“THE FRUITS OF IMPERIALISM,
BE THEY BITTER OR SWEET . . .”

“America’s Mission” and the Rhetoric of the Imperialism Debates (1898-1900)

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ABSTRACT

My thesis unpacks the rhetoric of the imperialism debates which took place at the end of the eighteenth century in response to the American annexation of the Philippine Islands. The United States, confronted with the experience of a direct and sustained colonial project for the first time in its history, engaged in a brief but intense period of national self-examination. At the core of these debates was the question of whether or not this new policy was in keeping with the “American mission” as this idea was conceptualized by the political actors of the day. Although these debates grew bitter at times, both sides argued from a fundamental consensus which presupposed an exceptional American nation. The ultimate goal of this study is to uncover the common rhetorical traditions which shaped the discursive boundaries of these debates and American national self-conceptions of the time. The rhetorical form of the Puritan jeremiad sermon serves as a useful heuristic device for better understanding the assumptions which informed the arguments of the participants in these debates.

The jeremiad is a mode of exhortation where a leader laments the degenerate state of his community, especially in contrast to a venerated past. The speaker reminds his audience of a set of norms which are not being fulfilled, often listing the divine punishments or other forms of declension that will be unleashed if this waywardness continues. The jeremiad typically ends with a prophetic reassurance in the ultimate success of the community’s mission, exhorting them to reflect on their shortcomings and reform their ways. I analyze the American jeremiad both in its original historical context in colonial New England, and as a rhetorical form that reappears throughout the
imperialism debates. I also mine the rhetorical structure itself for its potential to shape a community’s self-conception.

In the context of this study, I define America’s national mission as the widely-held belief that the United States has a special leading role to play in world affairs. This idea has manifested itself in many ways throughout American history. The Puritans exhorted each other to better fulfill their divinely-sanctioned “errand into the wilderness” as they struggled to establish an exemplary community or a “city on a hill.” American mission has also informed the idea of “American exceptionalism,” which posits the United States differs qualitatively from other nations, or that it can transcend the historical laws under which other nations must exist. Both the ideas of national exceptionalism and national mission present ambivalent worldviews. This allows advocates of diametrically opposed policies to appeal to those worldviews for support. This was the case in the imperialism debates.

These represent an archetypal moment in which a novel experience forced Americans to struggle with and reinterpret the meanings of the American national self. This thesis closely examines this historical moment, while also connecting the varied arguments of the time to common rhetorical traditions.
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INTRODUCTION

On the morning of 1 May 1898, Commodore George Dewey issued his famous command to the captain of the USS *Olympia*, “You may fire when ready, Gridley.” Over the next six hours, a flotilla of five American cruisers destroyed the entire Spanish Pacific Squadron which was at anchor in Manila Bay in the Philippine Islands. This one-sided engagement was the first major combat of the Spanish-American War. It also opened the door for the annexation of the Philippines, one of the first examples of sustained overseas colonialism in American history.

Twenty months later, Senator Albert Beveridge stood before the U. S. Senate and defended a war that stubbornly refused to end. Although the Treaty of Paris had concluded hostilities between Spain and the United States on 10 December 1898, American troops were engaged in brutal fighting with Filipino nationalists. Led by Emilio Aguinaldo, the guerilla army refused to trade a Spanish colonial regime for an American one. Beveridge nevertheless exhorted his colleagues to stay the course. “The Philippines are ours forever,” he declared. “We will not repudiate our duty in the archipelago. We will not abandon our opportunity in the Orient. We will not renounce our part in the mission of our race, trustee under God, of the civilization of the world.”

These policies did not go unchallenged. Almost immediately, groups of men organized in opposition to President McKinley’s policy of annexation, which they termed “imperialism.” The Democratic candidate for president – William Jennings Bryan – made anti-imperialism a significant plank in his campaign platform. On 22 February 1899 he delivered an address in

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honor of George Washington’s Birthday. The speech – entitled “America’s Mission” – drew on various political, religious, and rhetorical traditions to mobilize listeners. Bryan appealed to “foundational values,” condemning imperialism as a deviation from a historical pattern. While he denounced his nation for its backsliding, that denunciation nevertheless reemphasized an exceptional place for the American nation in sacred and secular history.

Scholars refer to the arguments over the annexation of the Philippines as the “imperialism debates.” From 1898 to 1900, Americans grappled with the significance of this new colonial policy. The arguments of this period reveal a people engaged in serious reflection over their national identity. Anthony Smith defines national identity as the “continual reinterpretation of . . . values, symbols, memories, myths, and traditions that form the distinctive heritage of the nation. . .”2 This study will examine this time of national self-examination as an archetypal era in which American national identity was especially “up for grabs.” It will then provide a close reading of the rhetorical devices employed by the disputants in these debates. One device in particular – the American jeremiad sermon – will be emphasized as a rhetorical tradition which has discursively shaped American national identity since before the nation’s founding up to the present day.

The American jeremiad sermon originated in the Puritan colonies of New England. Typically delivered on election-days or other public gatherings, the jeremiad served as a “state-of-the-covenant address,” in which the speaker assessed the community’s adherence to its divinely-prescribed “errand into the wilderness.”3 From the very beginning of their experiment in

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the New World, Puritan ministers exhorted their congregations to better fulfill their role as God’s elect community of saints, “a latter-day Zion at the vanguard of history.”

These sermons followed a tripartite formula, establishing a form that would become a hallmark of the American rhetorical tradition. Jeremiads typically begin by establishing a scriptural and historical standard for community norms. There then follows a long list of condemnations and laments over the community’s failure to live up to these norms, with vivid descriptions of the consequences God has in store for those that break covenant. The sermon ends by unveiling the promise within this notion of covenant and expressing a sense of hope that the covenant will be renewed and fulfilled. These rhetorical movements were attuned to the particular situation and religious ideology of the New England Puritans. Yet the jeremiad as a mode of exhortation has survived to shape American national identity in times of crisis and upheaval.

The late nineteenth century was a time when perennial conflicts over the idea of America were being settled, or at least swept under the rug. The stage was set for new national conceptions to take the fore. The sectarian conflict of the Civil War had begun to recede into the past. The Compromise of 1877 removed federal troops from southern cities, ending the period of Reconstruction. With this step, the rights of southern African-Americans became a southern issue, abandoning the freedmen to decades of racial oppression. *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) upheld this “separate but equal” status. With these issues sidelined, the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars served as catalysts for a period of national self-examination. Robert

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Beisner called it “one of the most exacting and thorough examinations of the basic principles of American government and society in our history.”

In 1899, the United States faced the novel task of administering and “pacifying” colonial holdings overseas. The terms by which Americans described their nation, its actions, and its principles became slightly more ambiguous in light of this development. Since the vocabulary of Manifest Destiny first appeared in the 1840s, Americans had devised meaning-making frameworks around the project of territorial acquisition. When this expansion suddenly took place outside of the “natural” confines of the North American continent, however, debates erupted over whether this was in keeping with previously-held conceptions of the “American mission.”

The idea of national mission is a recurring theme in American history. It allows Americans to view themselves as an exceptional community with the “duty to universalize its values for the good of both itself and others.” The emphases of this idea shift depending on the time and circumstance, reflecting at various times a millennialist belief in God’s chosen people working to fulfill a divine errand and a secularized faith in the goodness and universal appeal of American democracy. From the Puritans’ “errand into the wilderness” to George W. Bush’s proclamation that a “global democratic revolution” is “the calling of our country,” the ideology of an exceptional America with the obligation to lead other nations has proven to be an enduring trope in this nation’s self-conception.

Virtually all participants in the imperialism debates agreed on the validity of this mission. However, they disagreed vehemently on how this mission might best be accomplished. Anti-

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imperialists invoked John Winthrop’s 1630 “city on a hill” sermon, imagining America as a model community for the world to emulate. Imperialists like Beveridge argued that the United States should forcibly spread its influence through colonialism, decrying isolationism as “vain and idle . . . self-admiration.”7 America’s wars with Spain and the Philippines “provoked a major crisis of belief and attitude that caused men . . . to inquire into more general questions about the makeup of American society, the future of American democratic institutions, and the nation’s future role in international affairs.”8

Such intense periods of reflection have a deep precedent in American history. Without the unifying elements of common ethnicity or ancient homeland, Americans must collectively ask the question posed by Samuel Huntington’s provocatively titled book, “Who Are We?” This examination analyzes the rhetoric of the imperialism debates to better understand how Americans at the turn of the century struggled with answering this question.

This examination takes seriously Sacvan Bercovitch’s assertion that rhetoric, “reflects and affects [the] particular psychic, social, and historical needs”9 of a community. In an effort to better probe the contours of American ideology as a system of thought in which symbols, myths, and stories are maintained and reinterpreted, one would do well to examine the rhetorical traditions of a nation that is “to a rare, if not unique degree . . . founded on rhetoric.”10

The arguments deployed by participants in the imperialism debates yield deep insights into American self-understandings of the time. Some scholars denigrate the study of language in history, focusing on the “real” or material interests that motivate groups and individuals. However, the means by which people describe their actions carry substantial significance in their

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7 Beveridge, “Policy Regarding the Philippines,” 98.
8 Beisner, Twelve Against Empire, xiv, quoted in McCartney, 3.
9 Bercovitch, The American Jeremiad, xi. (Emphasis mine)
own right. As Gordon Wood writes, these actions are necessarily “circumscribed by the ways we can make them meaningful, and they are meaningful only publicly, only with respect to an inherited system of conventions and values.”11 Even if the debates over the annexation of the Philippines had a negligible effect on American policies, the rhetoric of those debates nevertheless reveal “a great deal about the norms, prejudices, and self-understandings of the intended audience.”12

Despite the fact that the imperialism debates concerned an issue of foreign policy, their arguments still hinged on contested interpretations of the American mission. “[T]he American national creed was the bedrock for the discussion of international policies . . . in the context of how U.S. policies . . . expressed or contradicted American ideals.”13 In wrestling with conceptions of the national self through the other, the perspective of the subaltern peoples was rarely understood or discussed by either party.

Richard Welch argues that Americans’ response to the prospect of overseas colonialism serve as a window into “the beliefs and ambitions of American society at the turn of the century.” He highlights “the patriotism . . . confusion and optimism, of a people uncertain of their national future while convinced of their national superiority.”14 It is no coincidence that the American jeremiad contains many of these ambivalent themes as well. The anti-imperialists’ prophetic denunciations of their country’s actions emerged from the rhetorical tradition of the New England Puritans. For centuries, the jeremiadic form of exhortation has been deployed in moments of crisis to reflect on notions of American national identity. The form of the jeremiad

12 McCartney, 13.
13 Hilfrich, 180. Emphasis in original.
serves to encompass these paradoxical feelings of hope, despair, anxiety, and chosenness, framing them within an exceptionalist, solipsistic national narrative that remains with us to this day.

SECTION ONE:

Imperial Encounter in the Philippines
On 19 April 1898, the Congress of the United States authorized President McKinley to force Spain to renounce its sovereignty over the island of Cuba. On 1 May, Commodore George Dewey sank the Spanish Pacific Squadron at anchor in Manila Bay. Six months later, American delegates in Paris demanded and received ownership of the Philippine Islands for the sum of $20 million. In February 1899, warfare broke out between an American army of occupation and a Filipino national army. In a remarkably short period of time, the United States’ posture with regard to the rest of the world changed from unapologetic isolation to aggressive colonialism, suppressing nationalist uprisings half a world away.

How did the United States find itself embarking on colonial adventures in the Western Pacific? The 1890s were a time of crises for the young nation. The country was just recovering from the economic recession of 1893. Farmers responded to sinking grain prices with threats of rebellion. American farms and factories produced more goods than the American people could buy. Intellectuals and politicians like Alfred Thayer Mahan, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Theodore Roosevelt began writing treatises on America’s need for a strong navy to open overseas markets.

The Road to War

In the Caribbean, Cuban nationalists launched a rebellion against Spanish rule in 1895. The local colonial government, faced with a popular and growing revolution, resorted to increasingly brutal counter-insurgency tactics. These tactics included corralling tens of thousands

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16 See especially Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660-1783*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1890).
of civilians into reconcentración camps to deny them access to the guerillas. Famine and disease stalked these camps, leading to death tolls that some estimate to be as high as 100,000. Cuban émigrés in the United States emphasized these atrocities, drawing explicit parallels between their struggle and America’s own anti-colonial history.

Newspaper men like Pulitzer and Hearst captured the American imagination with lurid tales of Spanish savagery, singling out General Weyler as the offending villain. Swashbuckling novels emerged depicting the Cubans as damsels in distress, awaiting Anglo-Saxon rescue from their Latin oppressors. In January 1898 President McKinley responded to popular pressure and ordered that the battleship Maine depart from the North Atlantic Fleet and lay anchor in Havana Harbor, for what was purportedly a “friendly visit” to protect American interests in Cuba. This American experiment in gunboat diplomacy would end in tragedy three weeks later.

On the night of 15 February 1898 the Maine sank into the harbor after an explosion rocked the ship, killing 266 men. Spanish officials protested their innocence. To an American populace primed to suspect Latin villainy, however, this incident confirmed what they had been told to expect. An American investigation blamed the explosion on a Spanish mine. The truth mattered little, however, as yellow journalists took theory as fact and their circulations quadrupled.

Headlines like "The Warship Maine Was Split In Two By An Enemy's Secret Infernal Machine!" and “The Whole Country Thrills with War Fever” were splashed across the pages of

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17 Mark Peceny, Democracy at the Point of Bayonets, (Pittsburgh: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 59.
18 Kaplan, 93.
19 Four separate investigations have come to differing conclusions on whether this was in fact the case. Most recently, Thomas B. Allen, “Remember the Maine?”, National Geographic, Feb. 1998. Vol. 193, Iss. 2, 92.
the New York Journal.\textsuperscript{21} A young generation of politicians gave speeches before the House and Senate calling for war. President McKinley ultimately asked Congress for a declaration of war against Spain on 12 April 1898. Yet, for all this attention paid to the \textit{Cuba Libre} movement, the opening salvos of the Spanish-American War took place thousands of miles away in the Philippines.

\textbf{Dewey’s Victory and its Consequences}

Spain had maintained a colonial outpost in the Philippines since the mid-sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{22} In 1896, a group of indigenous intellectuals called the Katipunan launched a nationalist revolution against Spanish rule. This insurrection ended in a stale-mated truce where the revolutionary leaders were forced into exile in Hong Kong. One of these leaders was named Emilio Aguinaldo. He would play a leading role in the coming guerilla war against American rule of the Philippines.

With the destruction of the Spanish fleet, the American government was suddenly faced with the question of what to do with a far-flung and unknown land. Three weeks after the Battle of Manila, Commodore Dewey met personally with Aguinaldo, who returned from exile in Hong Kong to reignite a Filipino resistance. Accounts of the meeting differ. Aguinaldo claimed that Dewey promised to establish an independent Filipino Republic once Spanish forces had been defeated. Dewey maintained that he made no such promises. Regardless, for the moment the two men shared the goal of evicting the Spaniards from the Philippines. Aguinaldo was put ashore and supplied with a small cache of weapons. He hastily assembled an army which continued

gathering weapons and digging trenches encircling Manila. Aguinaldo and his cadre declared an independent Philippines on 18 June, 1898. Dewey noticeably declined his invitation to a ceremony commemorating the event.\textsuperscript{23} Fearful of being passed from one colonial master to another, the Filipinos worked quickly to convene a government based on the American bicameral model.\textsuperscript{24} Tensions on the island grew as the indigenous government grew increasingly distrustful of the Americans’ intentions for their land.

Meanwhile, the Spanish-American War was in full swing. When President McKinley issued a call for 125,000 volunteers more than twice that number applied.\textsuperscript{25} Theodore Roosevelt resigned his post as assistant secretary of the Navy to lead a detachment of Rough Riders up Kettle Hill. William Jennings Bryan joined the National Guard and formed the Third Nebraska Volunteers in hopes of seeing combat, but never got closer than a training camp in Florida.\textsuperscript{26} The military forces of the United States landed at Santiago Bay and helped complete the task begun by Cuban revolutionaries over years of brutal insurgency warfare. When Spanish forces surrendered, American General William Shafter refused to allow the Cuban army to participate in victory celebrations, or even enter the city of Santiago.\textsuperscript{27} Through various means, the United States asserted measures of sovereignty over the island of Cuba. On 12 August an armistice was signed ending hostilities between the United States and Spain.

On 13 August, unaware that a peace protocol was already in effect between America and Spain, Dewey bombarded the city of Manila and attacked with a force of 10,000 soldiers shipped from the west coast. It was meant to be a bloodless battle. The commander of the Spanish forces

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 73
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 73
\textsuperscript{27} Kinzer, 39.
in Manila feared the fate his men would suffer if they were attacked by the growing Filipino army. He thus secretly conversed with Dewey, indicating his willingness to surrender after an American display of force. Accepting the deal, Dewey forbade Aguinaldo’s waiting army from participating in the final assault on the city.

With the end of hostilities between the United States and Spain, the tension between American and Filipino forces intensified. It was unclear what the Americans would do with the Philippine Islands now that Spanish rule had been overthrown. Although Aguinaldo and his compatriots had established independent governmental structures, they mistrusted American intentions as loaded troop transports continued to arrive from the United States.

In December 1898, two naval officers named William Wilcox and L. R. Sargent were ordered to explore the island of Luzon and take account of the progress of state-making. Their report detailed the patriotism of the nascent state that they found, with one governor expressing his peoples’ willingness to “expend to the last drop of their blood, if necessary in defending the liberty thus gained against the encroachments of any nation.”\(^{28}\) Wilcox and Sargent’s final report detailed the Filipino’s revolutionary fervor, their preparedness for war, and their urge for self-government. The report was not entered into the public record as a Senate document until 1900.\(^{29}\)

In Washington, such considerations were rarely taken into account, the discussion over what should be done with the Philippines commenced. The national aspirations of the Filipinos, who McKinley patronizingly termed “little brown brothers,” were rarely taken into account.

### The Stirrings of Debate


\(^{29}\) Ibid., 109.
The United States emerged from its “splendid little war”\textsuperscript{30} with a renewed sense of national optimism. Finally, it seemed, the bad feelings of the Civil War had been put behind them. Billy Yank and Johnny Reb had finally put aside their differences to join forces for the liberation of Cuba. President McKinley addressed this point explicitly in October 1898 when he proclaimed that the United States defeated Spain, “. . . not as a divided country, but as a united country, North and South vying with each other in self-sacrificing devotion to the country and flag; and united, my fellow-countrymen, we are invincible.”\textsuperscript{31}

The question of what the United States should do with the Philippine Islands still lingered, however. Most Americans were unaware of the archipelago’s existence before their newspaper headlines proclaimed Dewey’s great victory. With a small fleet at anchor off Manila and 10,000 troops deployed in the city, the American military stood ready to exercise its power over the Philippines. Yet what would the relationship between the Americans and their new subaltern peoples be? For participants in the imperialism debates, nothing less was at stake than the character of the American nation and the fate of the American mission.

McKinley flirted with the idea of maintaining control over only the harbor of Manila, or only the island of Luzon. He even considered granting the islands their independence. These ideas were threatened by the prospect of another imperial power encroaching elsewhere in the region. Senators like Albert Beveridge made speeches in favor of full annexation. He cited the nearby wealth of China, the preternaturally American impulse for expansion, and the Anglo-Saxon “civilizing genius.” Beveridge and others harnessed the rhetoric of “American mission” – in various novel iterations – to support the policy of overseas colonialism.

\textsuperscript{30} John Jay, quoted in Beisner, xv.
On 16 September, McKinley dispatched the American peace commissioners to the Paris Conference. He ordered them to demand “the cession in full right and sovereignty of the island of Luzon” from the Spaniards. In October, he extended his demands to include the entire archipelago. The commission would negotiate for ten weeks. During this time, Filipino emissaries sent by Aguinaldo were barred from the conference rooms. Under the terms of the resulting treaty, the United States purchased sovereignty over the Philippines from Spain for $20 million.

Among his contemporaries and later among historians, President McKinley has had a reputation for inscrutability, keeping his thoughts from even his trusted advisors. His explanation for why he made this decision was recorded, however. At a meeting with a group of Methodist missionaries, he explained his rationale for ordering the seizure of the Philippine Islands. His justification includes many tropes of American exceptionalism and national election, and deserves to be cited at length:

When I realized that the Philippines had dropped into our laps I confess I did not know what to do with them . . . I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight and I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night. And one night late it came to me this way . . . (1) That we could not give them back to Spain – that would be cowardly and dishonorable; (2) That we could not give them over to France and Germany – our commercial rivals in the Orient – that would be bad business and discreditable; (3) That we could not leave them to themselves – they were unfit for self-government – and they would soon have anarchy and misrule over there worse than Spain’s was; and (4) that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and Christianize them, and by God’s grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died. . . . the next morning I . . . put the Philippines on the map of the United States.
The American peace delegation returned with a peace treaty that included sovereignty over the Philippine Islands. This precipitated a strident debate in the Senate over its ratification. Opponents of the treaty saw the annexation of the Philippines as a fundamental break with America’s traditional anti-colonial history. The imperialists had the day when violence broke out between American and Filipino forces on 6 February 1899. The treaty was ratified by a narrow margin, and the Philippines became the property of the United States. The debates over whether this was in keeping with “America’s mission,” however, were only just beginning.

**SECTION TWO:**

**From Faneuil Hall to the Senate Floor**

The debate over America’s annexation of the Philippines was not relegated to the Senate floor. From 1898 to 1900, the discussion over whether a policy of imperialism was in keeping with American values took place across editorial pages, on whistle-stop tours, and within crowded meeting halls.

In late May of 1898, three weeks after Commodore Dewey opened fire on the Spanish fleet, Senators Henry Cabot Lodge and Stephen Elkins arranged a meeting with the President. McKinley had not yet committed himself to annexing the Philippines. The two men encouraged
him to aggressively pursue the annexation of the Philippine Islands. The two Senators underlined their imperialist ambitions by declaring that the American domestic market was no longer “enough for our teeming industries” and the United States should acquire markets overseas as a remedy for this overproduction. Western European powers were already deeply involved in the colonial game, and bellicose American politicians feared being left behind. The *Boston Evening Transcript* reported that the President “expressed no dissent” from these proposals.36

Whatever McKinley’s reaction, Lodge believed that he was well on the way to persuading the president to pursue a course of annexation. He wrote a letter to Theodore Roosevelt in which he declared “in absolute certainty, that the administration [was] grasping the whole policy at last.”37 Words like these, written by representatives or editorialists, proposed a novel shift in American foreign policy. This sentiment disturbed groups of men who would soon galvanize themselves into the anti-imperialist movement.

“A Cry for Help”

One of these men was a retired banker and prolific reformer named Gamaliel Bradford. On 3 June 1898, he penned “A Cry for Help” in the pages of the *Boston Evening Transcript*. Alarmed at the war fever and imperialist sentiment growing around him, he appealed to his New England brethren’s sense of progressive history:

> In the name of all the past glories of Massachusetts, I call for help . . . Some months ago I tried to get up a Faneuil Hall meeting to protest against the war, but was met with the excuse that the war feeling might get the upper hand. . . . If that is the danger, in God’s name lets us stand for the right, if the war spirit does prevail! If free speech is to be suppressed in Massachusetts, if Faneuil Hall is to be converted into a silent tomb, if the spirit of Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison – sorely needed to avert a slavery

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37 Lodge to Roosevelt, 24 May 1898 in *Selections from the Correspondence of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, 1884-1918*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925), 299.
worse for Massachusetts at least, we had better find it out now. If enough men will join with me to secure the hall, I for one, will stand up and have my say against the insane and wicked ambition which is dragging this country at least to moral ruin.38

This jeremiadic trope of denunciation for fear of declension would reappear throughout the debates. Bradford aimed to unite the myriad groups of individuals who saw the growing tides of imperialism as antithetical to the traditions and best interests of the American nation. On 15 June, Boston’s historic Faneuil Hall witnessed the first meeting of what would become the American Anti-Imperialist League. The resolutions proposed that day demonstrate how the participants saw imperialism as a violation of their beloved nation’s “mission.” The form and content of their arguments reveal their interpretation of American national identity. The anti-imperialists in attendance declared that:

. . . the mission of the United States is to help the world by an example of successful self-government, and . . . to abandon the principles and the policy under which we have prospered and embrace the doctrines and practices now called imperial, is to enter the path which with other great republics has ended in the downfall of free institutions.39

In addition to producing resolutions, the attendants of the Faneuil Hall meeting formed a Committee of Correspondence which was charged with disseminating the principles discussed on 15 June. The members of this organization self-consciously patterned themselves on the pre-revolutionary committee formed by Samuel Adams in 1772.40 A few months later, the task proved too great for the four men of the committee, and the Anti-Imperialist League was formed on 18 November, 1898.

For anti-imperialists, nothing less was at stake in these debates than the success or failure of the American experiment. This section will examine the personalities and organizations which

39 Speeches at the Meeting in Faneuil Hall, Boston, 15 June 1898, 1.
comprised the anti-imperialist movement, as well as its first political test; opposing the ratification of America’s treaty with Spain. Section Three will deal with the arguments and rhetoric of the movement, placing them alongside their imperialist interlocutors. Section Four will analyze the imperialism debates through the rhetorical tradition of the American jeremiad.

The Anti-Imperialists

The anti-imperialist movement was a highly variegated entity. It was composed of such incorrigible individualists that, some scholars argue, it can scarcely be categorized as an organized movement at all.41 Its members included former presidents (Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland), active politicians (Champ Clark, Ben Tillman, William Jennings Bryan, and George F. Hoar), university presidents (like David Starr Jordan of Stanford, Jacob G. Schurman of Cornell, and Charles Eliot Norton of Harvard), reformers and political independents (Carl Schurz, E. L. Godkin, William James, Charles Francis Adams, Moorfield Storey, William Lloyd Garrison Jr., and Jane Addams), clergy (Edward Everett Hale, Charles H. Parkhurst, and John Lancaster Spalding), leaders of business labor (Edward Atkinson, Andrew Carnegie, and Samuel Gompers) as well as writers and artists (Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and Ambrose Bierce).42 Otherwise bitterly opposed characters like Samuel Gompers and Andrew Carnegie, or Ben Tillman and William Lloyd Garrison Jr. came together in opposition to Filipino annexation. Many of the anti-imperialists could agree on little else besides this issue. Moreover, the movement was split into a wide variety of factions, each opposing imperialism for its own

reasons. Yet even within a movement as diverse as this, common rhetorical themes of
denunciation, declension and chosenness pervaded their pronouncements.

The identities and personalities of the anti-imperialists are significant in the context of
this examination because as a group they self-consciously situated themselves within multiple
overlapping political and rhetorical traditions. These traditions would shape their individual and
shared responses to this new shift in American foreign policy. Many of them were accustomed to
playing the role of Jeremiahs from long careers in the public sphere.

The first organizations devoted to opposing an American imperial policy came from a
group of aging reformers in Massachusetts. Many of these men had had been shaped by the
abolitionist movement and the Union cause in the Civil War. Some had personally served in the
Union Army, while those who did not were still deeply impacted by the traumatic experience of
the war.43 William Lloyd Garrison, Jr. was heir to the famous editor of The Liberator. Senator
George Frisbie Hoar’s father had braved a lynch mob when he traveled to Charleston in the
1840s to challenge the constitutionality of slavery.44 For the anti-imperialists, overseas
colonialism posed a similar threat to American ideals. Their writings are replete with explicit
comparisons between the two struggles, and many of their disseminated pamphlets opened with
quotations by Abraham Lincoln. This experience of reform would provide a rhetorical tradition
which many anti-imperialists would mine to the best of their ability.

Another political movement from which the anti-imperialists emerged was the group of
activist Republicans known as mugwumps. When the former abolitionist Thomas Wentworth
Higginson first attended a meeting of the Anti-Imperialist League, he noted that it “seemed like

43 Paul Jerome Croce, “Calming the Screaming Eagle: William James and His Circle Fight Their Civil War Battles,”
44 Schirmer, 105.
an old Mugwump gathering.” Indeed, many of the men who would form the backbone of the anti-imperialist movement had also been among the Republican Brahmins who refused to support James G. Blaine’s presidential candidacy in 1884. Their high-minded defiance of party loyalties earned them the epithet of “mugwump” which is derived from the Massachusett word for sanctimonious. Men who found themselves in both camps included such notables as Carl Schurz, Moorfield Storey, Edward Atkinson, Charles Francis Adams Jr., William Lloyd Garrison Jr., Erving Winslow, and Gamaliel Bradford.

These men made no apologies for their independence from party loyalties. Most of them were educated men from established and genteel families. This security endowed them with the confidence to follow their principled notions of civic morality even at the cost of political solidarity. This mindset of irascible independence would plague the anti-imperialists in their attempts to rally support for William Jennings Bryan in the 1900 election, however.

“Mugwumpery,” Geoffrey Blodgett writes “was not geared to decisive political action. It was not an organization but a mood.” Nevertheless, this sense of moral clarity would shape the anti-imperialists’ certitude in the rightness of their cause. It would allow them to carry on their righteous protest in the face of a popular policy of Philippine annexation. At times, they referred to themselves as modern-day Jeremiahs, railing against a wayward nation which was breaking its sacred covenant.

Almost all of the officers of the Anti-Imperialist League participated in the reform movements of the second half of the nineteenth century. Besides the Mugwump movement and

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45 Diary of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, February 10, 1899, cited in Beisner, Twelve Against Empire, 7.
46 Beisner, Twelve Against Empire, 9.
abolitionism, anti-imperialists led efforts to reform prisons, education, health care, and child labor. They were also outspoken opponents of the corrupt machine politics of the Gilded Age. New York City’s infamous Tammany Hall, for instance, was repeatedly cited as evidence against the imperialist argument that Anglo-Saxons possessed an inherent genius for self-government.49 Many of the officers had also served in the field of what we would consider civil rights today.

**Personality and Age**

As we discuss the leaders of the anti-imperialist movement vis-à-vis their imperialist opponents, it is important to mention that, almost to a man, the officers of the Anti-Imperialist League were quite well along in years. Gamaliel Bradford was sixty-seven when he issued his call for the first Faneuil Hall meeting. The League’s president George Boutwell was eighty. Carl Schurz, the German immigrant, former senator, and Union Army General, was sixty-nine. Edward Atkinson, the former banker who would court controversy by sending radical propaganda to American troops in the Philippines, was seventy-one. By E. Berkeley Tompkins’s reckoning, the average age of this group of men was sixty. Within ten years, most of them would be dead.50

In contrast, many of the leading advocates of imperialism were in the prime of their political lives. Theodore Roosevelt, Albert Beveridge, and Henry Cabot Lodge were all under fifty. Some scholars highlight the significance of this age differential between the parties, attributing the imperialists’ success to their youthful vigor and dynamism.51 This thesis can be

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50 Beisner, 215.
51 For example, Tompkins, 160.
easily overstated, but it is nevertheless significant that the anti-imperialist movement was headed by men whose great accomplishments were already behind them.

This disparity between the imperialists and anti-imperialists was thrown into high relief during debates on the Senate floor. On 9 January 1900, Albert Beveridge rose to present a speech in support of the continuing war against the Filipino nationalists. After grandiloquently presenting “thanksgiving to Almighty God [for marking Americans] as his chosen people,” he went on to outline what rewards that chosenness might entail:

The Philippines bring us permanently face to face with the most sought-for customers of the world. National prestige, national propinquity, these and the commercial activity are the elements of commercial success. The Philippines give the first; the character of the American people supply the last. It is a providential conjunction of all the elements of trade, of duty, and of power. . . . This is the divine mission of America, and it holds for us all the profit, all the glory, all the happiness possible to man. We are the trustees of the world’s progress, guardians of its righteous peace. The judgment of the Master is upon us: “Ye have been faithful over a few things; I will make you rule over many things.”

Beveridge’s speech was met with great applause. When the uproar had died down, the seventy-two year old Senator George F. Hoar – who would later serve as an officer of the Anti-Imperialist League – arose and delivered his response:

As I heard his eloquent description of wealth and glory and commerce and trade, I listened in vain for those words which the American people have been wont to take upon their lips in every solemn crisis of their history. I heard much calculated to excite the imagination of the youth seeking wealth, or the you charmed by the dream of empire, but the words Right, Justice, Duty [sic], Freedom, were absent my young friend must permit me to say from that eloquent speech.

The anti-imperialists did not dispute the visions of American glory proposed by Beveridge and others. Both groups took an exceptional American nature as a given. They implicitly agreed that this special status reserved for Americans the right to pursue a different course than other nations of the world. Instead of focusing solely on wealth and power, however, the anti-imperialists

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52 Congressional Record. 56th Congress, 1st Session, 710.
53 Congressional Record. 56th Congress, 1st Session, 712.
found American’s exceptionalism in its “founding principles” which were ever in danger of being corrupted. The two parties both drew from a rhetorical tradition which could be appropriated by either side of the debates without undermining a fundamental consensus on the content of American national identity. Namely, this meant an America which took part in the “regeneration” or “civilization” of the world. This exceptionalist consensus reveals itself as a skeletal rhetorical structure, into which diametrically opposed prescriptions of policy might be fitted. The flexibility of this form has its rhetorical roots in the exhortations and assumptions of the American jeremiad.

The anti-imperialists’ first political fight was over the ratification of the Treaty of Paris. The negotiation team sent by President McKinley had attained the president’s wishes and secured a treaty which granted the United States sovereignty over the Philippines. On 30 November 1899, Senator Hoar wrote an open letter to the 
*Worcester Gazette* in which he expressed confidence that the Treaty of Paris would not be ratified by the United States Senate. 54 The American people, he believed, would never allow their ideals to be tarnished by nakedly imposing their rule on an unwilling population overseas. Armed with the belief that American republican ideals were incompatible with a colonial enterprise, Senator Hoar planned his opposition to the Paris Peace Treaty.

Even before the Anti-Imperialist League came into being, the Committee of Correspondence enacted ambitious plans to educate the American public about the dangers of colonialism. This took the form of a membership drive which was similar to the modern chain letter. Each officer of the committee undertook to write a letter to “prominent men” in each state, requesting the names of men from each congressional district who would be receptive to the anti-

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imperialist cause. Each of these men was called on to do the same, and so on.55 Each packet contained a personal letter, as well as a collection of anti-imperialist literature, to be distributed however the recipient saw fit. In this way, the officers aimed to create a widespread protest movement which would force McKinley to suspend his expansionist ambitions. Included in each information packet was a petition letter addressed to McKinley, which implored the president:

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\ldots \text{against any extension of the sovereignty of the United States over the Philippine Islands, \ldots without the free consent of the people thereof, believing such action would be dangerous to the republic, wasteful of its resources, in violation of constitutional principles, and fraught with moral and physical evils to our people.} \]

The printing costs were defrayed by contributions from Andrew Carnegie and Edward Atkinson. The League continued to operate until 1920, but it was most active between Dewey’s bombardment of Manila in 1898 and McKinley’s reelection in 1900.

Less than a month after he dispatched his peace commission to Paris, President McKinley started his own public relations campaign. He embarked on a ten-day whistle stop tour of the western states. He delivered several speeches a day, proclaiming the recent accomplishments of the American military, the economic recovery from the panic of 1896, the newfound unity between the North and the South, and the prosperity and glory which he predicted would attend an American presence in the western Pacific. He strongly emphasized he presumed connection between America’s growing prosperity and its overseas adventures throughout the tour. To the residents of Hastings, Iowa, McKinley declared that he saw “evidences both of patriotism and prosperity. \ldots pretty much everything in this country to make it happy,” he continued. “We have good money, we have ample revenues, we have unquestioned national credit; but we want new

55 Legaspi, 291.
56 Quoted in Legaspi, 295.
markets, and as trade follows the flag, it looks very much as if we were going to have new markets. [Applause.]**57

McKinley made sure to tie that success and prosperity to the passage of the peace treaty. At almost every stop, He impressed upon his audience the need to support a treaty which would ensure that this “gift” stayed in American hands:

During these trying months the people of the United States have stood together as one man. North and South have been united as never before. [Applause.] People who think alike in a country like ours must act together. That is what we have been doing recently, and we want to continue to act together until the fruits of our war shall be embodied in solemn and permanent settlements.\(^\text{58}\)

The Treaty of Paris of 1898 was signed on 10 December. The Senate debates began on 4 January 1899. Despite the President’s strong support for the treaty, straw polls predicted its failure. Anti-imperialists hoped that a political victory here would nip imperialism in the bud, saving the innocent republic from the corruption of ill-gotten gains overseas. Their hopes were dashed when, after a month of debate, the imperialist cause was rescued by news of events unfolding in the Philippines.

When the Filipinos learned that their sovereignty had been sold to the United States, tensions between the two armies reached a fever pitch. The forces of General Elwell Stephen Otis occupied Manila and its surrounding suburbs, while 15,000 Filipinos waited in their trenches surrounding the city. On the night of 4 February, Private William Grayson of the 1st Nebraska Volunteers was patrolling the no-man’s land separating the two armies. When he came

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upon four Filipino soldiers who did not heed his orders to halt, he opened fire. Three Filipinos were killed in the ensuing skirmish, and the Philippine-American War had begun.  

News quickly reached Washington that Filipino insurgents had attacked American positions in Manila. With American troops engaged in combat, several senators switched camps to vote in favor of ratification. The final count was 57 to 27 in favor of ratification – only one vote beyond the required two-thirds majority. Now committed to the goal of American sovereignty in the Philippines, the U.S. Army routed Aguinaldo’s forces within days. A brutal guerrilla war continued for several years thereafter. After struggling with the task of fighting an enemy that could melt into the civilian population, American military leaders eventually resorted to the same counter-insurgency strategies used by the Spanish against Cuban nationalists. Paul Kramer outlines what this policy of “reconcentration” meant for the Filipinos:

. . . peasants in resistant areas were ordered to relocate to garrisoned towns by a given date, leaving behind all but the most basic provisions. Outside of the policed, fenced-in perimeters of these “reconcentration camps,” troops would then undertake a scorched-earth policy, burning residences and rice stores, destroying or capturing livestock, and killing every person they encountered.

In all, over 4,000 U.S. troops and 50,000 Filipino troops were killed in the fight over control of the Philippines. An even greater burden was borne by Filipino civilians. In the unsanitary and overcrowded garrison towns, disease and malnutrition took the lives of an estimated 250,000 people.

60 McKinley strongly worked to perpetuate this image of American innocence. Months after the event, he colorfully declared that “The first blow was struck by the insurgents, and it was a foul blow. Our kindness was reciprocated with cruelty, our mercy with a Mauser. The flag of truce was invoked only to be dishonored. Our soldiers were shot down while ministering to the wounded Filipinos; our dead were mutilated; our humanity interpreted as weakness, our forbearance as cowardice.” “Address before the Tenth Pennsylvania Regiment,” 25 Aug. 1899 in *Speeches and Addresses of William McKinley: 1897-1900*, (New York: Doubleday, 1900), 216.
61 Paul Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 157. See also Appendix, Figure 2
62 Ibid., 154.
All this was lay in the future as the anti-imperialists reflected on their first political defeat. Undaunted, they continued their prophetic criticism of American policies which they feared were leading their beloved nation to stray from its destined, chosen path.

SECTION THREE:

Pamphleteering and Electioneering

The Imperialist Project

In 1893, a group of American sugar planters in Hawaii overthrew the indigenous monarchy and lobbied Washington to annex the islands. President Grover Cleveland refused. As a justification for his refusal to acquiesce to the planters’ demands, he declared that the seizure of far-flung lands was, “not only opposed to [American] national policy but a perversion of [its] national mission.” Only six years later, the United States found itself engaged in a colonial war thousands of miles from its shores, fighting to suppress the nationalist impulses of the Filipinos. This seemingly abrupt ideological turnaround was primed by economic and political considerations, buttressed and legitimized by writers and thinkers who foresaw America’s future beyond its continental boundaries.

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63 Quoted in Kinzer, *Overthrow*, 32.
Alfred Thayer Mahan served as the director of the Naval War College and wrote *The Influence of Sea Power on World History*. In this work, he argued that a country desirous of international influence must have a strong naval force to open overseas markets. Not long after, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote his influential essay on “the closing of the American frontier.” There, he argued that the first phase of American history, which was characterized by ceaseless territorial expansion, was about to end. By reaching its continental bounds, the nation was in danger of losing the dynamism inherent in continual growth. Turner’s thesis implied that the United States should look overseas for the next “frontier” in American history.

One political scientist named Theodore Marburg saw this turn to the seas as inevitable given the Anglo-Saxon proclivity for maritime expansion. In his historical purview, Americans’ terrestrial expansion was but a stopgap for further overseas exploration. “Americans left the sea,” he wrote in a pamphlet entitled “Expansion,” “because they found it more profitable to open up the rich west. . . . The characteristics of our race, its traditions and our great coast line all point to our return to the sea.”

While such thinkers were laying the intellectual groundwork for a new form of American expansion, politicians began to stake their political careers on making that goal a reality. Congressman Henry Gibson proclaimed in 1899 that, “When God made us a nation, He gave us the right to grow; and when we cease to grow we will begin to die.” Many other imperialists assumed similar theories likening the nation to a biological organism that must either continually expand or begin to decay. Beveridge called this tension “the eternal duel between the forces of

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progress and reaction, of construction and disintegration, of growth and decay.”⁶⁶ If America did not embark on a policy of overseas expansion, the argument followed, she would inevitably crumble from decadence and indolence. This jeremiadic anxiety of declension played a part in the imperialist argument, albeit not a primary one. Instead, the imperialists relied primarily on a reinterpreted notion of the American mission, clothed in the rhetoric of duty.

Imperialists framed the United States’ acquisition of the Philippines as an opportunity to join the Anglo-Saxon race in the task of civilizing the world. Recall McKinley’s justification for annexing the Philippines on the grounds that he meant to “educate the Filipinos, and uplift and Christianize them, and by God’s grace do the very best we could by them.”⁶⁷ Imperialists did not shy away from describing the wealth and power would be gained colonialism, but they preferred to center their arguments on the idea of an unselfish American nation leading the darker regions of the world into the light of progress. McKinley declared that the peace treaty which sold the Philippines to the United States was “... not a selfish truce of arms, but one whose conditions presage good to humanity. The domains secured under the treaty... came to us not as the result of a crusade or conquest, but as the reward of temperate, faithful, and fearless response to the call of conscience, which could not be disregarded by a liberty-loving and Christian people.”⁶⁸ The accomplishment of one’s duty was clearly a moral right, even if the beneficiaries of that duty expressed ingratitude to their benefactors.

The imperialist discourse conceptualized the Filipinos as children who needed to be “rescued from their barbarism.” If they refused their savior’s beneficent aid, then “only the imposition of order would allow proper fulfillment of [America’s] duty. [For] nothing could be

⁶⁶ Albert Beveridge, quoted in Ibid.
more negligent than leaving them in anarchy.”69 Whether the benighted masses asked for this blessing was beside the point. Two weeks after fighting broke out in the Philippines, McKinley addressed the Home Market Club in Boston:

Did we need [the Filipinos’] consent to perform a great act for humanity? We had it in every aspiration of their minds, in every hope of their hearts. . . . Did we ask their consent to liberate them from Spanish sovereignty, or to enter Manila Bay and destroy the Spanish sea-power there? We did not ask these things; we were obeying a higher moral obligation, which rested on us and which did not require anybody’s consent. [Great applause and cheering.] We were doing our duty by them, as God gave us the light to see our duty, with the consent of our own consciences and with the approval of civilization. [Applause.]

The Filipinos’ violent resistance to this “great act for humanity” did not change the equation:

Nor can we now ask their consent. . . . It is not a good time for the liberator to submit important questions to the liberated while they are engaged in shooting down their rescuers. [Applause and cheering.]70

Many prominent figures in the Protestant church penned treatises expanding on this new American mission to the world. The Congregationalist clergyman Josiah Strong wrote a widely-read book entitled Our Country, which argued that:

. . . God, with infinite wisdom and skill is training the Anglo-Saxon race for an hour to come in the world’s future. . . the final competition of races, for which the Anglo-Saxon is being schooled. . . . having developed peculiarly aggressive traits calculated to impress its institutions upon mankind.

Strong was not unconscious of the effect that these “aggressive traits” would have on other peoples. The divine plan for the civilization of the world would inevitably lead the agents of that

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plan “... to dispossess many weaker races, assimilate others, and mold the remainder, until ... [they] has Anglo-Saxonized mankind.”

Other ministers placed less emphasis on racial theories, focusing instead on the universal appeal of American ideals. Reverend David Gregg of Brooklyn, for example, depicted an American nation possessed of unique and universal values following a righteous path for the good of humanity. Soon after the declaration of war against Spain, he laid out his conception of America’s “war aims transcen[ding] merely parochial interests:”

My fellow-citizens, our motto must be ‘America for the world,’ for God, in Jesus Christ, has given us, who are Americans, principles which are not local, but universal. ... Our national ideals lace and interlace into the interests of broad humanity. ... [The American cause] is out-and-out altruistic. There is no revenge in it. In is not mercenary in the least atom. It is the principle from Alpha to Omega. If there were no Christ and Christianity[,] it could never be. It partakes of the brotherhood of man.

The diverse and variegated arguments for American imperialism in the late nineteenth century contained appeals to the American mission, civilizational uplift, and racial superiority. They routinely conflated the interests of the United States and the interests of all the other peoples of the world. A deeper treatment of this obviation will appear in Section Four, in the context of an analysis of American exceptionalism.

Imperialists maintained that an American form of colonialism, possessing American values, could transcend the brutal experience of other imperial encounters. In 1898, James Fernald declared in his aptly titled book, The Imperial Republic, that in pursuing a “blessing for the world” Americans must “do that new thing among nations – to make an imperial domain a

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72 David Gregg, “The National Crisis, or God’s Purposes Worked Out Through International Relations,” quoted in Ibid., 154-155.
republic.”73 American colonial administrators in the Philippines, according to Michael Adas, “were convinced that, defying all prior experience, they could transform colonial domination into a grand development project that would empower and enrich the subjugated peoples.”74 In the imperialist mind, the American mission was best fulfilled by attaining power and influence, so to better spread American values in a direct fashion. The anti-imperialist platform reversed the order of this causal relationship.

The Imperialist Riposte – The Preeminence of Principles

For the anti-imperialists, the principles of American democracy had to be upheld if American influence were to continue its rightful advance across the world. If they those principles were betrayed, the United States called the greatest of hypocrites, or in Carl Schurz’s vivid words, “rapacious land-grabbers posing as unselfish champions of freedom and humanity.” In his and other anti-imperialists’ estimations, this loss of moral authority would constitute the most serious breach of the American mission. If Americans could “no long be trusted . . . how will that cause of civilization fare which consists in the credit of domestic institutions, of the government, by, and for the people, for which the American people are above all things responsible, and the maintenance of which is above all things their duty and mission?”75 The principles of America existed apart from America as a nation. The continued progress of the nation depended on its adherence to these presumably universalist principles.

Members of the anti-imperialist movement mined American history for its exhortations to self-government and democracy. They modeled their rhetoric on documents such as the

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75 Carl Schurz, “Thoughts on American Imperialism,” *The Century* 56 (1899), 783.
Declaration of Independence, Washington’s Farewell Address, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural. Lincoln’s words of warning that “Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves, and, under a just God, cannot long retain it” served as the epigraph for many anti-imperialist publications.

Some anti-imperialists drew explicit comparisons between the Filipino independence movement and the American Revolution. The platform of the Chicago branch of the Anti-Imperialist League denounced military action in the Philippines for “extinguish[ing] the spirit of 1776 in those islands.” William Jennings Bryan declared that America’s mission was to spread liberty throughout the world by virtue of its status as an exemplary model, “without the use of the sword or the Gatling gun.”

These arguments were based in a particular interpretation of American history. Where the imperialists saw an America defined by its continual expansion, the anti-imperialists saw themselves as conservative guardians of America’s true mission, fending off an imperialist agenda which was radically opposed to the nation’s anti-colonial history. On a larger scale, the anti-imperialists viewed America’s rise to wealth and prominence as providential and vouchsafed by its adherence to foundational values. But with the advent of an imperialist agenda, the United States had approached a turning-point where it may either continue upwards, spreading its influence over the world by its “exemplary” example, or fall back into history and be governed by the historical law that all empires inevitably fall. The cautionary example of Rome’s imperial overreach was frequently employed here. Anti-imperialist addresses typically ended with a call to national renewal in which the speaker reminded the audience of America’s

glorious when its ideals were upheld and the hand of Providence guided its chosen community on the path to wealth, power, and influence over the world.

Most anti-imperialist proclamations, like American jeremiad sermons, followed this tripartite pattern. They established the image of an esteemed past, contrasted that past’s goodness with the present’s degeneracy, and concluded with a hopeful reassurance that Americans’ better nature – embodied in their policy prescriptions – would ultimately triumph. Both the jeremiad and these proclamations contained what Bercovitch calls the “paradoxical realization” of both imminent threat and prophetic hope in future renewal.\(^\text{78}\)

**“America’s Mission” – 1899**

William Jennings Bryan’s speech “America’s Mission” is an archetypal anti-imperialist jeremiad. This link between this speech and the rhetorical form is most apparent when Bryan refers to America’s divinely-ordained mission to the world. He illustrates his interpretation of the disparity between this mission and an imperialist agenda, using religious imagery to drive his point home. This speech provides an especially rich source because it represents a transitional moment in the history of the jeremiad. Despite the heavily religious context in which the jeremiad emerged, most other anti-imperialists utilized the structure of the jeremiad without the overt Biblical imagery favored by “The Great Commoner.” As a model, “America’s Mission” provides a window into the broader anti-imperialist narrative and the jeremiadic tradition from which it emerged. The wide-ranging implications and consequences of narrative choice and narrative construction will be featured in the upcoming section.

Bryan begins by attacking the imperialists for their smug certitude that destiny is on their side. He compares his opponents’ hubris with other predictions that “once wore the hue of

destiny, but which failed.” His cast of boastful failures shifts seamlessly from the religious to the historical, illuminating similar shifts in the content of the jeremiad. Bryan begins with Pharaoh, who in his pride thought he could pursue the Israelites across the dry Red Sea, and Belshazzar, the last king of Babylon whose fate was “written on the wall.” Following them are the historical conquerors Abderrahman, Napoleon Bonaparte, and King George III. In each case, the victory seemed clear, but each villain “saw too small an arc of the circle of events.” This application of biblical precedent to contemporary events was a pervasive trope in the jeremiad. The Puritans especially cautioned their audiences to heed the example of the stiff-necked Israelites, who lost their chosen status in God’s eyes through their disobedience.

Past and Present

Having dispatched with the argument by destiny, Bryan continues into another common discursive pattern of the anti-imperialists. He establishes a virtuous American past in which its “foundational values” were followed, contrasting that glorified past with a debased present. “What is the Nation’s purpose?” he asks. “The main purpose of the Founders of our government was to secure for themselves and for posterity the blessings of liberty, and that purpose has been faithfully followed up to this time.” He then lists the benefits of faithful adherence to the founders’ ideals, such as uninterrupted growth, moral influence over the world, and freedom from imperialism and militarism.

Many anti-imperialist figures – even otherwise irreligious ones – discussed this halcyon American past using spiritually-charged vocabularies. In his Chicago address, Schurz spends the first few pages discussing the “extraordinary favors . . . bestowed by Providence upon the

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79 Bryan, “America’s Mission,” 34.
American people.” Anti-imperialists presented an idealized American past, made possible by adherence to its foundational values.

Many writers spoke reverentially of the giants of American history. In his Presidents Day address, Schurz dwelt on the role George Washington played in providing “the most perfect model of a republican chief magistrate in the history of the world,” proclaiming that “Surely no other nation has ever been so singularly blessed.” Anti-imperialists quoted freely from Lincoln, especially his injunction that “Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves, and under a just God cannot long retain it.” In the anti-imperialist narrative, empires inevitably fell, but a chosen nation could transcend this historical pattern and continue to advance so long as it remained true to its sacred principles.

This relationship grew especially pronounced vis-à-vis the corrupt realpolitik and colonialism of the European powers. Whereas imperialists viewed the British Empire as a positive model of Anglo-Saxons’ “civilizing genius,” their opponents saw only the corruptions which inevitably followed imperial policy. The platform of the Chicago branch of the Anti-Imperialist League opens with the stirring words, “We hold that the policy known as imperialism is hostile to liberty and tends toward militarism, an evil from which it has been our glory to be free.”

To the claim that British imperialism was a just means of spreading civilization, Schurz answered that despite appearances, “under the policy of conquest and territorial aggrandizement the British government did fall into a very grievous state of profligacy and corruption, from

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81 Ibid., 5.
which it emerged only after a long period of effort. Whether, or how, our democratic government would emerge from such a state is, to say the least, an open question.” Many anti-imperialist pamphlets are entitled “Republic or Empire,” which presented these two systems as mutually exclusive. This sentiment was especially strong among German-American immigrants – Carl Schurz among them – many of whom had emigrated to escape the militarism of their former native land. Schurz himself often emphasized this irreconcilability. He clearly argued that America’s dabbling in colonial adventures would quickly bring about a “demoralization” of American democracy:

... there are things which may be done by monarchical or aristocratic governments without making them less strong as monarchies or aristocracies, but which cannot be done by a democracy ... without fatally demoralizing it as a democracy; and that one of those things is the arbitrary ruling of foreign populations as subjects. . . .

In the same vein, the Supreme Court Justice David Brewer laid out this view with special emphasis on British-style imperialism:

The consent of the governed was only a little factor in English life when she first reached out her hand to subdue and control other races. . . . With us the case is different. We stand consecrated to the single political idea of government by the consent of the governed. To introduce into the life of the nation the other though of government by force is, at the very outset, to precipitate a conflict which, sooner or later, must inevitably result in disaster.

William Jennings Bryan, in his characteristic style, proposed similar ideas infused with Biblical imagery:

Other nations may dream of wars of conquest and of distant dependencies governed by external force; not so with the United States. The fruits of imperialism, be they bitter or sweet, must be left to the subjects of monarchy. This is the one tree of which citizens of a

85 Schurz, “Thoughts on American Imperialism,” 786
86 Schirmer, 176.
republic may not partake. It is the voice of the serpent, not the voice of God, that bids us eat.  

Two prevalent themes of anti-imperialist discourse emerge in these lines: the innocence of the young republic and foreign temptations which, if indulged, would corrupt that innocence. This dichotomy emphasized the supposedly vast difference between the Old World and the New. Many contemporary historians have placed such declarations in the context of a pervasive belief in American exceptionalism which “. . . was often articulated through self-laudatory contrasts with the European societies it was seen to have left behind and to be destined to replace in the vanguard of human development.”

Several anti-imperialists imagined the temptation to annex the Philippines as a latter-day version of Christ’s trial in the wilderness. Charles Francis Adams imagines imperialists as the Devil, promising Jesus the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worship. Adams ponders what would have happened if the Messiah, instead of rebuking the Devil, had “seen the proposition as a new Mission, - thought, in fact, that he heard a distinct call to Duty.” Adams imagines Christ hurrying down the mountain, assembling a stock of weapons, and going forth to conquer. This course, in Adams’s estimation, would be “exactly - what Mohammed did six centuries later!”

**The Threat of Declension**

This theme of impending disaster was also a crucial element in anti-imperialist propaganda. Writers were very explicit about dire consequences awaiting America if the she

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89 William Jennings Bryan, “Naboth’s Vineyard,” Republic or Empire, 28.
91 See political cartoon, Appendix 3.
continued to pursue an imperialistic agenda. In this view, America was “consecrated to the single political idea” of democratic government. If that idea were compromised, then discord and decline were sure to follow.

In a satirical piece of dystopia fiction, the ardent anti-imperialist Mark Twain writes in the voice of a dissident historian a thousand years in a future where the United States has lost all traces of its former democratic spirit. The piece is entitled “The Fall of the Great Republic” and tells an apocalyptic story of the consequences of America’s “conquest days” in which “There was no principle but commercialism, no patriotism but of the pocket.” Twain, along with many other anti-imperialists, feared that pervasive colonial adventures in far-flung lands would inculcate an alliance between the trusts, the politicians, and the military in America. They feared that it would set a precedent which was anathema to the values of the nation as they understood them.

**Prophetic Exhortation in a Crucial Time**

Having established a conceptualization of a glorified past, and the consequences of a militaristic future, anti-imperialist exhortations concluded by inviting the audience to reflect on its own crucial moment in American history. Many writers placed the imperialism debates alongside other such crises of American values as the abolitionist movement and the Civil War. As we have seen, many anti-imperialists cut their political teeth fighting against slavery. It is understandable that many of them would see imperialism as a similar threat, or insidious “compromise” of America’s stated values of self-government.

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In an address before the annual Meeting of Progressive Friends, William Lloyd Garrison Jr. sought to rouse his audience through such comparisons:

There are times in the histories of nations when the common languages of truth and soberness seems weak and inadequate. Then the seers and prophets, the Isaiahs and Jeremiahs, are needed to arouse a slumbering people from lethargy to instant action. Such a period was the anti-slavery days of storm and stress, still fresh in the minds of many of my hearers.

Garrison channels the prophetic fury of his father, exhorting listeners to heed the words of he and other Jeremiahs who warn America of imperialist “foes of freedom, insidious and plausible,” who are “deceiving the elect” with their cunning words of destiny, duty, and civilization.94 Whereas imperialists saw entropy as the primary threat to a dynamic young nation, anti-imperialists focused on policies which threatened to corrupt America’s principles and her national soul. Within this worldview, if these principles were compromised – principles which were fundamentally irreconcilable with imperial policies – then America would fail as an experiment in democracy. Many commentators went further still. They maintained that such a failure would have disastrous world-historical consequences.

For many anti-imperialists, the American nation had reached a crucial moment where the fate of its soul was in jeopardy, and with it the opportunity to participate in the regeneration of the world. Bishop John Lancaster Spalding of the Chicago branch of the Anti-Imperialist League declared that, “[i]f we fail, the world fails; if we succeed, we shall do more for the good of all men than if we conquered all the islands and continents.”95 Statements like this linked the fate of America with that of the world. Of course, imperialist exhortations also conflated the particular

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95 Spalding, Address at CAIL, Chicago Liberty Meeting, April 30, 1899, quoted in Hilfrich (2000), 194.
success of America with universal progress. Recall Gregg’s belief that “God, in Jesus Christ, has given . . . Americans, principles which are not local, but universal.”

Prophetic Hope

Despite their dire predictions, however, anti-imperialists typically ended their writings and addresses on a note of reassurance. Having warned their audiences of the woeful consequences of imperialism, they expressed a faith that America would repent of its evil ways and return to its providential, chosen path. As we shall see, this too was a common feature of the jeremiad sermon. There, the preacher would forcefully remind the congregation of the danger of being forsaken by an angry God. Still, the sermon would traditionally end with a prophetic reassurance of the ultimate success of the divine mission undertaken by the community of saints.

Similarly, anti-imperialists would remind audiences of America’s past successes in the face of tyranny and slavery, exhorting them to take part in the fight and expressing confidence in victory. Garrison declared that, “In 1776 and 1861 our country emerged triumphant from its grapples with oppression” and hoped that Americans would rouse themselves to triumph over imperialism, which represented an even “more desperate conflict” than the Revolution or the Civil War.

Reverend A. A. Berle paraphrases Wendell Phillips to provide a spiritual reassurance of the anti-imperialists’ ultimate success:

We shall not be discouraged and we shall ultimately triumph. Truth has often been on the scaffold before while triumphant Error was on the throne. But the years of God are God’s

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96 David Gregg, “The National Crisis, or God’s Purposes Worked Out Through International Relations,” quoted in Many Are Chosen, 154-155.
and Truth’s. America will remain free. And because America is free, Cuba and the Philippines shall be free also.⁹⁸

Even as anti-imperialists lamented the sins of their community, they invoked and reaffirmed the image of an exceptional American nation with the mission of regenerating the world. While they bitterly opposed imperialist conceptualization of threats to America as a physical nation, they took threats to the nation’s principles very seriously. This rhetorical stance allowed them to simultaneously denounce the behavior and policies of their community while reaffirming its essential goodness. In this effort, they drew widely from the rhetorical tradition of the America jeremiad.

SECTION FOUR:

Forms of the Jeremiad

This section will briefly trace the form of the jeremiad as it developed from its ancient biblical antecedents to colonial New England where it acquired its particularly American flavor. Along the way, important themes and vocabularies contained within the rhetoric of the jeremiad will be explored for their salience and their socio-political consequences. In the American context – both in the seventeenth century Puritans and fin de siècle anti-imperialists – the jeremiad has always reaffirmed the notions of chosenness and errand. This idea of America as

chosen, or “set apart somehow, with a special relationship to the Creator, has constituted one of the nation’s most enduring self-images and has played an important role in the nation’s founding” as well as its ideological construction. This long-standing, flexible idea of the “Chosen Nation” has its roots in a distinct brand of Protestant millennialism. As American history progressed away from the colonies of New England, these explicitly religious sentiments morphed into less sectarian terms such as national mission and American exceptionalism. While keeping focus on the imperialism debates of 1898-1900, this section will treat these themes as they occur within the structure of the jeremiad, paying special attention to how they have framed a discourse which reflects and affects the national identity of America.

The Biblical Jeremiah

The jeremiad sermon traces its roots to the Book of Jeremiah. Tradition holds that the eponymous prophet wrote in the last days of the Kingdom of Judah before Jerusalem was sacked, Solomon’s Temple razed, and the captives carried off into exile. In the text, Jeremiah exhorts his fellow Israelites to abandon their worship of idols and repent, for fear of God’s coming judgment. When these calls go unheeded, God tells Jeremiah to cease praying on his peoples’ behalf, for “My anger and my wrath shall be poured out on this place, on human beings and animals, on the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground; it will burn and not be quenched.”

The ancient text itself establishes several themes which will reoccur in various forms throughout the history of the jeremiad sermon. First and most obviously apparent is the issue of covenant. Jeremiah’s denunciation of the kings of Judah is motivated by their breaking of the

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101 Jer. 7:20 NRSV
Israelites’ covenant with God. This covenant established a conditional relationship between the people and an omnipotent deity. As in a two-way contract, the people could, through their disobedience, stand in breach of contract lose their place as God’s chosen people.

We have seen the anxiety that this entails as an important theme in anti-imperialist literature, where self-appointed “Isaiahs and Jeremiahs” warn of the calamities that will occur if America betrays the promise of her founding principles. The notion of a perpetually tenuous relationship with the divine is an important and enduring trope. And, as we have seen, it carries a sense of world-historical consequences.

Jeremiah is known for his stern denunciations of Judah’s violation of the Lord’s covenant. While the jeremiad bears his name, he stands in a long tradition of prophetic criticism where these themes of denunciation feature heavily. Given a covenantal relationship wherein a god demands certain behaviors from his chosen people, the question of whether that chosen people is keeping up its end of the deal inevitably arises. Controversies break out over whether this is the case, and prophets arise to call the community back to what – in their interpretation – a fulfilled covenant would look like. Given these rhetorical boundaries, we begin to see the particularities of the jeremiadic form emerging.

The Puritan Jeremiad

The Puritans’ new interpretation of the jeremiad was fitted to their colonial situation and their conceptions of their social and spiritual communities. Sermons preached to European congregations may have exhorted them to greater obedience, but without a pervasive mission, or errand, for the community to accomplish, there was little room for a prophetic sense of hope.

European congregations did not have a single galvanizing endeavor around which a rhetorically-based social cohesion could be built.

The Puritans who undertook the dangerous Atlantic crossing, however, had very different ideas of where they fit as a people within God’s world and God’s history. They were a peculiar people, possessing a particular divine mission to establish a New Zion in the New World. Physically displacing themselves from the corruptions of Europe, they intended to build a community which would serve as a model for all humanity. The colonial jeremiads focused community attentions, situating their communal and social efforts within Biblical frameworks of meaning. Freely drawing on images from the Old and New Testaments, Puritan leaders could relegate all events – both positive and negative – within this framework. Indeed, the rhetoric of the jeremiad positively thrived on transmuting crises into reaffirmations of the errand and of the community’s efforts to fulfill it.

The Puritan belief in their own community’s chosenness can be traced back to British national election. In the mid-sixteenth century, John Foxe wrote Acts and Monuments of Matters Most Special and Memorable, better known as the “Book of the Martyrs.” Besides giving account of the persecutions suffered by Protestants under the reign of Mary I, the text explicitly identified the English people as the inheritors of the Hebrew covenant with God. To bolster this inheritance, Foxe included stories which situated England in God’s sacred history. He gave an account of Joseph of Arimathea bringing the gospel to England, as well as Emperor Constantine’s birth in England to a British mother. Arrayed against this new elect nation were the forces of the Antichrist in the guise of the Pope’s Roman prelates. Yet, the binding of the Beast had already begun to take place, and Foxe assured his audience that God would use

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England to bring the apostolic light to the world. This account presented a narrative which placed the English nation at the center of God’s history, which became “indelibly imprinted in the minds of all Englishmen, fostering pride in being English, and making them conscious of being a people set apart from all others.”\textsuperscript{104} John Burrow goes so far as to call it “the greatest single influence on English Protestant thinking of the late Tudor and early Stuart period” after the Bible.\textsuperscript{105} Less than a century later, the Puritans would mine this tradition in their efforts to differentiate themselves still further as the vanguard of God’s history.

**The Inherited, Imperiled Covenant**

In England, Puritans took their name from their desire to purify the Church of England from its Roman Catholic vestiges in the wake of an incomplete English Reformation. A small number of these dissenters become Separating Puritans, breaking away from the state church and earning the ire of the King and ecclesiastical authorities. Some of these Separatists took the next step, physically distancing themselves from England altogether by founding a new colony in Massachusetts.

An exploration of this aspect of Puritan history is necessary because it provides insight into the colonial Puritan community’s conception of itself. On board the \textit{Arbella}, John Winthrop delivered his famous sermon on “A Model of Christian Charity,” from which the phrase “city on a hill” gained its prominence in the American canon. The sermon itself is a prototypical American jeremiad, establishing the community’s self-image as the chosen vanguard of God’s historical forces. This and other sermons drew direct parallels between the Puritan community’s own covenant with God and that of the ancient Israelites.

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\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.

This comparison also provided a cautionary example. Winthrop, speaking in the voice of Jeremiah, makes the punishment for breaking God’s covenant bitterly clear: “‘the Lord cast them off,’ to ‘laugh at their Calamities until He has consumed them utterly, so that there shall be no Remnant, nor escaping.’” A covenantal relationship between a deity and his chosen people implicitly carries the possibility of that community’s failing to live up to its side of the bargain. However the Book of Jeremiah does promise that there will be a remnant left, and that God will restore Israel to its pre-exilic glory. In chapter 33, the prophet proclaims that the Lord will establish a new and immutable covenant:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.107

Jeremiah’s promise of future redemption for Israel posed a hermeneutical problem for the Puritan community which saw itself as the inheritors of the Hebrews’ chosen status. Winthrop and other Christian commentators identified Jeremiah’s new audience as:

‘. . .the spiritual Israel, the entire community of the elect, past, present, and to come – and what he said concerned not temporal affairs, but the promise of ‘Christ the Messiah . . . and their eternal deliverance.108

Through this interpretation, the Puritans could assume for themselves the chosen status once reserved for the Israelites. The prominent jurist William Stoughton proclaimed that God had “singled out New England . . . above any nation or people in the world.” Moreover, the colonists who participated in the Great Migration became the vanguard of a godly movement,

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106 John Winthrop, quoted in Bercovitch, The American Jeremiad, 32.
107 Jer. 33:14-15 NRSV
108 Quoted in Bercovitch, 32.
fulfilling their errand of establishing a New Jerusalem in a diabolical wilderness. This task carried with it great responsibilities, which the Puritan ministers never failed to emphasize.

John Winthrop, after emphasizing the importance for the community’s need to be “knitt more nearly together in the Bonds of brotherly affection” on these foreign shores, ends his sermon by situating their enterprise on the vanguard of God’s sacred plan for the world and for history:

For wee must consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are uppon us. Soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our God in this worke wee haue undertaken, and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. Wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the wayes of God, and all professors for God's sake. Wee shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till wee be consumed out of the good land whither wee are a goeing.  

In this interpretation, both the eyes of God and the eyes of the world were fixated on the success or failure of the Puritan’s mission. Winthrop ends his sermon by exhorting the community to keep God’s commandments lest they suffer the fate of the Israelites. This constant tension between eternal expectations and daily reminders about the community’s failure to live up to those expectations created a dynamic of almost continual crisis. Such anxiety over the state of the community is an inevitable by-product of a widely-held belief in a community’s having an externally prescribed errand. Impending crisis and the self-reflection that attends it became constant themes in the Puritan and later in American discourse.

The word “crisis” derives from the Greek *krisis*, meaning a time of decision. John Eperjesi writes that “The rhetoric of national mission has historically functioned as a powerful ideological response to the appearance of social, political, or economic crisis, and part of that

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response entails both the production and policing of the crisis itself.”  Bercovitch takes this idea even further when he argues that “crisis was the social norm [the jeremiad] sought to inculcate. The very concept of errand, after all, implied a state of unfulfillment” (23). This perpetual state of unfulfillment helps explain the particularly American fixation with self-appraisal. The continual debates over whether America is adhering to its sanctified mission are themselves indicative of a continually emergent national identity. Baldwin applies this idea to individuals when he writes that “The necessity of Americans to achieve an identity is a historical and a present personal fact [that is] The one thing that all Americans have in common.”

The final words of John Winthrop’s sermon are taken from Micah, encouraging the congregation to, “choose life that wee, and our seede may liue, by obeyeing His voyce and cleaveing to Him, for Hee is our life and our prosperity.” This obviates the distinction “between preparation for salvation and social conformity,” where “the fear for one’s soul is a function of historical progress, moral discipline a means simultaneously to personal and social success, and success a matter of constant anxiety about the venture into the future.” These sermons blended religious and political identities, reminding the congregation of its covenant with God and exhorting the listeners to better fulfill the errand that that relationship entailed.

Having established norms through Scripture and demonstrated the community’s violation of those norms, the prototypical American jeremiad then resolves this ambivalence by placing this tension within a larger notion of mission and progress. This rhetorical turn “posits a movement from promise to experience – from the ideal of community to the shortcomings of community

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life – and thence forward, with prophetic assurance, toward a resolution that incorporates (as it transforms) both the promise and the condemnation.” The jeremiad as a mode of exhortation situated the community within a religiously-inspired narrative of millennialism. The enduring vocabularies and themes of this form would outlast the Puritan colonies, informing the national identity of the United States of America.

The Narrative Framework of the Jeremiad

The anti-imperialist proclamations were deeply inspired by the rhetorical tradition of the American jeremiad. This should not come as a surprise, given its rich history and resonance in the American canon. The jeremiad as a form carries with it certain rhetorical assumptions which American audiences in 1898-1900 would have recognized and responded to. William Lloyd Garrison explicitly drew connections between the imperialism debates and past efforts to “arouse a slumbering people from lethargy to instant action” like the abolitionist movement. By creating continuity with the past, participants in the imperialism debates utilized and revised the tradition of the jeremiad.

In doing so, they inevitably drew on the vocabularies and worldviews implicit in the jeremiad. Even though Winthrop’s “city on a hill” had long since passed away with the Puritan experiment, religiously-inspired themes and vocabularies continued to be utilized in describing the American nation (e.g. chosenness, mission, crisis, and prophetic hope). It is important to remember that the American jeremiad did not only contain resonant vocabularies such as these,

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but also a clearly defined narrative of how an American community might conceptualize itself in “a fusion of secular and sacred history.”¹²⁰ A thorough analysis of the jeremiadic tradition may lend insight into this dual nature of American national identity.

At its most basic level, a narrative is a story which offers an interpretive connection between contemporary events and conceptions of the past and future.¹²¹ A historical narrative contains “a structure of relationships by which events . . . are endowed with a meaning by being identified as parts of an integrated whole.”¹²² In the context of the jeremiad, the community’s relationship to its divine covenant provides this unifying “integrated whole” or “meta-code.”¹²³

At the individual level, a narrative structure provides a person with the ability to store events in a meaningful framework. The continual process of forming this autobiographical narrative “makes individual lives comprehensible by configuring events into sequences and . . . articulating a sense of self grounded in the particularities of one’s community.”¹²⁴ Since even an individual’s memory formation is grounded in a social context, however, questions of a meaning-making self must eventually turn to questions of a meaning-making community.¹²⁵

Stephen Crites calls such wide-ranging explanatory narratives sacred stories, “. . . not so much because gods are celebrated in them, but because men’s sense of self and world is created through them. . . . these are stories that orient the life of people through time . . . to the great powers that establish the reality of their world. . . . [they] are not like monuments that men

¹²⁰ Bercovitch, 9.
¹²³ Ibid. 1.
¹²⁴ Murphy, “Two American Jeremiads,” 91.
behold, but like dwelling-places. People live in them.”126 In his theories on “narrative theology,” Stanley Hauerwas explores the capability of shared narratives to “form a people” by grounding their collective identity in resonant and recognizable symbols.127 He argues that the primary goal of any political system is to “offer its people a sense of participation in an adventure. For finally,” he continues, “what we seek is not power, or security, or equality, or even dignity, but a sense of worth gained from participation and contribution to a common adventure. Indeed, our ‘dignity’ derives exactly from our sense of having played a part in such a story.”128 For the Puritans, colonial life was filled with hardships, but “what are these compared with the magnificence of leading an exodus of saints to found a city on a hill, for the eyes of the world to behold?”129 With its emphasis on the errand of God’s chosen people building a city on a hill in the midst of a diabolical “howling wilderness,” the American jeremiad represents one particularly potent sacred story.

Scholars have proposed different vocabularies to describe the narratives that shape a community’s sense of itself. The study of such stories can be problematic, because of their subtle and sotto voce nature. Wesley Kort writes that, “When most effective, plot draws little attention to itself; it seems unforced by tone, unplotted, natural.”130 The creation of any narrative necessarily involves the selection of certain aspects of reality and the relegation of others. This is true for something as simple as a person recounting the day’s events. Some events will be emphasized, some given passing notice, and others left out. When we apply these ideas to the social, communal, and political realms, any presented narrative serves as grist for the scholar’s

128 Ibid., 13.
129 Miller, Errand into the Wilderness, 15.
mill. When the focus of a story is a community’s sense of its own history, both events that are included and those that are excluded are significant. In Bercovitch’s estimation, it is the “gaps and silences in narrative structure . . . [that] demarcate the limits of ideology.”

A jeremiad provides the audience with an explanation of how a community arrived at the present moment in time, what the significance of that moment is, and where the community may go from there, depending on its conduct. The interpretation of this or any other sacred story, however, is often the site of disagreement. While each sermon may be considered the work of an individual, they are written and presented as collective efforts at meaning-making. This effort to impose meaning on reality must inevitably deal with the issue of power and social capital. “In seeking and being granted rights to a lengthy verbal contribution, narrators assert their authority to tell. . . . To narrate is to make a bid for a kind of power.” Looking around them, Puritan leaders and anti-imperialists saw a loathsome disregard for hitherto esteemed values and practices.

In the act of preaching a jeremiad, a speaker is telling the story of the community in medias res. The story presents a current state of degeneracy in contrast to a halcyon, virtuous past. The dynamic tension that is established by this comparison primes the audience for concrete exhortations to reform. In whatever historical context, the jeremiad is more than an esoteric religious treatise; it is a call to political and social action. In Andrew Murphy’s words:

Discussions of past virtue and present degeneracy are never presented simply as a series of empirical statements about the American past; always implicit or explicit is a call to reverse the errors of the present and to reappropriate founding virtues. . . . This call to action and reform is a crucial part of the jeremiad’s rhetorical power, as it allows a backward-looking form of rhetoric to speak to future hopes and dreams; and keeps the focus on degeneration from founding virtues from becoming overly pessimistic.

133 Murphy, “Two American Jeremiads,” 89.
In the American jeremiad, a sense of anxiety over the unfulfilled errand combines with a sense of hope and vigor. The form obviates the distinction between the spiritual and civic exhortations, lending great – indeed, eternal – significance to the hard work of establishing a colony.\(^{134}\) It exhorts community members to constantly reflect on whether their conduct is in keeping with a fulfilled covenant. This ideological focus allowed the Puritans to achieve the “delicate balance” of “counterpois[ing] novelty with continuity” and allowed them to establish politically and ecclesiastically-linked colonies throughout New England.\(^{135}\) Yet this reflection could only take place within certain discursive boundaries, prescribed by the form in which the rhetorical exhortation to reform took place. In lamenting the sins of the community, the jeremiad bypassed the question of whether the community was set apart from the *goyim* of the world. Put another way, the question was not “‘Who are we?’ but, almost in deliberate evasion of that question, the old prophetic refrain: ‘When is our errand to be fulfilled? How long, O Lord, how long?’” This rhetorical form “invariably joined lament and celebration in reaffirming America’s mission.”\(^{136}\)

As this rhetorical form evolved and spread from the colonial Puritan context to a more regional and eventually national one, it gradually shed its explicitly religious vocabularies. The imperialism debates of 1898-1900 represent a transitional moment in the history of the jeremiadic tradition, and the sacred story of America which is expressed in that rhetoric.

Anti-imperialist Edwin Mead depicted Americans’ decision as resonating across space and history:

> If [the American people] have not the courage and the greatness of heart to settle [the question of imperialism] rightly, they will stand condemned in history of making the republic a murderer – more than a murderer of men, a murderer of the cause of human

\(^{134}\) Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 33 (emphasis mine).

\(^{135}\) McKenna, 1.

liberty, the holy cause whose chief custodian and champion in the world God had appointed them to be.137

Disputants on both sides began and ended their argument from the presupposition that America had the opportunity to be a central actor in world affairs. And most went further than that. Imperialists maintained that America’s righteous power could transcend the petty realpolitik practiced by European nations. Anti-imperialists wrote that America’s moral authority had the potential to regenerate the world through its exemplary example of democracy and freedom, which would inevitably be emulated throughout the world. These diametrically opposed policies were both feasible in the American political discourse because of the ambiguity inherent in the dialectic structure of American exceptionalism.138

American Exceptionalism

Exceptionalism is an idea which posits that the historical course of one’s community is “different from the universal tendencies of history, the ‘normal’ fate of nations, the laws of historical mechanics itself.”139 As we have seen, the anti-imperialists believed the United States capable of transcending the historical laws determining empires’ rise and fall through its adherence to transcendent values. This is a secular manifestation of the jeremiadic notions of chosenness and errand. Exceptionalism eliminates the sectarian need for a specific deity’s covenant, while still positing an almost supernatural place for the community in world history. The dialectic structure of exceptionalism simultaneously contains the prerogative to assume an active crusading mission and to avoid contact with the world for fear of being corrupted by it.

Disputants agreed on the goal of a reigning American influence over the world. It was only the means of attaining that goal that were bitterly contested. The imperialism debates took place within the bounds of a widespread consensus on American exceptionalism.

But what exactly does exceptionalism mean in this context? A collection of essays entitled “Is American Different?” wrestles with the question of whether the historical circumstances of the American nation differ qualitatively from that of others. To be sure, the foundational story of the United States is peculiar, consisting of a relatively costless conquest (for the colonists) of a resource-rich continent, and a successful anti-colonial revolt. And we have seen the consistent belief among Americans that their society stood at the forefront of history, accompanied by God’s blessing. But these sentiments of distinction and superiority are differences in degree and not in kind. The French belief in their génie français or the German Kultur also placed their respective nations at, in Thomas Paine’s words, “the birthday of a new world.” Scholars must conclude with Daniel Rodgers that “Pride and providentialism are too widely spread to imagine them American peculiarities.”

But exceptionalism is not merely the belief in one’s own difference and superiority. It is an explicit belief in one’s ability to transcend the sameness of others. Exceptionalism posits “deliverance from a common lot,” Joyce Appleby writes, “There are no exceptions without well-understood generalizations or norms in contrast to which the exception commands attention.”

We saw this tendency in the imperialism debates when anti-imperialists argued that it was only through adherence to America’s distinct foundational values that it could transcend the historical laws of rise and decline. The Puritans interpreted their Massachusetts colony as an elect

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141 Rodgers, “Exceptionalism,” 22.
community working to usher in a millennial age. William Jennings Bryan and other anti-imperialists saw the United States tasked with “a grander destiny than has opened before any other race . . . [to] imprint its flag upon the hearts of all who long for freedom.” Both these notions of errand and mission carried with them the particularist and universalist elements which compose the dialectic nature of the exceptionalism.

It may be too reductive to isolate American ideology to these two paradoxical extremes. Rodgers identifies numerous formative ideas within the “skein of tropes” that make up American national identity through history. Yet even when other tropes are taken into account, the fundamental ambivalence of exceptionalism remains. James Moorhead argues that this “oxymoron” has its basis in the biblical passages affirming Israel’s covenant:

God conferred singular benefits upon Israel unlike those given to any other nation. Yet the favored people were . . . blessed in order that they might be a blessing and serve as a light to the nations. This universalism was subsequently reinforced by the New Testament vision of Christianity as a religion for all people. The same ambivalence may be read in the numerous statements that located American exceptionalism in the nation’s Protestant culture, republican institutions, and material progress. These attributes, although they found their preeminent embodiment in the Great Republic, were also designed for export to all the nations.

It is as this crossroads of particularism and universalism that the constant debate over American national identity takes place. Hilfrich builds on Daniel Boorstin’s thesis to argue that the ambivalence inherent in the structure of exceptionalism “is a strength of the American political discourse because its rich repertoire facilitates appeals by defenders and opponents of the status quo, thereby making ideological disputes redundant,” which lends “extraordinary stability and

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144 Rodgers, “Exceptionalism,” 22.
continuity [to] the political discourse.”147 The deeply-held notion of exceptionalism creates a rhetorical frame that provides the shared epistemological consensus necessary for the success of such a new and diverse polity as the United States.

Embarking on his studies of American history, Bercovitch writes that he expected to easily dispel the image of the Puritans as the ur-fathers of the American national self-image. “I expected to discover the creation of a national past, the invention of a Puritan tradition commensurate with the needs of a modern republic. Instead, as I traced the act of creation back . . . I found that its roots lay with the Puritans after all.” He argues that their legacy was not religious or institutional – America today is neither Calvinist nor theocratic – but rather symbological:

The Puritans developed a rhetoric that joined . . . aspects of their venture, cultural and territorial, in a vision that was simultaneously distinctive, expansive, spiritual, and secular [which] provided their heirs, in New England first and then the United States, with a useful, flexible, durable, and compelling fantasy of American identity.148

The flexibility and durability of this fantasy was displayed in the imperialism debates as conflicting jeremiads prescribed opposite policies while appealing to the same idea of an American mission. The imperialists and anti-imperialists quarreled over whether America’s mission was aided or hindered by the annexation of the Philippines. Yet both parties mined the enormously resonant tradition of the jeremiad to appeals to their audiences. Their use of this rhetorical form meant that they could not escape from the assumption of chosenness and mission contained within it. At this and other moments of ideological struggle “The ambiguity of American history and traditions was so appealing that even the most implacable foes . . . could not resist citing it for their own purposes.”149 And here we return to the fundamental “solipsism

149 Hilfrich, “Nation and Democracy,” 515.
of . . . United States’ discourse.”¹⁵⁰ Even when Americans purport to discuss the welfare of benighted peoples across the waves, the conversation inevitably turns to whether a policy is in keeping with the nation’s appointed mission and the values contained therein.

CONCLUSION

Long before there was such a thing as the United States, there was a vision and symbol of America, expressed in the rhetoric of the jeremiad. The rhetorical form of the jeremiad endorses that idealized symbol while lamenting the reality when it falls short. It allows leaders and prophets to despair over their community’s degeneracy while still providing a deep sense of hope. The tension inherent in the relationship can engender a formidable dynamism or a solipsistic myopia, or both. The unquestioned notion of the shared mission has proved capable of knitting together communities around common ventures. Dissent and denunciation are allowed their space, yet they are relegated within a rhetorical structure that inevitably affirms the deep hope which is inherent in such a mission.

The rhetoric of the American jeremiad is tempting for its resonance and its widespread appeal. Despite the denunciations, audiences thrill to hear a story which identifies them as members of a providentially select community, called to participate in an adventure whose

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 6.
consequences resonate through sacred and secular history. Even the imperiled and precarious state of that adventure serves to underscore its significance. The languages of American mission have become so ubiquitous in the political discourse that any actor would be foolish to ignore them. And yet to utilize the resonating structure of the jeremiad is to bind one’s words to a powerful consensus of an exceptional community.

This consensus was and continues to be so strong because of its deep rhetorical traditions. As we have seen, the jeremiad provides the discursive structure in which criticism and denunciation of a community become ritualized. In that process of ritualization, the community’s sense of chosenness and mission are explicitly reaffirmed. Dissent is therefore grounded in a prescribed mode of rhetoric which enlists that same dissent in bolstering the community’s foundational consensus. For this reason, American national identity invites “social criticism [since] The summons to dissent enlist[s] radicalism itself in the cause of the American Way.”

This discursive trap may be the source of James Baldwin’s frustration when he laments the American habit of “smashing taboos without thereby managing to be liberated from them.”

With the defeat of William Jennings Bryan in the 1900 election, the debates over imperialism were effectively closed. With that issue momentarily settled “Americans found themselves pursuing policies defined by an aggressive new spirit that blended humanitarian moralism, aggrandizing triumphalism, and crusading ethnocentrism.” Once the so-called “Filipino Insurrection” had been subdued and the activist vision of the American mission vindicated, the United States was free to continue its quest for global leadership and influence. In the post-Cold War world, this goal has become an inarguable reality.

153 McCartney, Power and Progress, 274.
The anti-imperialists fought two major political battles between 1898 and 1900. Each ended in failure. They opposed the ratification of the Paris Peace Treaty and they fought the reelection of William McKinley. The American Anti-Imperialist League continued to operate until 1920, but for all intents and purposes the movement ended with Bryan’s resounding electoral defeat in 1900.

The jeremiad has proven itself as an enduring rhetorical form. There is little evidence to suggest that it will disappear from the American stage. In all likelihood, it would take an unprecedented catastrophe to shake Americans’ assuredness in their own exceptionalism. In present times, this belief in an American mission has shed its most of its religious trappings. Yet the jeremiad as a rhetorical form continues to circumscribe the ways in which Americans conceptualize their identity among the nations of the world.
FIGURE 1: Map of the Philippine Islands

FIGURE 2: Journalist’s rendering of the burning of Caloocan
Source: Schirmer, *Republic or Empire*, 144-145.

FIGURE 3: Cartoon, “The New Temptation on the Mount”

FIGURE 4: Cartoon, “Consent of the Governed”
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