



“Large” Policy

Peter Makari

One hundred and twenty-five years ago, the United States was in the throes of a most vibrant debate over the issue of expansion. Should the US seek to exert its power and sovereignty over lands beyond the 48 contiguous states? The issue was prompted by the fighting of the so-called Spanish-American War from April to August, 1898. The Treaty of Paris, signed in December, 1898, resulted in the US gaining forms of control over Puerto Rico, Cuba, Guam, and the Philippines. In the same year, the US annexed Hawai'i. Arguments in Congress, newspapers, and society more broadly over whether and how to expand, and the nature and rationale for expansion, were heated, pitting expansionists against anti-imperialists.

The debates drew on themes of history, morality, religion, commerce, and politics, and were flavored by ideas of racial and religious supremacy as well as a sense of destiny. President McKinley, an advocate of expansion, spoke of the US acquisition of the Philippines, saying that the US acted “under the providence of God and in the name of human progress and civilization” (132). Theodore Roosevelt, who had led the Rough Riders in battle against the Spanish in Cuba and was a staunch advocate of expansion, stated, “All men of sane and wholesome thought must dismiss with impatient contempt the plea that these continents should be reserved for the use of scattered savage tribes whose life was but a few degrees less meaningless, squalid, and ferocious than that of the wild beasts with whom they held joint ownership” (137). More to the point, perhaps, was that the Philippines were seen as a commercial entryway into the grander market of China. Each place has offered perceived economic and/or military benefit. The particular relationship of each has taken its own turn. Puerto Rico, for example, is neither a sovereign nation nor a US state, but a US protectorate. Puerto Ricans enjoy some benefits but not complete rights nor the right to vote.

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nor a US state, but a US protectorate. Puerto Ricans enjoy some benefits but not complete rights nor the right to vote.

Andrew Carnegie, a fervent anti-expansionist, pointed to the hypocrisy of an American assertion of the value of liberty when he spoke, "With what face shall we hang in the schoolhouses of the Philippines our own Declaration of Independence, and yet deny independence to them?" (68-69). Booker T. Washington spoke of the military victory over Spain by drawing attention to racism still festering in the US. "Until we conquer ourselves, I make no empty statement when I say we shall have, especially in the southern part of our country, a cancer gnawing at the heart of this Republic that shall one day prove as Dangerous as an attack from an army from within or without" (84).

The expansionists won the day in the Senate in 1899 when the Treaty of Paris was ratified, William McKinley won re-election in 1900 with Theodore Roosevelt as his vice-presidential running mate, and the "Large" Policy—expansion—was enacted. In reading about these debates, I was struck by how little the settlement of land and displacement/dispossession of Indigenous people during the acquisition of territory across the North American continent was discussed—except by those who favored expansion. Henry Cabot Lodge, an active proponent of expansion in 1898, drew on that history to justify expansion, saying, "We took Louisiana without the consent of the governed, and ruled it without their consent.... Then came the Mexican war, and by the treaty of Guadeloupe Hidalgo we received a great cession of territory from Mexico, including all of the California coast.... There were many Mexicans living within the ceded territory. We never asked their consent."

Never was the rightness of US westward expansion and settlement questioned. It was accepted as a *fait accompli*. Such a pattern brings to mind the debate about the occupation of Palestinian land, including East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, which has continued since 1967. Seldom has such a focus included—or allowed—acknowledgement of the Palestinian Nakba, or "catastrophe," following the declaration of the establishment of Israel seventy-five years ago in May 1948, which resulted in the destruction of more than 400 Palestinian towns and villages and the displacement and dispossession of more than 750,000 Palestinians, who became refugees.

In both cases—and in innumerable others around the world and in the US—the voices of Indigenous and oppressed people are lost or suppressed. To recover and amplify those voices is to appreciate their authenticity, to respect their agency, and to recognize their authority. It is to open the door to a more complete understanding of history, with

implications for the present. It is to acknowledge that injustices have been done and a first step to address those injustices so that they are not perpetuated.

Citations are from Stephen Kinzer, The True Flag. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2017, which is recommended for further reading.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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