliefs and ideals, by common interests, laws, and aspirations, — in one word, a nation. Indeed, we were not without our difficulties and embarrassments, but only one of them, the race antagonism between the negroes and the whites, especially where the negroes live in mass, presents a problem which so far has baffled all efforts at practical solution in harmony with the spirit of our free institutions, and thus threatens complications of a grave character.

We gloried in the marvellous growth of our population, wealth, power, and civilization, and in the incalculable richness of the resources of our country, a country capable of harboring three times our present population, and of immeasurable further material development. Our commerce with the world abroad, although we had no colonies, and but a small navy, spread with unprecedented rapidity, capturing one foreign market after another, not only for the products of our farms, but also for many of those of our manufacturing industries, with prospect of indefinite extension.

Peace reigned within our borders, and there was not the faintest shadow of danger of foreign attack. Our voice, whenever we chose to speak in the councils of nations, was listened to with respect, even the mightiest sea-power on occasion yielding to us a deference far beyond its habit in its

intercourse with others. We were considered ultimately invincible, if not invulnerable, in our continental stronghold. It was our boast, not that we possessed great and costly armies and navies, but that we did not need any. This exceptional blessing was our pride, as it was the envy of the world. We looked down with pitying sympathy on other nations which submissively groaned under the burden of constantly increasing armaments, and we praised our good fortune for having saved us from so wretched a fate.

Such was our condition, such our beliefs and ideals, such our ambition and our pride, but a short year ago. Had the famous peace message of the Czar of Russia, with its protest against growing militarism, and its plea for disarmament, reached us then, it would have been hailed with enthusiasm by every American as a triumph of our example. We might have claimed only that to our republic, and not to the Russian monarch, belonged the place of leadership in so great an onward step in the progress of civilization.

Then came the Spanish War. A few vigorous blows laid the feeble enemy helpless at our feet. The whole scene seemed to have suddenly changed. According to the solemn proclamation of our government, the war had been undertaken solely for the liberation of Cuba, as a war of humanity and not of conquest. But our easy victories had put conquest within our reach, and when our arms occupied foreign territory, a loud demand arose that, pledge or no pledge to the contrary, the conquests should be kept, even the Philippines on the other side of the globe, and that as to Cuba herself, independence would only be a provisional formality. Why not? was the cry. Has not the career of the republic almost from its very beginning been one of territorial expansion? Has it not acquired Louisiana, Florida, Texas, the vast countries that came to us through the Mexican War, and Alaska, and has it not digested them well? Were not those acquisitions much larger than those now in contemplation? If the republic could digest the old, why not the new? What is the difference?

Only look with an unclouded eye, and you will soon discover differences enough, warning you to beware. There are five of decisive importance.

of the northern races, as they have never done so before, will not now go there in mass to do the work of the country, agricultural or industrial, and to found there permanent homes; and this is not merely because the rate of wages in such countries is, owing to native competition, usually low, but because they cannot thrive there under the climatic conditions.

But it is the working-masses, those laboring in agriculture and the industries, that everywhere form the bulk of the population; and they are the true constituency of democratic government. And as the northern races cannot do the work of the tropical zone, they cannot furnish such constituencies. It is an incontestable and very significant fact that the British, the best colonizers in history, have, indeed, established in tropical regions governments, and rather absolute ones, but they have never succeeded in establishing there democratic commonwealths of the Anglo-Saxon type, like those in America or Australia.

The scheme of Americanizing our "new possessions" in that sense is therefore absolutely hopeless. The immutable forces of nature are against it. Whatever we may do for their improvement, the people of the Spanish Antilles will remain in overwhelming numerical predominance, Spanish creoles and negroes, and the people of the Philippines, Filipinos, Malays, Tagals, and so on,—some of them quite clever in their way, but the vast majority utterly alien to us, not only in origin and language, but in habits, traditions, ways of thinking, principles, ambitions,—in short, in most things that are of the greatest importance in human intercourse and especially in political coöperation. And under the influences of their tropical climate they will prove incapable of becoming assimilated to the Anglo-Saxon. They would, therefore, remain in the population of this republic a hopelessly heterogeneous element,—in some respects more hopeless even than the colored people now living among us.

What, then, shall we do with such populations? Shall we, according, not indeed to the letter, but to the evident spirit of our constitution, organize those countries as territories with a view to their eventual admission as States? If they become States on an equal footing with the other States they will not only be permitted to govern themselves as to



their home concerns, but they will take part in governing the whole republic, in governing us, by sending Senators and Representatives into our Congress to help make our laws, and by voting for President and Vice-President to give our national government its executive. The prospect of the consequences which would follow the admission of the Spanish creoles and the negroes of West India islands, and of the Malays and Tagals of the Philippines, to participation in the conduct of our government is so alarming that you instinctively pause before taking the step.

But this may be avoided, it is said, by governing the new possessions as mere dependencies, or subject provinces. I will waive the constitutional question and merely point out that this would be a most serious departure from the rule that governed our former acquisitions, which are so frequently quoted as precedents. It is useless to speak of the District of Columbia and Alaska as proof that we have done such things before and can do them again. Every candid mind will at once admit the vast difference between those cases and the *permanent* establishment of substantially arbitrary government, over large territories with many millions of inhabitants, and with a prospect of their being many more of the same kind, if we once launch out on a career of conquest. The question is not merely whether we *can* do such things, but whether, having the public good at heart, we *should* do them.

If we do adopt such a system, then we shall, for the first time since the abolition of slavery, again have two kinds of Americans: Americans of the first class, who enjoy the privilege of taking part in the government in accordance with our old constitutional principles, and Americans of the second class, who are to be ruled in a substantially arbitrary fashion by the Americans of the first class, through congressional legislation and the action of the national executive, — not to speak of individual "masters" arrogating to themselves powers beyond the law.

This will be a difference no better — nay, rather somewhat worse — than that which a century and a quarter ago still existed between Englishmen of the first and Englishmen of the second class, the first represented by King George and the British Parliament, and the second by the American colon-

ists. This difference called forth that great pæan of human liberty, the American Declaration of Independence, — a document which, I regret to say, seems, owing to the intoxication of conquest, to have lost much of its charm among some of our fellow citizens. Its fundamental principle was that "governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed." We are now told that we have never fully lived up to that principle, and that, therefore, in our new policy we may cast it aside altogether. But I say to you that, if we are true believers in democratic government, it is our duty to move in the direction toward the full realization of that principle, and not in the direction away from it. If you tell me that we cannot govern the people of those new possessions in accordance with that principle, then I answer that this is a good reason why this democracy should not attempt to govern them at all.

If we do, we shall transform the government of the people, for the people, and by the people, for which Abraham Lincoln lived, into a government of one part of the people, the strong, over another part, the weak. Such an abandonment of a fundamental principle as a permanent policy may at first seem to bear only upon more or less distant dependencies, but it can hardly fail in its ultimate effects to disturb the rule of the same principle in the conduct of democratic government at home. And I warn the American people that a democracy cannot so deny its faith as to the vital conditions of its being, it cannot long play the king over subject populations, without creating within itself ways of thinking and habits of action most dangerous to its own vitality, — most dangerous especially to those classes of society which are the least powerful in the assertion, and the most helpless in the defence of their rights. Let the poor and the men who earn their bread by the labor of their hands pause and consider well before they give their assent to a policy so deliberately forgetful of the equality of rights.

I do not mean to say, however, that all of our new acquisitions would be ruled as subject provinces. Some of them, the Philippines, would probably remain such, but some others would doubtless become States. In Porto Rico, for instance, politicians of lively ambition are already clamoring

for the speedy organization of that island as a regular territory, soon to be admitted as a State of the Union. You may say that they will have long to wait. Be not so sure of that. Consult your own experience. Has not more than one territory, hardly fitted for statehood, been precipitated into the Union as a State when the majority party in Congress thought that, by doing so, its party strength could be augmented in the Senate, and in the House, and in the electoral college? Have our parties become so unselfishly virtuous that this may not happen again? So we may see Porto Rico admitted before we have had time to rub our eyes.

You may say that little Porto Rico would not matter much. But can any clear-thinking man believe that, when we are once fairly started in the course of indiscriminate expansion, we shall stop there? Will not the same reasons which induced us to take Porto Rico also be used to show that the two islands of San Domingo with Hayti, and of Cuba, which separate Porto Rico from our coast, would, if they were in foreign hands, be a danger to us, and that we *must* take them? Nothing could be more plausible. Why, the necessity of annexing San Domingo is already freely discussed, and agencies to bring this about are actually at work. And as to Cuba, every expansionist will tell you that it is only a matter of time. And does any one believe that those islands, if annexed, will not become States of this Union? That would give us at least three, perhaps four new States, with about 3,500,000 inhabitants, Spanish and French creoles and negroes, with six or eight Senators, and from fifteen to twenty Representatives in Congress, and a corresponding number of votes in the electoral college.

Nor are we likely to stop there. If we build and own the Nicaragua Canal, instead of neutralizing it, we shall easily persuade ourselves that our control of that canal will not be safe unless we own all the country down to it, so that it be not separated from our borders by any foreign, and possibly hostile power. Is this too adventurous an idea to become true? Why, it is not half as adventurous and extravagant as the idea of uniting to this republic the Philippines, nine thousand miles away. It is already proposed to acquire in some way strips of territory several miles wide on each