An Appeal to “Our Fathers”:
The Founding Myth, the Spanish-American War,
and the Debate over American Imperialism

On January 9, 1900, Senator Albert Beveridge arose and addressed his colleagues in the Senate. At issue was the nature and future of American control of the Philippines. Beveridge, an avid imperialist, used his time on the floor to respond to claims from anti-imperialists that annexation was antithetical to the founding ideals of the United States:

The founders of the nation were not provincial. Theirs was the geography of the world. They were soldiers as well as landsmen, and they knew that where our ships should go our flag might follow. They had the logic of progress, and they knew that the Republic they were planting must, in obedience to the laws of our expanding race, necessarily develop into the greater Republic which the world beholds today, and into the still mightier Republic which the world will finally acknowledge as the arbiter, under God, of the destinies of mankind.¹

For Beveridge, the principles, documents, and men of the founding were far from stumbling blocks to imperialism; contemporary Americans would be faithfully following in their footsteps by seizing Spain’s former territories. Immediately succeeding Beveridge’s address, Senator George Hoar offered a rebuttal. Hoar argued that “you will have to enlarge the doctrines of the American Declaration of Independence” and “build anew a Constitution … before you can find your right to buy and sell that people [the Filipinos] like sheep.”²

Through the Spanish-American War, in the words of Louis Pérez, “the United States acquired territories in the time-honored fashion of war and conquest.”³ The war and its aftermath has been heralded as initiating the “dawn of the American century” and “the moment in which

the nation first projected itself as a world power.”4 Internally, the war was a moment of intense introspection and retrospection. Peppered throughout the speeches and papers of the time can be found the phrase “our fathers,” followed by a claim about those fathers and their ideals.5 While that expression is not unique to that period, its frequency speaks to the authoritative weight that generation placed on the tradition of the Founding Fathers. It is my thesis that imperialists and anti-imperialists alike sought justification and legitimacy for their positions in the founding myth of the United States.

A review of the historiographical work on American imperialism at the end of nineteenth century reveals a litany of interpretations that have been proposed by scholars: economics, ideology, culture, humanitarianism, race, and religion. While no means comprehensive, historians have offered these factors—usually knottily interwoven—as keys to understanding the period. Their works acknowledge the influence of the founding in many of these areas. For example, one scholar argues that understanding the Philippine-American War requires understanding the American identity at the close of the nineteenth century. She quotes Senator Henry Johnson who succinctly summarized one common perception: “we are a Christian nation.”6 She adds that nineteenth century Americans, in keeping with that identity, “constructed the course of American history as the manifestation of divine will, and positioned the Founding Fathers as the directors of the national mission.”7 Another historian argues, in his economic interpretation of the conflict, that the War of 1898 was a product, in part, of an expansionist

---

5 For example, in one volume of the Congressional Record from 1900, there are multiple references to “our fathers” from both sides of the debate; *Cong. Rec.*, 56th Cong., 1st sess., 1900, vol. 33, pt. 1: 588; 711; 803; 878.
7 Harris, *God’s Arbiters*, 22.
ideology—dating back to Founding Fathers like James Madison—that “explained America’s democracy and prosperity” as resulting from what would be later called Manifest Destiny. 

While all of these works recognize the use of the founding myth in political rhetoric from the period, there was no systematic attempt to categorize and understand its use overall. Historians have routinely understood its rhetorical applications in terms of their specific thesis and subject matter. Even so, there has been no general investigation into how public figures across the political spectrum used the American founding—a term which encompassed the character of republican government, the nature of sovereignty, the role of consent in governance, expansionism, race, religion and the identity of the American people and culture—as a key component of their argument. The hope is that this paper will be a starting point for that discussion.

“The ancient wise men knew that a man's nature and fate were revealed by his dreams; the cultural anthropologists have taught us that a people's character is revealed by its myths,” so wrote Walter Donlan in an introduction to an article investigating the “The Foundation Legends of Rome.” The founding myth of the United States, like Rome’s, has played a prominent role in the nation’s history. Myth here does not necessarily denote falsehood; it is a “traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people.” Further, myth entails “a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone,”

---


10 This essay will not be concerned with the “truthfulness” of the history employed by American leaders. It will be an investigation into how they made use of the founding myth to shape contemporary politics.

notably “one embodying the ideals and institutions of a society or segment of society.” The story of the Revolution—of the life and death struggle of the Founders for national independence—serves this purpose in the American context. The story of the Founding Fathers establishes and outlines the defining features of what it means to be an American, appealing to future generations to follow in their path. “Only myth,” Northrop Frye argues, “with its suggestion of an action that can contain the destinies of those who are contemplating it, can provide any hope or support at all” for a people. Importantly, that call to action legitimates the behavior of leaders in the political tradition. Francis Fukuyama asserts that “political power ultimately rests upon recognition—the degree to which a leader or institution is regarded as legitimate and can command the respect of a group of followers. People may follow out of self-interest, but the most powerful political organizations are those that legitimate themselves on the basis of a broader idea.” During the lead up to and throughout the Spanish-American War, and amid the imperialist debate it would engender and be outlasted by, the Founding Fathers and the Revolutionary War would be rhetorically commissioned to legitimate arguments from leaders from both sides.

Late on February 15, 1898, and early into the morning of February 16, news began to reach the U.S. mainland by telegraph that the USS Maine had mysteriously exploded in Havana Harbor, Cuba. It was the spark that ignited the tinder. Americans were greeted with descriptions of the sinking in the morning edition of their local papers, often accompanied by headlines in the

---

vein of the *Boston Globe*’s: “Heaping Up Horror.” With 266 American sailors dead and an American battleship at the bottom of Havana Bay, the American public was inflamed. “During the following weeks,” John Offner writes, “the national tragedy dominated American thinking.” By the end of April, the United States would be at war with Spain who would be blamed for the disaster.

If the sinking of the *Maine* was the spark, the Cuban Revolution of 1895— and the American reaction to its events— was a key component of the kindling. Spain, in an attempt at quashing the rebellion, turned to brutal tactics described by Spanish leadership as “abominable devastation.” The American public quickly sympathized with the island as tales of, as one newspaper put it, the “incredible abuse of warfare in Cuba” spread throughout the nation. This period prior to the immediate lead up to hostilities offers important context for the rhetoric surrounding imperialism during and after 1898. American affinity was tied to the notion that Cuba was following in the revolutionary tradition of the United States, a theme that featured prominently in the discourse just as the myth of the American founding would be employed throughout the Spanish-American War and the ensuing debate over imperialism.

On December 17, 1896, Republican Senator Jacob Gallinger explained, “I am in profound sympathy with [the Cuban revolutionaries], who are battling, as I understand the matter, for precisely the same principles for which our forefathers contended against the great power of the British Empire.” This was not a one-off remark. The sense that Cuba was engaged

---

19 Miller, *From Liberation to Conquest*, 21.
in that same “glorious struggle for independence” as the American Founders was persistent.\textsuperscript{21} The following year, a Democratic Senator from Alabama read from an 1854 account from an American in Cuba. He explained that “as I read from this author, we will see that fountain—the same from which our fathers drank—of constitutional liberty from which the Cubans received the inspiration that now refreshes the Republic of Cuba.”\textsuperscript{22} As evidenced by this senator’s use of an antebellum American work on Cuba, the island had occupied a special place in the American mind for many decades. Senator John Daniel spoke to this theme in May 1897, with a section of his address titled “Our Peculiar Relations to Cuba—We Gave Them Their Exemplar.”\textsuperscript{23} If the Cubans “are trying to throw off the yoke of an old government which has been oppressive,” he suggested, it was “we who have promulgated the principles” of the American Revolution who held part of the responsibility.\textsuperscript{24}

Not only were Americans understanding their part in the moment in terms of American actions during the Revolutionary War, but also in light of the role France played in that same narrative. “What a picture is that 80 miles from our shores! And yet this great nation folds its arms and officially asks, ‘Am I my brother's keeper?,’” one senator exclaimed.\textsuperscript{25} “Thank Heaven, the Government of France did not reason that way when Lafayette stood side by side with Washington and Stark and Mad Anthony Wayne when our forefathers were fighting for human freedom and independence!”\textsuperscript{26} Even so, there were those who justified their opposition to intervention in the Cuban Revolution and the possibility of annexation on the same founding

\textsuperscript{22} Senator John Morgan, \textit{Cong. Rec.}, 55\textsuperscript{th} Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} sess., April 13, 1897, vol. 30, pt. 1: 692.
\textsuperscript{23} Senator John Daniel, \textit{Cong. Rec.}, 55\textsuperscript{th} Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} sess., May 17, 1897, vol. 30, pt. 1: 1100-1.
\textsuperscript{24} Senator John Daniel, \textit{Cong. Rec.}, 55\textsuperscript{th} Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} sess., May 17, 1897, vol. 30, pt. 1: 1100-1.
myth: “the people of Cuba are not our people; they can not assimilate with us,” Nebraska Senator John Thurston proclaimed.27 “And beyond all that I am utterly and unalterably opposed to any departure from the declared policy of the fathers which would start this Republic for the first time upon a career of conquest and dominion utterly at variance with the avowed purposes and the manifest destiny of popular government.”28

John Offner observes that the sinking of the Maine “directly linked the United States to the revolutionary events taking place in Cuba.”29 Many influential public figures echoed Congressman Thomas McRae’s exclamation that it was “an occasion when Americanism should assert itself on behalf of the defense of American honor.”30 Reminding his audience of the “heroic valor and manly courage of the Revolutionary fathers,” the congressman declared that “we should stand as our fathers stood, the avengers of any wrong to every American citizen or sailor, the heralds of right and the liberators of the oppressed.”31 Or, in the words of Congressman Benton McMillin, “we were taught by our ancestors not to go out of our glorious path one inch to bring on a conflict. But the same wise ancestry also taught us not to go out of our path one-thousandth part of one inch to escape a conflict where injustice was about to be done to the humblest American citizen or the great American flag.”32 Another Congressman judged that Americans in his day were just as willing as “their forefathers in” the Revolution

---

29 Offner, An Unwanted War, 122.
were “to rally to their country's defense and to risk their lives in vindication of their country's cause, and, if duty require, to die in support of their country's rights.”

When it came, war went well for the United States. “First blood was drawn on May 19, 1898, at Manila Bay by Commodore Dewey, nearly two months before actual hostilities began in Cuba, where the struggle lasted a scant six weeks,” writes the historian of the conflict, John Tebbel. A “splendid little war,” in John Hay’s famous estimation. Victory over Spain left the United States in control of many of its former territories in the Caribbean and Pacific. “From the late summer of 1898 until after the election of 1900,” George Herring writes, “one of those periodic great debates over the nation’s role in the world raged in the United States.” This was not just an outward looking deliberation. As the historian Merrill Peterson records, with the conquests of 1898 “the nation’s fundamental principles were again called up for debate.” After Dewey’s decisive victory at Manila Bay, the President of Stanford University, David Jordan, warned that “the crisis comes when the war is over.” E. Berkeley Tompkins explains, “Jordan was concerned that in their elation over a swift and easy victory in the war the American people might lose sight of their nation’s basic principles.”

“‘Terminata, terminata,’ indeed is our ancient national soul!” William James penned those words in response to news of the beginning of the Philippine-American War following the

---

35 Immerwahr, How to Hide an Empire, 69-70.
36 Herring, From Colony to Superpower, 322.
conclusion of the Spanish-American War. The Treaty of Paris would grant the United States control over Spain’s former colonies but, soon after, Filipinos resisted American occupation. Andrew Carnegie, comparing Cuban and Filipino fighters to Washington’s Revolutionary War army, had earlier asked “who would answer the call of the [American] President of an ‘imperial’ republic for free citizens to fight the Washington and slaughter the patriots of some distant dependency which struggles for independence?”

Senator George Hoar, years into the fighting would reiterate James’s diagnosis: “we have given away all the old ideals of the country in the past.”

This rhetoric was not new. The Anti-Imperialist League was organized in the Summer of 1898 contending that “we more deeply resent the betrayal of American institutions at home.” Senator George Vest noted that “every schoolboy knows, or ought to know, that the Revolutionary war, which gave us existence as a people, was fought for years exclusively against the colonial system of Europe.” Accordingly, the anti-imperialists argued, imperial expansion was utter hypocrisy. For, in the words of a Virginia Congressman, “the advocates of the new order would have us believe that our Revolutionary fathers maintained that colonial government was tyranny when imposed on them, but justice when they imposed it on others.” Further, they argued, the principles that had made the United States into the greatest and most prosperous nation were being overthrown. For anti-imperialists, the very soul of America was in danger.

---

42 Harris, God’s Arbiters, 55.
Senator Albert Beveridge rejected the anti-imperialist position outright. Imperialism was no deviance from the founding tradition, he claimed. “What shall history say of us?” he asked during debate over American policy in the Philippines. “Shall it say that, called by history’s noblest work, we declined that great commission? Our fathers would not have had it so. No! They founded no paralytic government, incapable of the simplest acts of administration.”

History, imperialists contended, was on their side. Expansion “is no new doctrine,” Senator Orville Platt concluded. “It was the doctrine of the fathers. It was the doctrine of the men who framed the Constitution.”

But what of the Declaration of Independence, anti-imperialists charged. Senator John Spooner suggested that it posed no stumbling block, for since “the Declaration of Independence did not apply to the Indians,” why was it necessary to apply it to Filipinos or Puerto Ricans?

While there were those who set aside the Founding Father’s as outdated, in general, imperialists suggested that their position “was the view of the framers of the Constitution and the fathers of the Republic [and] is manifest from a study of the history of the formation of our Government.”

In the words of the famous imperialist Henry Cabot Lodge, “I am sure, Mr. President, that there is no Senator upon this floor, no matter what his views on this question may be, who would not cut off his hand sooner than be false to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and to the great traditions and ideals of American history.”

---

48 Harris, God’s Arbiters, 71.
The Spanish-American War and the debates over imperialism in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century speak to the authoritative weight that generation placed on the founding myth. Matthew Jacobson argues that, within this time period, “the most significant ideological strands were those that linked many anti-imperialists … with their presumed enemies in the expansionist camp.”\textsuperscript{51} Whether in support or in opposition to intervention in Cuba, for declaring war on the Spanish Empire, or for overseas expansion, American leaders legitimated their arguments through appeals to “our fathers.” In this way, the founding myth of the United States played a parallel and often intertwined role with the Monroe Doctrine. Jay Sexton observes that “the open-ended nature of the seemingly direct 1823 message foreshadowed the elasticity and political utility of” the doctrine, which “generations of Americans would proclaim … embodied fundamental principles of American statecraft. But they would disagree with one another over its meaning, purpose, and application.”\textsuperscript{52} The same can be said for the founding myth.

While the examples presented above are but a mere sampling of the oratory deployed, it does demonstrate that their language was clothed in the myth of the Revolution, a rhetorical device found throughout American history. Its use at this particular moment, however, when the nation was redefining itself as a global power, is instructive. It demonstrates how political rhetoric makes use of the past to give authority to ideas or policies in the present. It proffers tutoring on how each generation, confronted with their own challenges and an ever-changing world, uses and reshapes history and myth for their own purposes. In this way, it offers insight

\textsuperscript{51} Jacobson, \textit{Barbarian Virtues}, 230.

into the use of history as a political tool, and how its discursive use by public figures shapes a particular understanding of the past—whether that past truly existed or not.
Bibliography


