Why the Center Can't Hold: A Diagnosis of Puritanized America

Tom O'Neill

Published by Punctum Books

O'Neill, Tom.
Why the Center Can't Hold: A Diagnosis of Puritanized America.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76509
When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941, I was seven years old. In the early years after World War II, it became a part of American folklore to say: “We’re a peaceful people, slow to take up arms—but once we’re aroused, look out!” I think statements along those lines accurately capture both the mood of us Americans at the moment Pearl Harbor was bombed and the lesson we took from the way hostilities ended some three years and eight months later.

I remember my parents were isolationist on the issue of the war up to the very day of Pearl Harbor. Their generation had been children at the time of the First World War; and as they grew older, they and most all of their generation in America had come to a collective judgment, endorsed by their own parents, that it had been a mistake for Americans to participate in the First World War.

To say as much leaves questions open of how isolationist regarding economics we had been in 1941 as we approached December 7, and questions also of whether our government had ever been genuinely isolationist even politically in the years between the Treaty of Versailles and Pearl Harbor. Putting on hold these complicating issues, it remains fact that we Americans by and large had no desire to enter the Second World War up to December 7. With regard to whether, once aroused, we committed ourselves to victory, there can be no doubt. Everyone living through those days has vivid memories of how hostilities were abruptly concluded less than four years later with gigantic clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, followed by the unconditional surrender of Japan.
Hence, the generalization: Americans are a peaceful people, but
dangerous when attacked.

The problem with taking this generalization as a paradigm
by which to view the American character in general is there’s
so much in our history that won’t fit. (Historian John Toland,
among others, has argued that the lead-up to World War II itself
doesn’t fit very well; and historian William Appleman Williams
titles his discussion of American participation in the Second
World War as “the War for the American Frontier.”1)

In fact, to accommodate the paradigm that finds us a peaceful
people, we’ve had to forget huge chunks of our earlier history, and
retain in memory to fill its place a story we began to nurture near
the earliest days of our arriving here. In this devised story, the
Puritans who arrived at Massachusetts Bay in 1630 were a peace-
loving people who wished simply to be left at liberty to worship
God according to their conscience. While they themselves were
tolerant, back in England their English neighbors had been intol-
erant toward them. (Here there may be some memory-conflation
of Plymouth Rock Pilgrim Separatists with Massachusetts Bay
Colony Puritans. While one can accurately see the two groups
as “cousins,” there were significant differences between them.)

The facts on record for Puritans tell us that Charles the First,
who gave the Puritans a charter to colonize New England, was
desperate to be rid of them. He gave them their charter in 1629;
and twenty years later, their fellow Puritans in England—with
some New England Puritans returning as reinforcements—
beheaded Charles. In the view of Puritans, King Charles had
become an impediment to God’s kingdom, so it was appropriate
he be removed.

Similarly, as mentioned earlier, when Indians in the New
World proved resistant to conversion and to Puritan governance,
you too had to be removed. In 1637, about seven years after the
Puritans arrived, when Puritans looked upon the Connecticut

River Valley and saw its rich agricultural possibilities and saw also that it was native habitat for Pequot Indians, they did what they could to persuade the Pequots to become a “protectorate,” a people protected by the Bay Colony and subservient to it. When the Pequots made clear they had scant interest in letting the Puritans control their lives and land, the Puritans did what they thought natural for those serving in God’s army. After much mutual denunciatory interpretation of each others’ motives, and following upon bloody skirmish, a rumor, and a Pequot refusal to accept a Puritan ultimatum, as noted earlier the Puritans conducted a surprise attack on the offending Pequot village at Mystic Fort:

Thus were they [the Pequots] now at their wits end, who not many hours before exalted themselves in their great pride, threatening and resolving the utter ruin and destruction of all the English, exulting and rejoicing with songs and dances. But God was above them, who laughed his enemies and the enemies of his people to scorn, making them as a fiery oven: Thus were the stout-hearted spoiled, having slept their last sleep, and none of their men could find their hands. Thus did the Lord judge among the heathen, filling the place with dead bodies.²

As recounted in the chapter on wealth, the Puritans killed all the Pequot men, women, and children they could lay hands on. Later they sought out the survivors—Pequots who had not been living at the massacred village—who were seeking to hide themselves, and—with few exceptions—killed them too. Subsequently, if some other Indian tribe found a straggler from among the Pequots and took in that straggler, this was regarded by the Puritans as a hostile act against themselves, and body parts were required by the Puritans as proof the straggler had been executed.

The mindset portrayed here is worth pondering. It must have gone something like this. “Here we are, good Christians,

---

² John Mason, commander of the Puritan forces, qtd. in Segal and Stineback, *Puritans, Indians & Manifest Destiny*, 111.
attempting to establish God’s Kingdom. In God’s Kingdom, to be sure, everyone is free—for the truth will set you free. But these Pequots are resisting the advent of God’s Kingdom. If they would behave as we tell them to, we would treat them with the full measure of charity that it behooves a Christian people to exercise; but they will not behave. Therefore, resolute in defiance, they have sealed their doom.”

John Mason’s account helps us see that by the time the Puritans got around to attempting genocidal action toward the Pequots, Puritans had reconfigured the scene to see their act as defensive. They saw themselves as potential victims. Though historical evidence provides good grounds for thinking it was Puritan land-greed and desire for control that led to bad feelings between the two groups, the sleeping Indians were seen by Puritans as “threatening and resolving the utter ruin and destruction of all the English.” It seems in fact it was this ability to refigure the attacking Puritan as victim that was needed to make their act influential—that is, to turn it into a precedent. Had the killing of Pequots been viewed as aberrational rampage or gross surrender to greed on the part of the Puritans, its importance for America’s development and for the souls of future Americans would have been negligible. As actually retained in Puritan memory (that is, in our memory) as something unrepented and celebrated, it’s been able to become a template for like action in a long series of later encounters.

In my youth in the thirties of the twentieth century, we romanticized the nineteenth-century imperiled homestead on the prairie in our story of westward development. Our version ran along these lines. Here, as they founded western outposts of civilization, our people were domesticating the land, attending church on Sunday, and conducting folk dances and pie-baking contests at the time of harvest. What more sacred image of Christians at peace could one ever hope to see? Yet all was in jeopardy. For savages, half-naked and godless, lurked in the vicinity. These were savages bent on desecration. They were encroaching. Once the harvest party was over, and the happy and celebrating crowd of friendly settlers had dispersed to their several homes, each little house would stand in isolation, defenseless against an immoral and near-invisible enemy—and, yes, the enemy was closer and
more menacing than the industrious settlers might think. Suddenly came the unprovoked and maniacal attack. Thankfully, in the eleventh hour of our romance—in the last chapter or the last reel—our cavalry would arrive, federal guardians of law and order. The savages would be shot down, and civilization could take one further courageous step westward.

That little westward house requires study. I was nearly an adult before it ceased for me to be a symbol of peace and became instead a symbol of violence. I was slow to acknowledge any Indian right to a land they loved as their land of the free and the home of their braves.

Making that acknowledgement, one need not be arguing to “give the land back to the Indians”—nor be claiming immigrants from across the Atlantic should never have ventured here—in order to cast about for an alternative to what we did. Both Roger Williams and the Quakers had in fact conceived an alternative.

Let’s consider again the beginnings. In 1635, a few years after the earliest encounters between Puritans and Indians, Roger Williams was banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony. As mentioned, he was banished in part for insisting Puritans had no warrant to appropriate land from Indians just because they wanted it or just because England’s king had granted it to them; he insisted colonists were bound rather to negotiate in good faith with Indians for it, and to abide by agreements made. This meant the Puritans, as newcomers, were morally bound to seek an honest accommodation with those already using the land—were obliged to recognize Indians as people holding prior title.

To Williams’ fellow Puritans this seemed an extravagantly troublesome position. It wouldn’t just bring Puritans down to the level of Indians, as equals dealing with equals; it would—in a sense—place them lower than Indians. The Puritans would be the petitioners; and it would be in the competence of Indians to grant or deny.

Williams’ appraisal of the facts was rejected by the Puritan leadership; and we can assume a majority of the Puritan community shared in rejecting it. While Massachusetts Colony did require that land purchases from Indians be recorded, the way the matter played out suggests this was more to determine which
Puritan had title to which land than it was a measure to protect Indian rights.

A half century later, in Pennsylvania, Quakers—despised and even hanged in Massachusetts Bay Colony—would take up a position close to the position Williams had taken. While William Penn’s successors in Pennsylvania often ignored the policy he’d laid down, one has to wonder what the history of America (and of the world) would look like if the attitudes of Roger Williams and of William Penn had prevailed. The objection is that the development of the West would have been greatly retarded. As it was, two years after Williams was banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Pequots were massacred. One must ask, would it have been some kind of catastrophe for America’s future if the tempo had been less frantic—if time to reach accommodation for mutual benefit had been allowed.

Rather than allow for organic maturation, what was taken to be an efficient template for dealing with Indians was established. The Puritans regarded their action as defensive. They were defending the right of God’s people to live in God’s country. This Puritan perspective of entitlement became, through repetition, so well installed that two centuries later, when a house was raised on a prairie, there was no question about whether the house was entitled to be there, and no question either as to the criminal violence and savagery of anyone who would attack it. (In terms of current vocabulary, it was clear for all to see which party were the terrorists.)

Two habits of mind became embedded. First, in dealings between us innocent, purified and god-serving Americans and other people, what ought to set the premise for the dealing was the plan of us, the servants of God. The other party revealed itself as good, indifferent, or bad depending on how they responded to our plan. Second, in cases where our plan was rejected or disregarded, it became a premise that we descendants of Puritans were right to think ourselves the injured party. Our plan became The Plan, self-evidently just; it became in fact the very standard of Justice, incarnated and brought down to earth by us. From then on, its defense and promotion have not needed justification. An obstructing party should know better than to oppose it; one who does oppose comes to deserve whatever the god-serving defenders of peace deal out.
This psychological aspect needs underscoring. In later times, as we legitimate offspring of Puritans employed force, it became practically invisible to us in its character as violence. It wasn’t we who acted aggressively; ours was action in the service of law.

Remarkable is the habituation to unacknowledged violence that ensues. One regrets this habituation not simply for havoc it visited on others; one regrets what it did to us. Let’s trace this expanding process of habituation throughout the nineteenth century (leaving, for a time, events closer at hand to speak for themselves).

The Revolutionary War in the last quarter of the eighteenth century deserves perhaps a pass. Fought against a force deemed a superior power, let’s grant to the Patriots who fought it their sense that it was defensive. Even though an interest in moving into Indian lands in the Ohio Valley was among Patriot motives, and even though Canadian relations with Britain present an interesting counterexample to feisty American relations to Britain, let’s say the Revolutionary War was mostly motivated by a desire to resist the mercantilist policies, provided for in British law, that the British had unwisely decided to impose more fully in the aftermath of the French and Indian War. Let then the war’s character as defensive stand. (Its negative value lay, paradoxically, in the way its success has resounded among us. With its David-and-Goliath aspect, once won, the Revolutionary war nurtured among us a celebratory regard for war. Every American-born American has been raised on legends from it which tend to legitimize and dignify wars—at least those in which we find ourselves engaged.)

In addition to the Revolutionary War of the eighteenth century, there were two wars in the nineteenth century, one minor and the other momentous, which don’t readily lend support to a case that we are a war-prone people. One was the War of 1812; the other was the Civil War.

Though existence of American “War Hawks” complicates the issue, the War of 1812 can be explained as resulting from an ill-advised British effort to re-impose a modified form of mercantilism on an American people who had already irreversibly shaken off British control. At war with France, the British seemed to think they could require their former colony to forgo its own economic interests and act economically as Britain’s ally against the
French. The choice they offered us was either to do that, or retire from trade on the high seas altogether. (The latter choice was something the Francophile Jefferson—to his credit—attempted, but which only postponed the war till Madison was president.) True, there were side issues—ones the ever-thoughtful historian Herbert Agar says in fact were controlling issues. Among some Americans was a desire to annex Canada. Contributing to American restlessness too was a desire of some to move more rapidly into westward territory still comfortably held by Indians, and to do so unencumbered by Canadian land claims. Writing about 1812 though, Henry Adams comes to the conclusion we Americans were at this time generally pacifist, documenting at length that, once war was declared, we seemed woefully unprepared to wage it. Theodore Roosevelt, in a book he wrote on the war while he was a student at Harvard, writes along similar lines. Let’s concede then that the War of 1812 doesn’t offer much that reveals us as an aggressive people.

As for the Civil War, Lincoln never wanted it to be a raw matter of the North imposing its will on the South. He had enough roots in Southern ancestry, and his wife had even more, to sense how the South viewed the war as a monumental overreaching by the North. While Lincoln’s consistent sense of the war was that the North’s motivation was to save the Union, what had made him a viable candidate for the presidency was his speech at Cooper Union in which he declared the institution of slavery should not be permitted to move westward. Significantly, he left it to the South therefore to “draw first blood” at Fort Sumter; and when eventually he issued an Emancipation Proclamation, he did not see it as providing the war’s motive, but issued it rather as a measure he hoped would give the North an advantage in ending the war. Once the war’s end was in view, it’s true he hoped the terrible loss of life on both sides could achieve something more than a restoration of the status quo at the war’s start. He wanted an end to slavery, but saw this as possible only through an act of Congress—not as something he could do as commander-in-chief. Famously, he rejected the consolation many on the Northern side

offered him that “God’s on your side,” and replaced it with a wistful expression of hope that he and the Union army might be on God’s side. This seemed to be—was in fact—an un-Puritan way to think. For these reasons (no doubt with many Southerners dissenting on this), it’s problematic to use the Civil War as evidence for a case we are an aggressive people. All things considered, and while allowing room for a pacifist dissent, let’s concede a defensive—or at least “unchosen” character—to the Civil War, not only from the Southern perspective, but from the Northern as well.4

Taking the War of 1812 and the Civil War off the board (while acknowledging this may seem quite arbitrary to some), there remain, among others, four representative and instructive uses of force in the nineteenth century deserving our attention. Each use has the double character of being (1) highly deliberate (chosen rather than imposed), but (2) deliberate in such a manner that our collective opting for violence goes almost unacknowledged. Because these cases seem not to have been logged into collective memory in an accurate way, it would seem they continue to fester like an undetected virus within the body politic. They are: (1) the removal westward to Oklahoma of the Cherokee Indians of Georgia; (2) the Mexican War; (3) the War on the Plains; and (4) the war that ended with American hegemony over Cuba and with the bloody annexation of the Philippines—a war we rather inaccurately call the Spanish-American War.

4. I admit this may be seeing the war too much through Northern eyes. What makes the Civil War such a difficult case is its aftermath. Viewing the war from its aftermath, it’s no easy matter to provide a coherent account of what the root of Northern motivation was. As remarks by Howard Zinn suggest, the mayhem and the wounds inflicted on the spirits of Northerners and Southerners alike, and the vitriolic hatred that ensued among defeated Southern whites toward “emancipated” blacks makes one wonder if the matter of slavery could not have been ended better by slave insurrections, relentless shaming of the South by abolitionists, and by economic factors and the general inconvenience of holding in bondage a huge population—rather than by full-scale federal invasion of the South by the North. Howard Zinn, A People’s History of the United States (New York: HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 2005), 186–89, 198.
Cherokee Removal

In the War of 1812, some Cherokee led by John Ross had fought on the American side against the British. Among his eight great grandparents, Ross seems to have had only one Indian, so his sense of himself as affiliated with white plantation culture is perhaps not surprising. What is remarkable is that the Cherokee among whom Ross was a chief seem largely to have shared Ross's sense of affiliation. These were Cherokee who wrote and read in a Cherokee script of their own invention, who printed a newspaper in Cherokee and English, who imitated white landowners in the cotton plantation economy, slaves and all. Also they set up schools as a path toward further assimilation into the surrounding white society, and they welcomed Christian missionaries into their midst and welcomed intermarriage of their women with whites.

At times, whites had said to Indians: if you would be like us, there would be no problem, and we could live together in harmony. Here was a test case of that olive branch.

Unfortunately for them, the Cherokee lived in a northeastern section of Georgia where gold was discovered. To fortify themselves against the acquisitive interests of their neighbors, the Cherokee wrote themselves a constitution modeled on ours; and they passed a law that no one of their citizens could sell any land to a non-Cherokee without the consent of their Cherokee government.

Their thriving ways stuck in the craw of white neighbors. Not only did Cherokee presume to do as whites did, but they did so well as to become envied rivals. The Cherokee constitution was itself an affront; they seemed thereby to present themselves as the equals of whites. Clearly though, most obnoxious of all was simply that Cherokee lived on lands the whites wanted.

The great champion of white enterprise was Andrew Jackson. No one in America could rival Jackson's well-earned celebrity as a killer of Indians. That John Ross had fought in 1812 under Jackson's command was no matter. When Jackson was not killing Indians, he was negotiating with them for their land. He was very accomplished at it. As early as 1817, he'd written to President Monroe: “I have long viewed treaties with the Indians an
absurdity not to be reconciled to the principles of our government.” An elegant turn of phrase. Indians were not to be taken seriously. As a negotiator, Jackson felt free to beguile them, lie to them, intimidate them. He behaved in full accord with the convenient maxim adopted by earlier Puritans: “there’s no treating with Indians above board.”

Wiley though and stubborn as Jackson was, not all Indians succumbed. Having failed as government agent to remove the Cherokee through negotiation, once Jackson was president he withdrew federal protection from them, leaving them to the mercy of the State of Georgia. He then used the vulnerability of the Cherokee as a pretext. In his first State of the Union message, Jackson observed disingenuously that since it wasn’t likely their neighbors would leave at peace such Indians as lived east of the Mississippi, it should be the policy of the federal government to do what it could to protect Indians by moving them to a territory west of the Mississippi “to be guarantied [sic] to the Indian tribes, as long as they shall occupy it.”

In response, Congress passed the Removal Act of 1830. In 1832, in the case of Worcester v. Georgia, John Marshall wrote for the Supreme Court an opinion upholding the Cherokee as “having territorial boundaries, within which their authority is exclusive,” and Marshall said these were boundaries “in which the laws of Georgia can have no force, and which the citizens of Georgia have no right to enter, but with the assent of Cherokees themselves, or in conformity with treaties, and with the acts of Congress.”

Perhaps Jackson felt the Removal Act, as an act of Congress, blunted the force of Marshall’s decision. At any rate, he despised Marshall’s assertion of Indian rights, and pushed ahead with the policy of removal. In practice this meant Georgia was licensed to use every means of bribery and harassment to force the Cherokee off Cherokee land, while the federal government did what it could to negotiate new treaties to nullify old ones. Even then, many Cherokee stood resolute in principled resistance. Finally, in 1837 Martin Van Buren, Jackson’s successor, sent General Winfield Scott to remove the Cherokee by force:

Families at dinner were startled by the sudden gleam of bayonets in the doorway and rose to be driven with blows
and oaths along the weary miles of trail that led to the stockade. Men were seized in their fields, or going along the road, women were taken from their [spinning] wheels and children from their play. In many cases, on turning for one last look as they crossed the ridge they saw their homes in flames, fired by the lawless rabble that followed on the heels of the soldiers to loot and pillage.⁵

Why is this episode significant? Its significance is in how little it’s been noticed. Three weeks before Christmas in 1838, on December 3, President Van Buren informed Congress:

The measures [for Cherokee removal] authorized by Congress at its last session have had the happiest effects….The Cherokees have emigrated without any apparent reluctance.⁶

The use of force was invisible. Certainly, that was as Van Buren wanted, and the atrocity hasn’t left a discernible mark on the reputation of Jackson. The memory entertained of Jackson’s proneness to violence is not that it was cruel but that it was effective. It cleared southern land of Indians, and rendered that land available for the righteous spread of plantations and slavery. We remember Jackson as one of the great American presidents—as one who

---

5. Quoted in Gary B. Nash, Julie Roy Jeffrey, et al., eds., The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 417. This may strike us as an eerie foreshadowing of the internment of Japanese residing legally in America—many of them American citizens—during the Second World War. In the case of the Cherokee, though, the extenuating circumstance of an America reacting in shock and irrational fear was not a factor. The Cherokee case bears a closer resemblance to the rounding up of Jews by Nazis. In both cases the legitimation was simple racism, and in both cases the outcome for many was death. We have no neat census of the Cherokee dead. Estimates suggest that about 14,000 were coerced onto the “Trail of Tears, and that of these about 4,000—somewhere between one-fourth and one-third—died along the way.

opened the West to the uses of democracy. Only in the second
decade of the twenty-first century have there been rumblings of
criticism concerning the long-standing custom of the Demo-
cratic Party to gather yearly in the separate states for Jefferson-
Jackson Day dinners during which Democrats commemorate
“the good old days” and nerve themselves to meet the challenges
of the present in the same splendid spirit these men met chal-
lenges of the past. Howard Zinn remarks that in historian Arthur
Schlesinger Jr.’s prize-winning salute to “the Age of Jackson,” one
finds no mention of the Trail of Tears.⁷

One must wonder what logical consequence such complacency
should have for our claim to be “the land of the free and the
home of the brave.” Surely our complacency requires us to con-
tract Francis Scott Key’s sparkling phrases to mean: “we’re a land
for the right kind of people to be free,” and “for those of the brave
who have white skins we’ve become a home.” It doesn’t scan as
well as the original, but cuts closer to the truth. When we pledge
allegiance to our “one nation, under God, with liberty and just-
tice for all,” we have to understand that, while we may aspire
to be such a nation, what our past has achieved so far is a less
perfect union, one in which the liberty of some has meant—in
the gestures and lifestyle modeled by Jefferson and Jackson—
the freedom to trample on the liberty of others. When we lose
awareness of this poignant disservice to principle, we reduce the
aspiration of our truly beautiful phrases down to the level of mere
propaganda and cant.

The Mexican War

It would be impossible to find another presidential administration
to match the record of James Polk. He entered the presidency to
fulfill four goals during what he said would be a one-term presi-
dency. In one term, he achieved those goals, after which he left
the White House, went home, and died.

In the course of his time in office, Polk added, by reason of
the Mexican Cession, two-thirds as much land to the U.S. as

⁷ Zinn, *People’s History*, 130.
Jefferson had by the Louisiana Purchase; and if one counts Texas (added in response to Polk’s election) and the Oregon Territory (whose boundary he settled), he added considerably more land than Jefferson had. If one rates presidents by how much real estate they acquired for their fellow Americans, Polk comes out at the top of the list.

When they hear such things, students ask: “Well, if he did all that, why isn’t he famous?” Polk is overdue for a close look.

He was a man of moderate height and prickly disposition. He was thought to have neither charisma—the ability to command spontaneous devotion—nor a capacity to intimidate. What he had was his Presbyterian/Methodist faith, and a stubborn sense of personal mission. He was a protégé of Andrew Jackson, whom he sought to imitate. The four goals he brought to his presidency were: (1) to settle the boundary with England over the Oregon Territory; (2) to lower the tariff; (3) to institute a new banking system for the federal treasury; and (4) to acquire California from Mexico. The first three he achieved with relative ease during the first half of his one term. The fourth required a war.

In early May 1846, after a year and two months in the White House, Polk addressed Congress requesting that Congress acknowledge existence of a state of war between the United States and Mexico. Polk wrote:

The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte [the Rio Grande]. But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war. As war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision the honor, the rights, and the interests of our country.

The United States, Polk was insisting, was the victim. Mexico was the relentless invader. It was more or less on this premise that for almost twenty-two months, and at the cost of some 13,000 American men and a greater but not well counted number of
Mexicans, that the United States invaded Mexico, took control of its capital, and wrested from it the cession of “Alta California” and the larger area sometimes called “New Mexico.”

That we were the defending party was—as we saw—Polk’s story. To an extent, he may have taught himself to believe it. It’s possible he never let himself regard the war as an exercise in conquest. If one squints one’s eyes, stands on one’s head, and looks at the whole thing just right, one may catch a glimpse of Polk’s angle. For one thing, the territory at issue—California and “New Mexico”—was sparsely populated and barely governed. After having won independence from Spain, Mexico had spun into a swirl of shifting governments; amid the turmoil, outlying northern districts were often given little or no direction from Mexico City. In these circumstances, perhaps Polk was able to conduct a self-persuasion; he may have persuaded himself his policy was a mere effort to occupy vacant territory and settle boundary issues.

In the case of the Oregon Territory, in truth it was an issue about boundaries that Polk’s diplomacy addressed. In this case, after some fairly standard threats, counterthreats, and near-ultimatums, the issue with Britain was settled peacefully, and the settlement produced no lasting discord.

The case of California was different. Conflicted as Mexico was, we can be sure there resided in the back of the minds of Mexico’s contending parties the notion that Mexico was a nation of vast land-wealth—that Mexico was rich in northward prospects for prosperity in the not-distant future. Who would manage such prospects was in fact a significant part of what the Mexican factions were squabbling about. Events leading to the de facto loss of Texas had to seem a naïve mistake to Mexicans, and only quickened the sense of urgency among Mexican officials not to repeat such mistakes at the threshold of Polk’s administration. Polk may have thought however that, having lost Texas, surely Mexicans realized they must also lose California. He may not have understood how the loss of Texas enhanced for Mexicans the preciousness of what northern land remained.

As to Mexico’s title to California, Polk did not really have genuine doubts. He’d sent Thomas Slidell to Mexico City for the express purpose of buying California. Understanding the purpose of Slidell’s mission, no Mexican official would meet with Slidell. Reaching for any excuse handy, Polk was getting ready
to treat this diplomatic snub as itself a “casus belli”—a violation of American rights sufficient to justify war. Such a pretext was, however, transparently weak—as if nations have some obligation under international law to meet with others whenever those others wish to make a purchase of their land. So Polk sent General Zachary Taylor south through Texas to stake out a position on territory just north of the Rio Grande about which there was a running boundary dispute. (We claimed that Texas extended south to the Rio Grande whereas Mexicans claimed it was bounded by a river to the north.) Polk’s hope was that Taylor’s presence in disputed territory would provoke an incident with Mexican forces situated on the Rio Grande’s southern bank.

It did; and the consensus of commentators then and now is that Polk was greatly relieved when it did.

Therefore, when Polk said in his request for a declaration of war that the war had come “notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it,” he was lying. He had to be aware of his own efforts to provoke the war. From then on, an issue that continued to divide Congress and ordinary people as well all through the war was between those who were content to allow the lie as being in a good cause, and those who weren’t.

The fact the lie “succeeded” and the U.S. gained immense real estate as a consequence has had two effects. First, Polk and the actual war have sunk below the visible horizon for most Americans. Since the war ended in “success,” we haven’t needed to think about it. Secondly, for those who do think about such things, the war allowed one more experience from which to argue that force used in the service of America’s destiny can be a good thing.

The harm in this is hard for most Americans to discern. A truly masterful book on the Polk administration, A Country of Vast Designs by Robert W. Merry (of the Wall Street Journal and the Congressional Quarterly), after it provides a fascinating record of the to-and-fro-ing, the conflicts, manipulations, and duplicities of the war effort, concludes with the following exoneration of Polk:

The moralistic impulse, when applied to the Mexican War, misses a fundamental reality of history: it doesn’t turn on moralistic pivots but on differentials of power, will, organization, and population. History moves forward with
a crushing force and does not stop for niceties of moral suasion or concepts of political virtue. Mexico was a dysfunctional, unstable, weak nation whose population wasn’t sufficient to control all the lands within its domain. The United States by contrast was a vibrant, expanding, exuberant experiment in democracy whose burgeoning population thrilled to the notion that it was engaging in something big and historically momentous.8

As an expression of what was the general sense among politically conscious Americans (at least once the treaty ending the war was in place and memories of the dead had begun to recede), the passage cited above may be accurate. It has however obvious inconveniences. When, in the mid-1930s, Japan looked again to the Asian mainland (having already stationed itself in Korea), no doubt what the leaders of Japan beheld in China was a “dysfunctional, unstable, weak nation” unable “to control all the lands within its domain.” When these same Japanese leaders looked to their own country, no doubt they beheld “a vibrant, exuberant experiment” (if not in democracy, at least in something that had far-reaching patriotic endorsement—the Emperor, after all, was divine) by a “burgeoning population thrilled to the notion that it was engaging in something big and historically momentous.” One might say Japan paid the United States a compliment—a kind of homage to the Monroe Doctrine9—by proclaiming as its ambition a “Greater Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.”

Simultaneously, when Hitler was looking to the east of Germany for Lebensraum for the German people, what he saw were Slavic countries, ill-governed and dysfunctional. Looking to the German and Austrian people, he saw a “vibrant, exuberant, experiment”—in a kind of populist democracy—by a “burgeoning population thrilled to the notion that it was engaging in

9. The Monroe Doctrine, penned by the always sagacious J.Q. Adams, was intended as an instrument of peace, taking the Western Hemisphere out of the turmoil of European politics and allowing the U.S. to live in separate harmony with itself and its neighbors. Already by the time of Polk’s administration, it had been flipped and rendered toxic.
something big and historically momentous.” He would entirely have agreed with Wall Street Journal writer Merry’s contention that history “doesn’t turn on moral pivots but on differentials of power, will, organization, and population.” Further he’d have claimed no one believed more firmly than he that “history moves forward with a crushing force and does not stop for niceties of moral suasion or concepts of political virtue.” The point being argued here isn’t that the Mexican War caused these other aggressions, but that it forfeited in advance the moral ground from which we professed to criticize Japan and Germany. Though I can still recall the outraged denunciations of Japan and Germany I heard as a boy during the Second World War, I came to see as I grew older how opportunistic they were. Our premise for the Mexican War and Merry’s rationalization for it made it clear we would not be restrained by the principles we demanded of others.

That we Americans found ourselves inconvenienced in the twentieth century by these might-is-right agendas of other countries, is moral karma. We vigorously denounced “imperialist behavior” in the most moralistic terms, but the actions against which we protested (and went on to reverse by war) were actions for which we’d provided paradigm and advertisement. Our Mexican war was a “success,” and we’ve never repudiated it. If one wants to, one can say that the Japanese and Germans didn’t need our example for their attempt to grab other peoples’ land—but to do so misses the point. If the actions of Japan and Germany were so contemptible, what then of ours?10

Surely, the principle of expansion, as internalized by Americans and accurately expressed by Merry, was self-contradictory and deeply damaging to our internal accounting system. As noted earlier, in our American formulation, the case for expansion has routinely invoked the notion we were expanding the domain of democracy. We’ve presented Democracy as our sterling goal; its goodness was that it enlarged the domain of human

10. In the case of the Japanese, I think there are in fact plausible historical reasons suggesting our example toward Mexico and the rest of Latin America was a motivating factor in the development of their Greater Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.
rights. To trample on human rights in the interest of enlarging their domain involves no minor instance of cognitive dissonance; one needs to shut down one’s mind to pull it off.

It adds to the irony of things that in this pell-mell effort supposedly to maximize opportunities for human freedom, we’ve often portrayed ourselves as having no choice. We were acting as servants of Manifest Destiny. Held in its grip, we could do no other. So in our mission to bring human freedom to an ever wider sphere, it seems the denial of our own freedom—made when we said: “The matter is out of our hands!”—was a price we were willing to pay.

I’ve mentioned Polk as partly Presbyterian; his father was one. Of the Christian sects, Presbyterians were the most directly descended from Puritans and were the most enduring of Protestant sects in maintaining a Calvinist sense of things that resonated echoes of predestination. We’ve noted earlier how the Puritan sense of an obligatory American mission to promote God’s reign could transform itself into a mere secular impulse to pursue goods compulsively. It could do this without undergoing a loss of momentum or foregoing any of Puritanism’s constraining demands for aesthetic deprivation, deferred gratification, or bigotry toward others. (Weber invites his reader to find particularly the first two demands in Ben Franklin’s days of producing aphorisms by “Poor Richard.”) The vivid presence of such Puritan demands on us as we waged the Mexican War manifests that Puritanism was alive and well as we fought.

Beyond other evils consequent upon this war though is this one that can be invisible—enabled therefore to be enduring and potent. It’s the hidden evil implicit in Merry’s eloquent rationalization: The Mexican War “worked” and therefore inquiries into the means by which it worked are irrelevant. To believe that is to believe in evil—to believe in entrenched evil of the kind Jesus may have had in mind when he said “sins against the light” are satanically tenacious.

The War on the Plains

There’s really no name for this war. That makes it easier to dismiss. Perhaps it was no war at all, we’re inclined to say. We’ve
re-cast it in our folklore as “the Winning of the West.” As I suggest, typically the folklore memorializes valiant efforts on the part of white settlers and the federal troops who protected them to subdue mindless acts of domestic violence by those resisting the westward march of civilization. It confuses things, we tend to think, to call this activity a war; it was a policing operation. It was law enforcement of duly negotiated treaties—made necessary by faithless Indians who refused to abide by these treaties. It was action—to use a term popular in my youth—necessitated by “Indian-givers.”

Such at least we have preferred to think, and so—until recently—many of our teachers would have us believe.

The heroes of this campaign in the West counted among their ranks some of the foremost heroes of the Civil War. Recall that right up into 1865, federal soldiers were marching courageously into hostile territory, risking their lives—losing their lives in great numbers—to liberate blacks held in bondage on the slave-labor camps that were the “peculiar institution” of the South. No sooner had these soldiers succeeded in their selfless venture than they turned their faces westward and marched out across the plains in a new effort at liberation—this time in an effort to liberate the lands of the West from the bondage of non-use or imperfect-use imposed by the savages who inhabited them.

The story won’t work, will it? It ends in anticlimax. Yet it’s true that many of the protagonists in this War on the Plains were from the victorious northern ranks of our Civil War. Some three years after the Civil War, General William Tecumseh Sherman wrote John Sherman (a brother, and a future secretary of state): “The more [of Indians] we can kill this year, the less will have to be killed in the next war, for the more I see of these Indians the more convinced I am that they all have to be killed or be maintained as a species of paupers.” In January of the next year, 1869, another great hero of the North’s liberating army, General Philip Henry Sheridan, is reported to have said at Fort Cobb: “The only good Indians I ever saw were dead.”

Until recently there have been writers who admired the candor of such words, seeing Sherman and Sheridan as realists willing, surgically, to make the task of Indian extermination as quick and painless as possible. They were men who manned up—saddled
up, John Wayne might say—to do the dirty work that needed doing. They acted as mercy killers.

It’s a defense few can now stomach. But then we find ourselves re-directed to an issue we addressed earlier. If these once-honored soldiers were not humanitarians, what are we to make of that Civil War which brought them to the forefront of our affairs?

(Before the Civil War, back in the 1850s, politicians and citizens had spoken of “Free Soil” in the West. California and John C. Fremont were prominent in the Free-Soil movement. When one first hears the phrase “Free Soil,” one is likely to conclude—since the phrase clearly intended to exclude slavery from the West—that the phrase envisioned a West where blacks, among others, could work the land in freedom. Yet after the war, the West did not soon see any large migration of blacks. Looked at more closely, the phrase “Free Soil” seems not to have intended a West that was free for blacks, but a West that was free from blacks. Envisioned by the victorious North was a West in which whites would be free to seek their fortunes without competition either from the institution of slavery or from the people once afflicted by that institution.)

Even though America was convulsed in the middle of the nineteenth century over the issue of slavery, one should be slow to conclude slavery was the century’s central theme. The readiness after the war with which Reconstruction was shunted to the side demonstrates it was not. The organizing focus of mainstream America in the nineteenth century was, as the Mexican War suggests, the expansion westward of our white and Christian way of life. How to accommodate emancipated blacks in that expansion was given little attention—even by Lincoln. As for Indians, there really was no interest at all in how to accommodate them. In language of today, what expansion meant for American Indians is that, indiscriminately, they’d be discounted as its collateral damage.

Once one had chosen to persist—by adopting this accounting system—in denying personhood to Indians, once one had risen to the heights of Merry’s “big and historically momentous” forces, one may have felt in a safe position (as some writers still do) to shrug and re-personalize as it were—and to do so on behalf of both sides. One can say: “Well, we must be fair; just as it was
wrong in the nineteenth century to say all the wrong was on the side of the Indians, so today it would be wrong to romanticize the Indians and say all the wrong was on the side of the whites; the truth is, there was good and bad behavior on both sides.”

How we love that kind of thinking. It seems to excuse us from ever making sense of anything. Writing as recently as 1995, Charles M. Robinson III, after describing the white/Indian encounter as a “basic conflict between a technologically-advanced society and a primitive, tribal society,” informs us: “In such a situation, where both occupy—or wish to occupy—the same area, the less advanced society must yield.”

To posit this is an adroit maneuver. It abstracts from the context of oppressor and victim, and of moral evaluation. Social problems reduce thereby to merely technical ones—a kind of extension of Newtonian physics. “He with the most technology wins.” The account-giver is thereby freed to recount the War on the Plains as a kind of sporting event—one in which some on each side showed valor and agility in tactics, while others on each side showed the lack thereof. Morality isn’t at issue—and the outcome is foreseeable by anyone with common sense.

Trouble is, such “balanced treatment” requires a near total suspension of aesthetic sensibility and empathy. The Nazi holocaust can be defended by one willing to argue this way; the Nazi Party had more technological competence in hand than had the Jews of Germany. We recognize spontaneously how banal and empty the argument is. In the War on the Plains, on the one side, the contestants were soldiers invading lands to which their most plausible claim was, “We bought this land from Napoleon!” On the other side, the contestants were husbands and fathers fighting to protect wives, children, and a place in the sun. An observer genuinely free from bias cannot see the issue here as one in which the merits and grievances on one side are more or less matched by those on the other—cannot use the type of “balanced” historical commentary one will still find commentators attempting who nonetheless regard themselves as fair-minded and liberal.

To achieve the resetting of scales needed to provide this comforting sense of equilibrium (to give, that is, a measure of legitimacy to federal soldiers and the settlers on whose behalf they fought and killed), one has no option but to continue with our traditional undocumented and unhistorical demeaning of Indian husbands and fathers. This balancing act requires that Indian husbands and fathers be viewed as devoid of dignity. Unless they can be found unworthy of respect, there can be no balancing act. The phrases for the undignifying of Indian braves have been ready-to-hand for generations now. “See how they hang about the trading posts and agency offices!” “Look at them: alcoholic, shiftless, waiting for handouts, quarreling pointlessly among themselves.” “Red devils, snakes, vermin, half-naked savages!” “Altogether untrustworthy!”

In the good old days, this denial of status was relentless and uncriticized—indispensable in fact to maintain the morale of us Puritans. Even today, if one is somehow out to sanitize God’s Elect for their attempt to exterminate their rivals, these notions are needed as a thumb on the scale.

One demeaned these husbands and fathers so one could view their destruction with equanimity. An alternative to destroying them—that of reaching an accommodation—was always regarded as too inconvenient to be taken seriously. It would have placed intolerable restraints on white liberty. It would have meant we were no longer the land of the free. We were free to fight Indians because Indians were worthless.

A tortured argument for sure; for both whites and Indians fully understood that the point in fighting Indians was to render them worthless. It was not alcoholic, suicidal, shiftless, impotent Indians against whom the War on the Plains was fought.

Was this genocide? The question perhaps is just semantic. If “genocide” looks to extermination of the last member of a race, perhaps not; for the intent was to move Indians out of the way. If however one means by “genocide” a systematic effort to deprive a people once and finally of all agency, I’d say this effort of our recent ancestors was as good an example of genocide as anything history offers. The influence of Indians on white purposes—the agency of Indians to influence and impede white purposes—was to be annihilated. We settlers shouldn’t have to worry about Indians any more. As the legitimate children of white Puritans, we
intended to secure total security by withholding all security of free action from our Indian predecessors and rivals.

Effective federal efforts to stop the sun dance and the ghost dance, and to take Indian children into Christian schools so as to extinguish in them the beliefs of their parents were as totalitarian and intolerant as anything the Chinese government has done in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries against Tibetan Buddhists or the Falun Gong. The successful attack on the buffalo herds—the staple and focus of Indian life on the plains—sets some kind of record in the annals total war.

Among the events in this war, the most famous was the campaign toward the end against some Lakota, a resistant federation led by the Sioux among whom Sitting Bull emerged as the paramount leader. One should be mindful of course that this episode, sometimes given recognition as “the Great Sioux War,” doesn’t name an initiation of hostilities between whites and Indians; as we’ve seen, hostilities date back nearly to first encounters. Further, without conceding “moral equivalence,” it can be conceded there’d been acts of cruel violence perpetrated by both Indians and whites in the long chain of bitter relations that preceded this final episode on the plains. (Both then and now, whites found barbaric and reprehensible the Indian custom of mutilating the dead bodies of their opponents—yet some whites engaged in it too, and some local white governments paid bounties for Indian body parts.)

So, yes, grievances and outrages on both sides provide context. If though one wants to use the words “massacre” and “terrorism,” it seems one shouldn’t reserve them simply for the deeds of one’s opponents. Further, use of such special terms should be warranted by special circumstances.

To refer to an episode on December 21, 1866, at the start of the Great Sioux War, as “the massacre of Fetterman’s party” seems unwarranted. A group of seventy-nine federal soldiers and two civilians, led by William Fetterman, had intended to pacify (whatever that entailed) a band of Oglala Sioux but instead were outmaneuvered and killed by them.

Sherman used the phrase “the massacre of Fetterman’s party” in a letter to Grant (not yet president), and then Sherman added: “We must act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux, even to their extermination, men, women, and children.
Nothing less will ever reach the root of the case.” In a more conscientious use of words, it would seem what the Sioux accomplished in the Fetterman incident was the ambush of a pursuing force; it was what Sherman advocated by way of retaliation that can properly be called a massacre.

“Massacre” and “terrorism” are terms which share each others’ connotations. In the case of a “massacre,” a large number of non-combatant people—“innocent civilians” if you will (though Sherman, with his concept of “total war,” seemed to deny civilians can be innocent)—are indiscriminately killed. This is a condition that general usage seems to imply by use of the term “massacre.” Similarly, it is annihilation of non-combatants for the purpose of sending a message, that can meaningfully be called “terrorism.” To shrug off these constraints in the use of terms seems then to leave these terms in the category of mere name calling.

In the subject-matter under consideration here, even in looking to the issue of civilian innocence, one can argue there was in the Indian/settler comparison, a lack of moral equivalence between the two sets of civilians. One population, as we noted, was an intruding and expanding population, instigating an ever-renewed breach of treaties; the other population was a population residing in traditional habitat. The argument made then and now by apologists for our side has been that the second population, being the weaker of the two and making the less intrusive and exhaustive use of the land, had no genuine right to live in any place where we whites wished to live instead.

To strengthen their case, some partisans for our inherited sense of entitlement have added: “Surely these very Sioux had themselves displaced other native populations in earlier generations.” To attempt though in this way to dismiss justice from the discussion is to make an argument that’s clearly a bridge too far. Alleged injustices among native Americans can’t exempt white Americans from all obligation to treat native Americans justly. To say otherwise is to make a mugger’s argument. (The argument goes like this: “No doubt there have been times when you’ve acted unjustly; therefore I have no obligation to treat you justly. Give me your watch and your wallet.”) Also, there’s a matter of scale. Native Americans had engaged in skirmishes with each other; we whites intended a war whose only limit was extinction.
The immediate circumstances leading to the Great Sioux War had to do with transportation, and involved a trespass on land occupied by Indians traditionally and guaranteed to them by treaty. Federal troops tried to defend whites who, trespassing through this Indian territory, were building a trail to connect white mining operations near the towns of Bozeman and Virginia City to the Oregon Trail. Some Sioux who were guided by Red Cloud and Crazy Horse recognized that this intrusion could lead to much greater intrusions, and they found the means to create endless trouble for the road-builders and their protectors. This can be regarded as the beginning of the Great Sioux War. The killing of the party led by Fetterman—sent to subdue Sioux troublemakers—was an early and important episode in this conflict. Since the conflict had started with white trespass on land guaranteed to Indians, our federal government thought a good remedy following the killing of Fetterman and his troops was to revise and contract our guarantees to Indians. A federal invitation was sent out for all parties to meet and negotiate at Fort Laramie in 1868. In light of what Sherman wrote Grant, one can judge of the degree of good faith our side would bring to the meeting.

The negotiations were problematic. For one thing, Indians had only fragmentary knowledge of the language in which conclusions were written down. Another problem was that such Indians as were present were not empowered to speak for all their fellow tribes-people. Still another is that Red Cloud and many other chiefs boycotted the meeting. Far and away the most serious problem was (as earlier we saw both early Puritans and Andrew Jackson admit) whites wouldn’t feel bound by any agreements they negotiated.

Negotiations at Fort Laramie ended with a treaty-signing on April 29, 1868. Red Cloud didn’t come to Fort Laramie to sign the treaty until November 6. By then, treaty provisions regarding a removal of federal forts had been implemented as an indication of federal good intentions. Red Cloud and one hundred twenty-five other chiefs signed; but Red Cloud remained suspicious of federal intentions.

The treaty itself contained clauses sounding very beneficial to the Lakota-Sioux. Noteworthy was Article 16: “The United States hereby agrees and stipulates that the country north of the North
Platte River and east of the summits of the Big Horn Mountains shall be held and considered to be unceded Indian territory, and also stipulates and agrees that no white person or persons shall be permitted to settle upon or occupy any portion of the same.

Article 2 listed, significantly, most of the Black Hills (regarded by the Sioux as particularly sacred ground) as an integral part of the Sioux reservation. This meant this territory would remain under complete control of the Sioux.

But Red Cloud was rightly suspicious. Less than seven months after the day Red Cloud signed, Sherman issued a general order saying Indians found on the “unceded lands” mentioned as Indian territory in Article 16, “as a rule will be considered hostile”—which meant they were subject to being captured or, if prudence suggested it was safer, shot. This annulled Article 16.

Further, when the economy dipped five years later (due in part to mismanagement, corruption, and greed in the Grant administration), whites began to lust for the gold rumored to be in the Black Hills. Yielding to temptation, in 1874 the federal government authorized Civil War hero George Armstrong Custer to conduct a “scientific” expedition into the Black Hills—an expedition joined by two professional prospectors. The next year, after exculpatory words about the importance of observing the 1868 treaty with the Lakota, President Grant wrote, “Efforts are now being made for the extinguishment of the Indian title, and all proper means will be used to accomplish that end.”

If a presidential wink had been needed, it was given; “all proper means” were intended to be along lines of an offer one could not refuse. The door was opened to the second and terminal stage of the Great Sioux War.

What could have been done here? Most writers falter in answering; they end by deferring to Merry’s and Robinson’s (and Calvin’s) “irresistible” laws of history. Suppose though the gold had been just north of the border with Canada. Suppose Canadian Mounted Police—Canada’s warriors—had been on the border and had attempted to push trespassing American prospectors back onto U.S. territory. Would American federal troops then

have taken up a war to the death against the Canadian Mounted Police? It’s unimaginable. Having a treaty-line with Canada, American troops would—had they been engaged at all—have been engaged to hold back the American prospectors.

Perhaps it’s too much to ask of us white and profoundly puri-
fi ed Americans, even in the twenty-first century, to imagine our federal soldiers joining forces with the Sioux to protect a feder-
ally guaranteed Sioux right to some Sioux territory. (As the event made clear, when push comes to shove, we leave “equal justice for all” to the “impractical” among us—the Roger Williamses, the Thoreaus, the Martin Luther Kings. Once we recover our breath from the insolence of an “outsider” who claims rights, we tend to shout as one man: “What about us? Don’t we have rights?”—as if any recognition of others’ rights diminishes our own.)

Consider then a lesser case. Is it really outlandish to think, in this matter of Sioux land, that U.S. federal troops, feeling disinclined to block white trespassers from entering Sioux ter-
ri tory, might have just stood to one side and told the trespass-
ers that the risk of entry was all theirs? Could not American soldiers have honored the clear implication of the Laramie Treaty that the Sioux were within their rights to defend land the treaty had guaranteed as theirs? (Federalists of honor like Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall would have understood this.)

Had we honored our promises, perhaps federal coffers, squan-
dered in the greedy days of the Grant administration, wouldn’t have been replenished quite so quickly for further squandering. Were gold-mining profits and fresh land so indispensable to our prosperity that a more legal and accommodating method and tempo would have been an unsustainable national loss? (That to this day, white writers’ imaginations frequently draw a blank at this point tells us much about the damage such episodes have done to us and why our diplomacy continues to be such a far-
rago of contradictions today. What kind of “success” was it that it required us to violate our own word so starkly?)

As it was, our readiness to overstep negotiated boundaries led, first to an effort on the part of federal commissioners to insist that the Sioux sell the Black Hills; then, when the Sioux simply said no, the Department of the Interior demanded that all Indians who still roamed freely on territory the Treaty of Laramie
had guaranteed as theirs must report to the Indian agencies by January 31, 1876. When some Indians—looking increasingly to Sitting Bull for leadership—refused, our government officially declared them “hostiles.” Federal expeditions against the Lakota-Sioux intensified; and the Great Sioux War moved toward what proved its climax and end.

There was an inconclusive battle at the river Rosebud on June 17, 1876—one from which General George Crook and his command were thought lucky to escape alive. A week and a day later, entering the valley of the Little Bighorn, George Armstrong Custer—famous for his dashing spirit in the Civil War, and encouraged by what now seems in hindsight a string of gambler’s luck—broke ranks from an elaborate, multi-pronged battle plan, and led an entire cavalry contingent to their death.

Departure from the battle plan may not have been intended; yet it seems most everyone in the federal command had seen it coming. Custer had moved with great speed. General Gibbon, the commander of a major prong, had been delayed. In Gibbon’s absence, General Terry, commander of the Seventh Cavalry, was to move with a large contingent from north of the Sioux’s expected encampment, and Custer was to come up from the south; together they were to catch the Sioux in an inescapable pincher.

On June 25, once Custer surmised that scouts of the Lakota Sioux had discovered his presence, he seems to have decided he had no alternative but to engage—whatever might be the whereabouts of Terry. It seems he did so with no proper estimate of the size of the intended victim. While he may have intended a massacre at the immense camping ground of Lakota-Sioux and other Indians assembled near the Little Bighorn, he and all two hundred and ten men under his direct command were outnum-bered in direct combat by one or two thousand Indian warriors and destroyed.

This was not a massacre. It was defense against massacre—a defense only temporarily successful. Too many Indians were killed or wounded in the event for it to be celebrated at length among those who survived. As for white Americans, the year 1876 was our nation’s first centennial; and the shock of such a reversal at the hands of “savages” was almost more than we whites could take in. (One wonders what we whites expected. Did we think
the thousands of Indians present should have just lain on the ground while Custer and his troops executed them one-by-one?)

The press was full of cries for retribution and vengeance and for a final solution to the Indian problem. The reconfiguration of Custer into a martyr for the American way tells us a great deal, not just about Custer’s skills as a showman, but about ourselves and our romantic tendency toward necrophilia.

With intensified effort on the part of the federal government, and with virtually unlimited authority now granted to Sherman to deal with Indians as he saw fit, what remained was a mopping up. Indian resistance continued but with ever-diminishing hope and confidence during this period when exhausted and resourceless Indians were being corralled into reservations hardly distinguishable from prison grounds. High percentages perished in federal custody.

How relentless the white will was to destroy all remnants of Indian life can perhaps be comprehended by the event at Wounded Knee, twelve years after Custer’s death, when two hundred or more Sioux men, women, and children were slaughtered—with the help of Hotchkiss repeating guns—after they came together to celebrate the Ghost Dance. Twenty medals of honor were awarded to federal troops who participated in the slayings. At least two medals seem to have been awarded for outstanding conduct in searching out and killing those who were hiding in ravines to escape the massacre.

One might continue from here, and go on to attempt the story of Chief Joseph. If ever in the nineteenth century a man evolved toward becoming a kind of American Gandhi, it was Chief Joseph. The tragic story of his long effort to hold the Nez Perce together against relentless persecution distinguishes him as one of the noblest heroes of our history. (It’s ironic that so many Americans are taught the story of Gandhi’s heroic resistance to the English, and so few Americans are taught the story of Chief’s Joseph’s heroic resistance to white Americans. Do we commemorate Chief Joseph on the Fourth of July? Why we don’t might provide an interesting reflection for that day—perhaps a welcome relief from the predictable romancing of violence that precedes our firecrackers.)

Enough though may have been said of the War on the Plains. Finally, let’s turn to what we call the Spanish-American
War—which occurs a decade after the Massacre at Wounded Knee.13

**War Against Spaniards (and Cubans?) and Filipinos**

From early on, our “successful” way of treating Indians had accustomed us to deal with others from a sense that the moral high ground was permanently ours. When we’d reached out in the 1840s to take Northern Mexico from Mexico, such dealing was one to which our continuing seizures of Indian land had habituated us and had anesthetized us to intrusions of ethical concern; the issue of Northern Mexico had seemed much like business as usual.

That’s to say, the seizure of Mexican land had had much in common with earlier land seizures: (1) in this confrontation with Mexico too the land was contiguous with “the land God had given us”; (2) it was land within the westward trajectory of our Manifest Destiny—manifest that is when looking out to that huge rectangular plot of real estate that a glance at any map clearly showed God meant us to have; (3) this Mexican land was but sparsely settled by the people claiming title; (4) our U.S. citizens were already settling there (in the case of Texas, and to a lesser extent in California, good white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, cleansed in the fires of Puritanism, were already in possession of land deeds); (5) we knew much of the indigenous population of the other party, less pure than us, was contaminated by Indian ancestry; (6) an added aspect was that, though this land had slipped from Spain’s control, it had an Hispanic and Catholic culture in a hemisphere the Monroe Doctrine had already unimpeachably declared to be in the keeping of us Americans—a

13. My concern as we move on from this is that those among us who are non-Indians and who fancy ourselves decent participants in the American mainstream continue to speak of “the Winning of the West,” and in the confused complacency of that phrase, conceal from ourselves an addiction to force that makes it difficult for us to get our bearings and find our balance in all the years that have followed. We’ve been wounded by that “Winning” more than we imagine. The untended infection from that wound continues to fester.
people with an enduring, if increasingly subterranean, purified brand of Christianity. Romanism was something against which we were maintaining a principled stand.

Later then, some fifty years following the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo and the Mexican Cession of 1848, when the West had been “won” and continental expansion westward had been achieved, our mindset was firmly defined and was in control; American settlement reached from sea to sea, and we were ready for fresh adventure. The first episode of this adventure is routinely called “the Spanish-American War.” Revisionist historians think it might more properly be called “the War to Thwart Cuban Independence and to Gain a Foothold off the Shores of Asia.” Not surprisingly, the shorter label has prevailed.

To dispense with the tone of sarcasm though, when I speak here of an “adventure,” I hardly take the measure of the urgencies besetting us amid our successes as the nineteenth century drew toward a close. We must look to those urgencies; and we should proceed in an awareness that the interaction and proper weighing of the factors in play at the time remain at issue today. There remains much murkiness as to details, and we should be tentative and cautious.

Still, were we able to look on from outer space, it might seem our next move was well prepared by our past. Just off our southeastern shores was Cuba, a holdout in the Western Hemisphere of what we regarded an anachronistic and dying Spanish Empire. In words John Quincy Adams wrote as secretary of state in 1823, Cuba was “a ripe fruit”—waiting to fall into American hands. The words fit well the spirit of J.Q.’s Monroe Doctrine. While we’d grandfathered Spain’s western colonies into our conception, we should be the arbiter of order in the Western hemisphere. Spanish administration of Cuba had always been mercantilist: it had been organized for deliberate, full-scale exploitation of Cuban resources and labor, and had been reliant on slavery and cruel measures from its earliest days.

In the 1890s, by no means for the first time, Spain’s rule was being challenged by local Cubans. As had been the case in prior instances, Spain sought to control such opposition by brute force. Though slavery had been officially abolished in the 1880s, the blacks of Cuba didn’t live in the status of a free
people; and as part of a fresh crack-down, much of the workforce of Cuba—black and black-Hispanic—were now being herded into reconcentrados by Spain’s General Weyler. In these concentration camps it’s estimated a third of Cuba’s population died of hunger and disease. Predictably, much of the Cuban population became resolute for independence. Was there not, then, an American opportunity—or rather, an American “obligation”—here?

The makeup of the rebel population may be beyond an accurate accounting by now. Without being tutored by archival research, let me share my conjectures as to how things stood. It’s likely some in the ranks of the rebels were peninsulares—people born in Spain but critical of Spain’s cruel management of Cuba. Less speculatively, we know some of the rebels (José Martí, at least from his father’s side) were from the “Hispanic” or criollo class: native-born Cubans with a claim to pure Spanish descent (at least for a parent if not for oneself). In the manner that we American colonists in the century before had taken issue with England, many from the criollo class probably took issue with Spain’s refusal to give Cubans official representation at Madrid. More than that, as people who prided themselves on being Spanish, one can assume many of them had to resent Spain’s general and amorphous contempt for the human rights of Cubans. Criollos then were likely the yeast for the rise of revolutionary feeling. As for Cubans of mixed Spanish and African ancestry (anywhere from 25 to 50 percent of the population) and Cubans of pure African ancestry, they had suffered physically more than the criollos, and it’s plausible to assume these groups were ready to be recruited by criollo revolutionaries when offered a promise of racial and economic equality in a liberated Cuba. Remaining groups can be assumed to be recruitable in like manner. As for Indian ancestry: in the course of the island’s earlier history, it had been reduced by inhumane work and inhumane living conditions to the point it remained mostly as mere traces in the blood streams of some who were of mixed Spanish and African ancestry. Indian ancestry did survive more recognizably perhaps in some quite limited groups of people of Indian/European ancestry without an African component. Finally, it seems there remained some few small settlements of pure-blood Indians. I suspect that even a very talented and diligent Cuban ethnologist of today
would have trouble with all this, in that issues of ancestry may have been delicate enough so that in many cases it was thought best to leave them unexamined.

To conclude this tentative consideration of parties, it’s likely that by the late 1890s, a high majority of those who could legitimately be called Cubans were at least in spirit rebels against Spain, although there were, as in our revolution against England, no doubt some prominent loyalists who held out for continuing with the way things were.

As for us Americans, we were on all sides of this struggle between Cuban rebels and the Spanish. Present among us were fresh sponsors of the sugar economy of Cuba who wanted Cuba to enjoy good order for the sake of predictable production, trade, and profits. Some probably were of double minds: in support of a Spanish crackdown from business motives, but opposed to its actual brutality from humanitarian motives. More widely, celebration of our own official abolition of slavery three decades earlier was still fresh in the minds of abolitionists and of Republicans in general, and this inclined these people to a humanitarian concern for the blacks of Cuba—blacks whom they accurately saw as still deprived of freedom and, in fact, in current danger of extinction from abuse and starvation. Further, and probably extensively, we Americans felt that the struggle of Cubans against Spain paralleled our own struggle for independence from England in the previous century.

From the desire our business men had for the protection of American property rights and opportunities, we tended to balance our concern for freedom among Cubans with some wariness about Cuban independence. “If we don’t control Cuba, who will?” was a question on American minds of those who anticipated an imminent end to Spanish rule—with the spiritual boundary, as suggested, between self-interest and humanitarian concern something of a blur. (This was the time when robber barons first came to the fore, and no doubt some of them wondered, “Why should the mercantilist Spanish exploit Cuba when our anti-mercantilist corporations can do the job so much better?”)

Considerations of these sorts occupied our minds in 1898, with our yellow press—especially the Hearst side of the Hearst/Pulitzer competition—doing what it could to heat things up. Responding to this array, chroniclers have sometimes presented
our eventual engagement against Spain as simply a matter of humanitarian concern, whipped to frenzy by the newspapers of Hearst and Pulitzer, finally overflowing into war when our battleship *Maine* exploded in Havana Harbor.

The trouble with leaving our war with Spain to such an explanation is that it leaves more general, strategic interests unattended. While the explosion of the *Maine*, for instance, was unquestionably an event of immense public interest in the United States, how one interpreted it depended on prior dispositions. The explosion of the *Maine* constituted for us Americans a kind of Rorschach test.

Some Americans seemed quite sure the Spanish government had done it. Their argument depended on circumstantial evidence: the whereabouts of the *Maine* when it exploded and the context of Spain’s growing hostility toward the U.S. The major problem for those who took this view had to do with motivation. It was manifestly contrary to the interests of the Spanish government to have our battleship explode in “Spanish waters” at this delicate moment. Even the *Maine*’s captain, Charles Sigsbee—interested to show that no neglect of good order in the interior of his ship had led to the tragedy—nonetheless veered off away from Spain toward a notion the ship had been sabotaged by freelance terrorists.

Some, then, have come forward with “false-flag” theories. Such theories say that anti-Spanish agents who wished to provoke the U.S. into war with Spain blew up the battleship in the expectation that Spain would be blamed. The actual provocateurs could have been either Cuban rebels or interested Americans. But if it was Cubans, this would be cool treatment indeed toward a potential ally. The “interested American” part also faces this problem of who and why. It seems implausible such Americans could have been government agents. For one thing, the administration could have achieved a declaration of war from Congress without this loss of American lives and treasure. Secondly, in those days before the Cold War and the black ops of the CIA, it’s a stretch to finger (even in the office of Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt) a sector of our government with the stomach for so treasonous an action. So if it was Americans, it’s more plausible to think it was Americans acting on their own. Whether then one looks to Cubans or to Americans, one seems
left with individuals, acting in the shadows and invisible, as one’s explanation.

The major alternative to inconclusive saboteur hypotheses was the natural-combustion hypothesis. Stored coal could have ignited spontaneously, and the fire could have spread to a munitions magazine nearby which then exploded. Other accidents can also be imagined.

What’s noteworthy for our purposes is that those who wanted war with Spain gravitated quickly to the interpretation that Spain was the culprit, whereas those concerned to avoid war were open to alternative explanations.

If so, this incident can’t be seen as the decisive cause of the war. Predispositions each person brought to interpreting the incident played too large a role for that. Even factoring in an irresponsible use of the incident by the newspapers won’t go the distance to explain why we declared war. One would need to explain why this journalism resonated as forcefully as it did. Still further, while acknowledging the intensity and legitimacy of humanitarian impulses, one can say when these are fully acknowledged and given due weight as context, we still lack a sufficient theory. Cruelty was happening in many places, near and far. Why did this particular instance of cruelty against Cubans lead to a war? Most important of all, why did this particular instance and the ensuing war have the aftermath it did? To explain the Spanish-American War we seem to need to add a backdrop of other, more strategic, considerations.

Let us look then for explanations in the wider context of America’s situation at the time. Marx had said in the mid-1800s that capitalism has a tendency to implode. His argument was that, as the capitalists economized on labor costs to meet the requirements of their ideology (paying laborers the lowest possible wages in a kind of auction toward the bottom), capitalist enterprise would eventually outproduce the purchasing power of their own society—composed as it was mostly of laborers. At that point, the workers—if there still were any—would be stuffing the warehouses with manufactures and agricultural produce they were too poor to buy. Lacking domestic consumers, the market would collapse from surplus product unless—and here’s the heart of the matter—the capitalists could unload the surplus
abroad. (Marx presciently wrote of efforts to tear down Chinese walls.)

By the depression of 1893, this problem of surplus was not only being openly discussed by Marxists but by businessmen and politicians all over America—people whose reputations for being “sound” and patriotic were beyond reproach. To be sure, unlike a Marxist, a preponderance of these profit-oriented spokespersons did not focus on a need for a more equitable distribution of purchasing power in America (a concern of William Jennings Bryan and other populists) but rather, as Marx predicted, they focused on a concern to find purchasing power in the hands of non-Americans abroad. Even though we had reached our Pacific shoreline, we continued our tradition of looking westward. Predictably, it was there that we hoped to find that “larger pie” or that “rising tide” which would ensure the continuation of American prosperity.

It’s not as if America had never before ventured beyond our western shoreline. We’d long been involved economically with a west beyond the border of our continent, and we’d become even more engaged there in acts of imagination. Secretary of State William Seward had persuaded Congress to purchase Alaska for the United States in 1867—envisioning Alaska as a bridge to Asia. Seward had also ambitioned a reciprocity treaty with the Hawaiian Islands; and this came to pass when, in 1875, a succeeding secretary of state, Hamilton Fish, negotiated a strong pact regarding mutual trade benefits between Hawaii and ourselves—a pact providing an American veto over any Hawaiian plan to cede territory to other countries. It’s amid such predispositions we can hope to find what deeper roots there may have been for a war with Spain.

Introducing Turner, Mahan, Brooks Adams, Hay, Theodore Roosevelt, and McKinley

Each of these men was in some way an architect of our intervention against Spain and of the expansion which that intervention served. Without some grasp of the context for that intervention as reflected in their motives, the further development of American
foreign policy into the twentieth century and up to the present is likely to be misunderstood. In particular, it seems helpful to identify here in 1898 the characteristic way an American reliance on force slips past us unacknowledged. It’s helpful, that is, if we wish to arrive at a realistic understanding of who we are now, and of how we’re currently perceived by others.

Let’s start with the historian Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner didn’t of course cause the closing of the American frontier with which his name is ever associated. And there are American historians who subsequently have argued that his announcement in 1893 of its closing was premature, or that the event was unidentifiable or at least less momentous than he claimed. A more basic criticism is one that questions whether his flattering assessment of the American character is accurate.

Such qualifications notwithstanding, in depression year 1893 Turner framed and explained our general sense of crisis in a way that resonated with prominent policymakers—contributing thereby toward a consensus about our predicament and its resolution. Even if his thesis was somewhat “unhistorical,” it was historic—for it functioned to shape our future. The West, he said, had been the horizon of the American people. It was the repository of our hope. It was the cutting edge at which our democratic spirit had been honed. His thesis could be elaborated by a cluster of generally held notions. The West was where one had gone to give oneself a second chance. It was the room in which America’s expanding population has been able to find a home, an escape valve for energies that might otherwise have turned rancid. “The Wilderness” had from the beginning provided our setting for The American Story: the story about the mission of God’s people to plant God’s kingdom here by taming a continent. The West was a storehouse of boundless resources. The challenges it offered had provided us with something we could mobilize against and come together over. It had been both an outlet for American feistiness and a motive for American union. It had been, Turner claimed by way of conclusion, a nurturing ground for the American spirit of independence, a test of manhood, a continuing inspiration for American ingenuity, a breeding ground for raw unspoiled instantiations of democratic spirit, and a source of national pride.

And indeed the popularity of the slogan “Manifest Destiny” demonstrates how central the movement westward was to our
sense of identity. Turner saw the closing of the frontier as problematic since he took our westward momentum to be the conserver of our values, providing challenging experiences indispensible to the renewal of American character in each successive generation. This momentum had become indispensible to American coherence, for we could hold together only by moving forward. The urgent implication of his message was that America must find a fresh frontier if it was to go on being America.

Turner wasn’t alone in his forebodings and his prescription. Brooks Adams, grandson of John Quincy Adams and great-grandson of John Adams, was—like his articulate and sardonic older brother Henry—convinced America was in trouble. Writing *The Law of Civilization and Decay*, Brooks Adams traced a path similar in some respects to the path suggested in earlier pages here. Adams saw “Imaginative Man”—poet and soldier, deeply motivated by religious conviction—as the builder of civilizations; he saw the success of this type leading dialectically to its own morphing and replacement—leading that is, eventually to the emergence of “Economic Man” as the new type at the center of things. Economic Man arranges everything for the enhancement of Economic Man, reducing his fellows to opportunities and victims in his arrangements. In so doing, he thereby guarantees the decay and collapse of the society that nurtured him. Economic Man is not unlike the protagonist in an Ayn Rand novel—only where Rand casts her protagonist as hero, Adams sees him as harbinger of pending disaster.

Written in Mark Twain’s Gilded Age, Adams’ account seemed an account that had abundant confirmatory evidence. The thing that marred the account—or at least was off-putting about it—was its easy acquiescence in a form of fatalism. Adams purported to be setting forth immutable laws of history. He’d have it that he was doing science; the pattern set forth was one for which he claimed inevitability. In the backdrop, one can hear echoes of Hegelian, Darwinian, and Marxist determinism. If one has a good ear, one hears the ghost of Calvin.

Were this all Adams had to say on the subject, he couldn’t have been among the architects of expansionism. Even Adams himself however found his doctrine dreary beyond bearing; and, for at least a time—and when it counted—he seems to have allowed the possibility that heroic human agency might break free from
the doom his theory foretold. Appalled at the vision of its own approaching decay, America could turn and invent itself once again after the model of Imaginative Man. Quickened by something of the religious sensibility of its forefathers, it could draw again from its heritage of poetic and soldierly qualities. (Martin Heidegger’s thought takes a similar turn in the twentieth century, leading him into a romantic and uncritical sense of German destiny.) Bolstering such optimism, Adams had discovered an additional law, a kind of mystic blend of Isaac Newton and Frederick Jackson Turner: “civilization moves westward.” If our nation could place its interests at the center of that westward movement, and if Americans could place national interest at the center of their individual lives, perhaps America could postpone or even escape the onset of decay.

Brooks Adams’ acquaintance with Theodore Roosevelt (with whom Adams maintained an intermittent conversation for more than a decade, and at a time when it could make a difference) probably had much to do with the rejuvenation of Brooks Adams; it likely also had something to do with the phenomenon of Theodore Roosevelt. Specifically, in prescribing that we center ourselves in westward movement, Adams seems to have contributed toward our intervention against Spain and our acquisition (though Adams first opposed our use of force) of the Philippines. Adams couldn’t of course have played such a part were it not that he was giving definition to ideas already vaguely diffused across America. As Roosevelt wouldn’t have been popular and able to exercise leadership had he not been representative of much that Americans were already feeling and thinking, so Adams’ contributions to Roosevelt’s thinking wouldn’t have mattered had they occurred outside a generalized context—a spirit of the times—open to plans for expansion. (While it’s become the fashion among many to view nations as moving according to supra-personal laws of their own, a less mystical alternative is, I think, to see society as a place shaped by interaction of multiple freedoms and ambitions overlapping and confirming each other.)

A more direct, quasi-physical impact upon policy came from Alfred Thayer Mahan. Mahan was a maverick in a profession that favored ordered and predictable behavior. In the heyday of his naval career he was never promoted beyond captain. Shining through his writing is an almost quaint desire to use language
accurately, backed up by an engaging transparency of character. To employ a non-naval metaphor, Mahan marched to his own drum. Perhaps his disinclination toward typical careerist behavior (he seems not to have been a notable ship captain) explains how his mind was free for matters of theory. The paradox is that few American navy men have had more influence on practical matters than this man who seemed disengaged from them.

In Mahan’s mental ramblings on the role of the navy in the big picture of America’s future, he began at a conventional place. From the start he saw trade as important for America’s wellbeing; and the role he first saw for the navy was a defensive one, protecting such trade from predatory action by foreigners. The predatory action could be anything from outright piracy to a long-term effort of some other nation to commandeer trade routes. To discourage such action and protect against it, coast-hugging cruisers, lightly armed, which could move and maneuver quickly, would seem the appropriate instrument.

As he continued to ponder these matters, however, Mahan’s thinking developed along a line familiar to military theorists—namely, it embraced the logic that says one defends best who commands an offensive position. Gradually his reflections moved to a specific, but global, question: “Have those states which have been notably successful been possessed of more than ordinary sea power?” Once posed, the question practically answered itself. Though he considered himself more a theorist than an historian, Mahan presented an abundance of data suggesting the correlation between “success” and “sea power” was, in current jargon of statistics, remarkably robust. “Successful” nations turned out to be nations possessing superior sea power. Taking Britain and the British navy as his prime example, this is the case Mahan presented in 1890 in his widely read, much translated, very consequential *The Influence of Sea Power upon History.*

Self-evident as this thesis may seem for the long era before air-power, Mahan’s thinking had undergone a notable stretch. His new thinking came to entail the principle that territory far from America’s coasts must be secured if America’s future was to be secured. While conquest was not an end in itself, control of land was necessary so that America’s freighters could be, not just close to places where resources are, but close also to places where markets are. Short of that, America would be at a disadvantage
in the great trade fair our globe was becoming. Further, if there were to be great freighters, there must be great battleships to protect them and to maintain the control of harbors and coaling stations—the infrastructure of naval system.

In a masterful paragraph, Warren Zimmermann sums up the vision in which Mahan’s thinking culminated:

For Mahan, there were many reasons why America had to abandon isolationist thinking and look outward: its growing production, public sentiment, a geographic position between two old worlds and two oceans, the growth of European colonies in the Pacific, the rise of Japan, and the peopling of the American West with men favoring a strong foreign policy. He was not a warmonger; in fact he had a highly sophisticated view of how to prevent war through deterrence. Preparing for war, he wrote, will help prevent it. He urged upon the United States a three-pronged naval policy: short-range warships to protect the chief American harbors, an offensive naval force to extend influence outward, and a national resolution that no foreign state should be allowed to acquire a base within three thousand miles of San Francisco. In his writings Mahan was introducing core concepts—deterrence, sufficiency, détente, globalism—that were to return as principles of American policy during the Cold War.14

Mahan had come to see in the Monroe Doctrine far more than a mere defense for present American security and influence; he saw it as a template for the future, the source of a forward-leaning strategy, a proclamation of unilateralist intent which could not be deduced as some mere corollary to international law. While it’s by no means implicit in international law that the Monroe Doctrine should be reinterpreted as a global agenda, such an agenda was, in Mahan’s view, a legitimate American agenda harnessed in the service of a decision for a strong international presence, one which could only be secured by extraordinary unilateralist

exertion—particularly, that is, by a strong navy. As such, Mahan’s vision was irresistible to eventual Under-Secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt.

Mahan became a highly effective champion of a canal through the Isthmus of Panama, a champion of some form of control over Cuba as the eastern guardian of that canal, a champion for annexation of Hawaii as a westward station from which to protect and service the trade routes which the canal opened, and a champion for retaining ports in the Philippines as a stepping stone and westernmost base for our conduct of trade in Asia. (Mahan eventually joined the consensus position, that Providence had—in spite of ourselves—intended the whole of the Philippines to become our colony.)

As suggested, Mahan’s vision owed much to his study of the British Empire. He envisioned however an improved version. He wanted a stripped down, bare-bones-and-muscle version—one which realized the benefits of empire but without its encumbering administrative responsibilities. What makes his vision so significant is that it reached out toward, and brought together, and became a point of convergence for the visions of many Americans—that of Brooks Adams included—and became the vision at the center of the Open Door Policy to be promulgated by John Hay, Roosevelt’s secretary of state, after the conclusion of the Spanish-American War. (It is in fact the vision which endures to this day at the center of American foreign policy. Tactical dependence on the navy has somewhat yielded to air-power and rocketry, but the strategic vision is the same.)

Let us speak then of John Hay. In the sixty-six years and some months of his life, undoubtedly the most memorable and intense years were not those when he was secretary of state but those from 1861 to 1865 when, with John Nicolay, Hay served in the White House as one of Abraham Lincoln’s two personal secretaries. Those years began when Hay was twenty-two. At that time, he was altogether unfamous, yet he lived in the shadow of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln, helped Nicolay manage Lincoln’s appointments, penned correspondence in the president’s name, romped with Lincoln’s children, reluctantly accompanied Mary Todd on some of her manic buying expeditions, and was at the bedside of Lincoln throughout the long night as Lincoln lay dying.
Later, Hay said of Lincoln: “As republicanism…is the sole hope of a sick world, so Lincoln, with all his foibles, is the greatest character since Christ.” Hay never got over that encounter. You could say he never recovered from it. Some historians conjecture Hay became a kind of surrogate son to Lincoln, a consolation after the death in the White House of young Willie Lincoln. In Hay’s later years, with a long string of accomplishments, well received writings, and illustrious friendships to his resume, it was remarked of Hay that he sometimes seemed inexplicably melancholy. This may have been largely due to temperament. It’s plausible though to think some of it was the residue of the momentous four-year episode of his life in his mid-twenties when he was Lincoln’s everyday gopher in the titanic struggle to hold the country together.

Hay never again felt so close to a center of absolute ethics as he had in the Lincoln years. The secret at the core of it all was not divulged, and the great task of the Lincoln years remained, as we know, unfinished—in fact, in some crucial aspects, it remained undefined. The reference to “republicanism” indicates the direction of Hay’s mind. As Richard Hofstadter has remarked, the death of Lincoln spared Lincoln any participation in what, in the rest of the nineteenth century, evolved out of the republicanism Lincoln had helped bring to birth. Hay was not so spared; and he labored through his remaining four decades to salvage for the nation something of what he’d glimpsed in his youth.

If, as I and others think, the Civil War was primarily concerned with how the West was to be incorporated into the Union, it’s useful to remark that Hay’s career, initiated with such unique personal involvement in that bloody argument, reached its peak a third of a century later with notes he penned regarding the Far East—a Far East which had by then become in our imaginations the new West.

I’ve claimed an instructive way to look at the Open Door Policy is to see it as a corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. Like the Monroe Doctrine, it was a policy that enjoyed the tacit approval of England; and like the Monroe Doctrine it ambitioned a sphere

of influence modeled on the British Empire while avoiding—so at least it intended—the inconveniences of colonialism.

The Monroe Doctrine had said in effect it would be regarded as action unfriendly to the United States if any European power were to attempt to curtail the influence of the United States in the Western Hemisphere.\textsuperscript{16} Similarly the Open Door Notes said in effect it would be regarded as action unfriendly to the United States if any power—Japan and Russia included—were to attempt by colonization or spheres-of-influence in China to close markets there to the United States. While couched in diplomatic language (as was the Monroe Doctrine), and while actually encouraged by a British bureaucrat assigned to China, the underlying statement of the Open Door Policy was “Don’t attempt to close doors in China to the United States.” Moreover, what some foreigners surely discerned as implicit here would in subsequent decades be made explicit by action: that the name of any place in the world could be inserted for “China.”\textsuperscript{17}

On the surface, this policy may look benign and pro-Chinese. Just as the United States had presented itself as the natural and rightful protector of the nations of Latin America, so now we were stepping forth as the protector of China against the kind of division into colonial sections that Europe was already imposing on much of Africa.

If though one looks at the policy from, say, the position of Japan or Russia (or, for that matter, of China), it can look quite different. When, by the Monroe Doctrine, the United States claimed

\textsuperscript{16} I speak here and elsewhere of the Monroe Doctrine as it has functioned in American foreign policy. As actually written by J.Q. Adams, it is clear the intent was to keep the Western Hemisphere from being Europe’s oyster; however, we soon came to interpret it as meaning the Western Hemisphere was America’s oyster. (J.Q. was a man of peace, and even when he wrote of Cuba’s falling into our hands as a ripe fruit, it now seems clear to me that he envisioned an organic and peaceful development.)

\textsuperscript{17} In his lecture on “American Diplomacy: 1900–1950,” George Kennan correctly states that other nations—including Britain—paid little attention to the Notes when they were first circulated; what he merely glances at, and seems to sell short in some texts is the immense influence the notes had on us, the source country, as providing the framework in which future American policy was formulated.
Latin America as a kind of protectorate, it raised over that vast region an umbrella of hegemony—a vague claim of American sovereignty; it implied that throughout most of half the planet, our word was law.

Let’s ruminate on this. Though the claim expressed by the Open Door Notes with regard to China was more nuanced and less strenuous, it wasn’t lost on attentive and interested foreign parties that the scope claimed for the Monroe Doctrine was being significantly extended. Our sphere of national concerns had abruptly bulged westward to include the largest country in Asia. Implicitly, as just suggested, the Open Door Notes meant that in the view of us wilderness-conquering Americans, the legitimate and sovereign interests of America were unbounded.

Between the original announcement of the Monroe Doctrine early in the nineteenth century and the publishing and distribution of the Open Door Notes at its end, occurred the Spanish-American War. Without that war and the physical shift in power it achieved, the Open Door Notes would not have been noticed at all. Indeed, they would probably not have been written. So it may seem John Hay is being introduced too early in the story. It may seem he is less an architect of the war than an inheritor of opportunities it provided. Hay was after all across the Atlantic as Ambassador to England (and actually vacationing in the Middle East) at the time the war was coming on.

But this is to think unhistorically. Better to think as Aristotle invites that the end (in the sense of “goal”) operates at the beginning. Throughout the early 1890s, at their adjacent homes in Lafayette Square—with Hay’s home looking out at the White House—John Hay and Henry Adams were conducting on and off, as referenced earlier, an informal but influential seminar on American foreign policy. This was not what we usually call a conspiracy, for it wasn’t clandestine. The ideas they discussed and criticized were the common coin of the realm; many of their sessions were no doubt paralleled by discussions in the barber shops and front parlors of quite ordinary people. But it happened that the attendants at this seminar had more access to the levers of power than most. The logic that emerged eventually as a statement of policy in the Open Door Notes was the logic emerging
in this seminar; here, if you will, were mechanics who could manufacture a war with Spain as a means to advance that policy.\textsuperscript{18}

What the Notes told the world at large—albeit \textit{sotto voce}—is that we intended the “mission” of the United States to go forward unimpeded; we had banished longtime holdings of the Spanish empire from both hemispheres to show ourselves in earnest. From this larger context we can conclude then, regarding Hay, that—both before it was waged and afterward—this war with Spain had his attention, and that his sense of policy helped bring it about.

Beyond Hay however, our quest to understand why the Spanish-American War happened requires us to fix attention on Theodore Roosevelt. In him the previous strands come together and find a champion. It’s not so much that each of these other strategists and planners endorsed Roosevelt (though, in some measure, they did) as that Roosevelt heartily endorsed relevant things from each of them, and took the sum of their work as a platform to be implemented—was the chief mechanic who regarded their aspirations and plans as something to make real.

Roosevelt had been writing his four-volume work \textit{The Winning of the West} when Frederick Jackson Turner first put forth his thesis on the closing of the frontier. Roosevelt recognized immediately

\textsuperscript{18} Today, to elaborate an earlier point, some American historians and policy-makers dismiss, to their discredit, Hay’s Notes as trivial and wishy-washy. Even the circumspect and articulate George Kennan seems at times to think the Notes were more in the order of window dressing and decoration than actual engines of policy, not recognizing that his own “containment policy” is the Open Door Policy up-dated and outfitted with a new name. Containment is neither more nor less than the other side of the coin to a policy for keeping the door open; those who would close the door must be contained and isolated; to quarantine them is a logical corollary to maintaining an open door. Equally lacking in insight are historians who say the rest of the world simply dismissed the Notes. It would be more accurate to say the British saw them as one strand in their own policy (one of maintaining Anglo-Saxon dominance in world affairs) while other countries held them at arm’s length as something to be regarded with distrust. The hidden agenda of the Notes was never \textit{very} hidden; indeed, to thoughtful people, it was likely transparent.
how Turner's view invited his own expansionism, and he wrote Turner offering enhancing arguments.

With regard to Brooks Adams, the connection has already been mentioned. Adams communicated to Roosevelt something of Adams' own dark sense of urgency (alarming Roosevelt sufficiently that at one point Roosevelt commented: "I wonder if Brooks is not quite mad").

Regarding Alfred Thayer Mahan, the connection with Roosevelt was very direct. Mahan had been impressed by that book Roosevelt wrote as a college student which described the navy's insufficiency in the War of 1812, and Mahan had incorporated Roosevelt's thinking into his own. In 1887 when Mahan was teaching at the Naval War College, he invited Roosevelt to come as a guest to lecture on the War of 1812. A few years later when Mahan published his own foundational work on sea power, Roosevelt strongly complimented Mahan in a letter, and also wrote a glowing review of the book for the Atlantic Monthly. Further, on occasions when either Mahan or the existence of the Naval War College seemed in jeopardy, Roosevelt volunteered to run interference. When Mahan was in Washington, he and Roosevelt would meet at the Metropolitan Club or at John Hay's house—where Brooks Adams, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Henry Adams were engaged in their intermittent but unending seminar on America's future.

With regard to John Hay, Roosevelt's connection went back to the days of his childhood. As a boy Roosevelt had been introduced by his father, the senior Theodore Roosevelt, to Hay. John Hay, along with Henry Adams, and Brooks Adams, had all become, from the time Roosevelt arrived in Washington as Civil Service Commissioner in 1889, informal tutors in Roosevelt's ongoing political education. Hay it's true maintained something of Henry Adams' amused detachment at the spectacle of Roosevelt's countless enthusiasms (even as Roosevelt, in private comments in later moments, had a tendency to downgrade Hay as more a dreamer than a man of action like himself). So while both Hay and Adams recognized in Roosevelt an agent more prone to action than they were, they worried—and in Adams' case sometimes complained starkly—about the form the action could take.

For all the currents and cross-currents, when Roosevelt became president after the assassination of McKinley, one of his first acts
was to retain Hay as secretary of state. Roosevelt understood the aggressive dimension of Hay’s Open Door Notes and kept Hay on as Secretary until, in Roosevelt’s second term, Hay became exhausted and died. It’s helpful for understanding Roosevelt’s connection to Hay to remember it was the calm and sometimes melancholy Hay who referred to the Spanish-American War as “a splendid little war.”

At the time the war broke out, Roosevelt was Assistant Secretary of the Navy. While others among the more economically motivated expansionists wondered whether the price of a war over Cuba was too great, Roosevelt—who seems never to have met an expansionist argument he didn’t like—regarded the possibility of war as an enticing prospect. War, he thought, was good for people. It set them in motion; and if ever a human maintained equilibrium by moving forward, it was he.

His forward momentum was a trait well understood by those closest to him. During his life it was remarked that while Theodore fulminated and celebrated, his second wife Edith stood by, interested and helpful, but sustained in her own center-of-gravity. She was somehow insulated from being swept off her feet by each new gust. It seems it would’ve had to be that way if the marriage was to endure; while truly a friend, she was never merely a fan. The same can be said more emphatically for Roosevelt’s first daughter, Alice. At once caustic and affectionate (and perhaps more caustic than affectionate), it was she who remarked that her father wished to be “the bride at every wedding, the corpse at every funeral.”

Theodore’s restlessness had no doubt many personal circumstances that help to explain it. Of more interest is why this restlessness made him so acceptable to America as a leader. He’s like Stephen Leacock’s knight who “jumped on his horse and rode off in all directions.” We noted Henry Adams’ misgivings; he spoke of Roosevelt as “pure act” (something like the medieval scholastic concept of God)—but Adams’ intent was not particularly complimentary. Like an accomplished lawyer who could make a case for anything, Roosevelt could become a cheerleader for any cause. He performed as one celebrating the achievements of America’s big businessmen, and as champion of the need to control them; as ardent seeker after world peace, and as one who could think of no higher exercise of the human spirit than to be engaged in war;
as a great believer in democracy and the equality of humans, and as one who saw nothing wrong with the resolute extermination of Indians in order to provide white men with a larger arena for the exercise of virtue.

Here, in fact, would seem the key to Roosevelt’s popularity. Like Americans in general, he did not brood over inconsistencies. He was moving so fast that no keen awareness of inconsistency could overtake him. In this, he served and intensified our aspirations while he allayed our misgivings.

For there were at least two major fault lines in the American psyche. One had to do with the identification of our national mission with the purposes of God. Nothing seemed more natural. Our mission was imposed by God; therefore what served the mission, served God. Debates, newspaper articles, memoirs, sermons, letters, and diaries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are studded with references (as we still find often enough today) to “mission,” “the destiny of America,” “the fulfillment of America’s promise,”—along with reference to America as “God’s Country” and “the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

One can say of course, this is a way of speaking. Of what though is it a way of speaking? What have we been talking about? Why could these phrases volley forth, over and over, as so self-evident as to render further discussion unnecessary? How did these phrases get to be “clinchers” in debates regarding national policy? While every society is held together by an ethos of sorts, ours seems to have been suspended in mid-air, held up by nothing more than our fervent say-so. There is latent anxiety in all of this. We protest too much.

The trouble with our Puritan ethos and shared dream of a New Eden in our New World is that, as noted, it immediately generated immense tension in the lives of those dedicated to it. We were, as we continue to be, bible-bearers. In 1899 we founded Gideons International with the purpose of making this book always accessible. Yet much of our activity seemed radically out of step with significant biblical teaching. The book of Job pictures a good man suffering. The weakest and most despised among us can be, the book of Job seems to teach, closer to God than all who criticize and despise him. Again, in the latter part of Isaiah, we find Isaiah describing a “Suffering Servant.” The servant
is regarded with contempt and cast out; but Isaiah seems to say this weak, vulnerable, and disfigured servant will be, quintessentially, the chosen instrument of God’s redeeming love. At least this is the way Isaiah was interpreted in the four Christian gospels. In other places, the prophets had spoken of God’s unwavering solicitude for the widow and the orphan, and had proclaimed our treatment of them as the test case of our relation to God. And all this comes to a culmination for Christians in the gospel portrayal of Jesus as the special patron of the poor, the orphaned, the diseased, the Samaritan. The New Testament story is about a man who accepted crucifixion in solidarity with outcasts.

If the purpose of the New Eden was to be a place where the spirit of Jesus would reign, clearly it could not be a place where might makes right. Unless, from its foundation, it was instituted as a place with a tender regard for the weaker party, it could not be anything like the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed. Yet in the New World, who among all was more vulnerable—“savage” gestures and desperate stratagems notwithstanding—than the American Indian?

Unwillingness to entertain this question meant the mission carried forward by our Puritan ancestors could never be the mission they intended—could never be the justifying mission in imitation of Jesus by which they sought to live meaningfully. For all that—or perhaps because of it—there was a desperate need to find in such deeds as were actually being carried out a reassuring manifestation of God’s approval. Great awakening followed great awakening. Our need to identify the lives we actually lived with some conception of divine will became the stronger and more compulsive as our brooding sense of our behavior’s failure to measure up became more undeniable.

Tension was enhanced when this original fault line in our Puritan legacy was quickened from a second source of values. Perhaps we inherit this too from the Bible; but its more immediate history dates from the Enlightenment—from the thinking that surfaces in Rousseau and Kant, and closer to home, in Adam Smith and Thomas Paine. Here we find shining proclamation of the equality of persons and fervent witness to the unalienability of human rights. If America was to be the city on a hill envisioned by Puritan John Winthrop, it would—in the constituting ambitions of
our political founders a century and a half later—achieve this exceptional place only by becoming the world’s exemplary society where equality had become palpable and human rights were not only professed but were respected and manifest in the events of daily life.

The reason this enhanced our tensions was that it conflicted directly with our Puritan sense of being an Elect. The divinely endorsed self-aggrandizing of the Puritan was incompatible with the egalitarian ideals to be found in our Declaration of Independence, our Bill of Rights, and some other major amendments to our Constitution. Therefore, Puritan urgencies drew us away from Enlightenment thinking, and when push came to shove, it was routinely our Puritan urgencies that prevailed.

Startling is the degree to which, from the very start, the commitment to equality was diluted and ignored. Ironically and beyond all logic, Enlightenment waters were quickly contaminated by a convenient sense that we who understood human equality so well were, by that very fact, superior to other people. Readily we came to see ourselves as better than those we thought incapable of our inspired insights. This mindset characterized frequently enough the leaders among our best and brightest—those whom we honored as architects and inheritors of Enlightenment thinking. In affirming human equality, we violated it; and the enthusiasms of the Enlightenment were redirected into Puritan channels. Enlightenment came to be regarded as a source of prestige—as a distinction and claim to privilege among the Elect.

So co-option of Enlightenment rhetoric was successful, and the doctrine of the Elect survived advocacy of egalitarianism and secularization. To state the irony as starkly as possible: we Americans were entitled to treat others inhumanely because our sense of humanity was more enlightened than theirs.

It’s in embodying this contradiction that Roosevelt strides forth in the 1890s as an ideal leader for the generation of our great-grandparents. In the third volume of *The Winning of the West* Roosevelt tells us:

> The conquest and settlement by the whites of the Indian lands was necessary to the greatness of the race and the well being of civilized mankind....Such conquests are
sure to come when a masterful people, still in its raw barbarian prime, finds itself face to face with a weaker and wholly alien race which holds a coveted prize in its feeble grasp.  

Note the word “necessary.” In it sounds that theme of Mission—of a divine calling—which resonates through all our history.

That Roosevelt is deliberately thinking in racist terms is made still more evident from an earlier passage in the same volume:

The most ultimately righteous of all wars is a war with savages, though it is apt to be also the most terrible and inhuman. The rude, fierce settler who drives the savage from the land lays all civilized mankind under a debt to him.

Here the paradox smacks one in the face. The “most terrible and inhuman” behavior is entitled to receive praise and honor from “all civilized mankind.”

Even a moment’s pause here—as it were to take a breath—provides the opportunity to wonder how such a dreadful means can be conducive to such a glorious end. Neither Roosevelt nor the American people had the appetite for such a pause.

Lest I seem to be wrenching his words out of Roosevelt’s context, here’s a passage from a page just before the last citation:

Whether the whites won the land by treaty, by armed conflict, or…by a mixture of both, mattered comparatively little so long as the land was won. It was all-important that it should be won, for the benefit of civilization and in the interests of mankind.

All of this is the language of the Elect. It is language poisoned by the bigotry of the Elect. It coats the poison over with silvery

phrases from the Enlightenment such as “the benefit of civilization” and “the interests of mankind.”

As suggested earlier, war against the Indians required a demonizing of the Indians if whites were to kill Indians with a good conscience. Warren Zimmermann, who culled together the passages cited above, writes of Roosevelt’s attitude toward Indians:

Roosevelt’s picture of Indians was a stereotype of inferiority. They were “filthy, cruel, lecherous, and faithless,” and their life was “but a few degrees less meaningless, squalid, and ferocious than that of the wild beasts with whom they held joint ownership.” In describing them, Roosevelt habitually used words like ferocious, treacherous, bloodthirsty, duplicitous, and skulking.22

One thinks of Indian-killers as having the status in Roosevelt’s imagination that we assign to Walter Reed and those other heroes who drained fever-bearing mosquitoes from the swamps of Cuba and Central America. Indians were there to be exterminated. (So too, evidently, were “wild beasts” whom Roosevelt visited other countries in order to put down by the crate-load.) In celebrating racism, Roosevelt writes with a purity and eloquence not even Jefferson could match.

With perfect candor Roosevelt helps us to situate the place the Spanish-American War had in his thinking. A year after the war, in a new forward to his four-volume work on the West, Roosevelt writes:

The whole western movement of our people was simply the most vital part of that great movement of expansion which has been the central and all-important feature of our history—a feature far more important than any other since we became a nation, save only the preservation of the Union itself. It was expansion that made us a great power…. At bottom the question of expansion in 1898

was simply but a variant of the problem we had to solve at every stage of the great western movement.23

Regarding Roosevelt’s important, on-the-ground, real-time contribution to the war with Spain, we must look away from his cowboy performance in Cuba to the time immediately preceding when he functioned in Washington as Assistant Secretary of the Navy. There, he was an indefatigable member of the McKinley administration and a vociferous participant in meetings with cabinet members, arguing at every opportunity that there was no alternative to war. He proceeded from at least three mutually-reinforcing premises: (1) the United States needed to expand; (2) War would be good for the character and morale of the American people; and (3) the Spaniards did not deserve an empire.

When the Maine exploded, Roosevelt went on public record as certain the Spanish had done it, and questioned the patriotism of those who presented theories to the contrary. When McKinley wavered as to whether war was necessary, Roosevelt was bluntly pro-war to McKinley’s face, and was even more blunt, adding sarcasm about McKinley’s wavering, behind his back. Of most importance: when his immediate boss John Long took a half-day off on Friday afternoon, February 25, 1898, Roosevelt sent a cable to Hong Kong to his crony Commodore Dewey that included the words: “In the event of declaration of war Spain, your duty will be . . . offensive operations in Philippine Islands.” This was a startling usurpation of power on Roosevelt’s part. That this cable was not countermanded by McKinley when he caught wind of it is instructive. The act had a rash character; but the mindset behind it had to have been generally shared, had to be within the bounds of the consensus that was forming.

So, finally, we must turn to McKinley to see how the consensus forming at that time led finally to war with Spain. McKinley has sometimes been seen as weak and vacillating. When he’s viewed from a distance, this appraisal can appear plausible. Viewed closer up, he comes across more positively. Career politicians who dealt with him at close quarters seem mostly to have found him kind and straightforward. He seems not to have been inclined

to nurture grievances, and in the tumbling free-for-all of Ohio politics, those who were his rivals at one turn often emerged as friends at the next. He was conscientiously devoted to American prosperity, and throughout most of his official career tried to promote it by promoting high tariffs. The booster spirit Sinclair Lewis would later portray in his character Babbitt seems to have come naturally to McKinley, but in McKinley’s case it seems it was free from pettiness. Perhaps he left the more sordid details of backroom deals to his self-designated manager Mark Hanna. It can be reckoned a part of his constancy that, in his pursuit of prosperity for the nation, he’d always aligned himself with the business class and had kept its interests at the fore of his attention as he wended his way through the complexities of foreign policy. For just this reason, promotion of business can’t fairly be charged against him as a hidden agenda. In matters of personality, he was attentive to his invalid wife, and seems to have been unburdened by narcissism or undo sensitivity. It may be that from the start of his career he’d spontaneously and genuinely thought of himself as a mediator, a smoother of ruffled feelings, a builder of consensus. This might help explain why rivals did not often turn themselves into enemies. This was so predictable that even in defeat he seemed to float upward. Having acquitted himself bravely and with distinction in the Civil War, he’d seen the carnage of war and had conceived a visceral repugnance for it. Humane feeling figured in his rhetoric about Cubans, and there’s no reason to doubt the concern he expressed for them was authentic. A man whose life was guided by uncriticized platitudes, in the inner circle of officials forming policy prior to the war with Spain, he may well have been the least (explicitly anyway) ideological and dogmatic. Later, as he lay wounded from a bullet he’d received while trying to shake hands with his assassin, he’s reported to have said of him: “Poor man; I’m sure he had no idea what he was doing.”

In most of the three months and some days in 1898 that led to his April 11 request for a declaration of war, McKinley should be called consistent rather than vacillating in his desire to find a peaceful end to the turmoil in Cuba. If he can nonetheless be seen as vacillating during those days, the vacillation was more about means than purposes. Could the U.S. buy Cuba from Spain? If so, let that be the end of the crisis. Could the U.S.
intimidate Spain into granting Cuba a kind of autonomy (similar to that for instance which the British were in the process of granting Canada)? If so, let that be the end. Could the Cuban insurgents against Spain prevail in battle and win their independence? If so, well then, more power to them—though here there were to be sure reservations and forebodings among his advisors and within the business community, and these probably entered into his calculus.

The trouble for McKinley was that each of these courses seemed a dead end. That may not actually have been the case; but this probably was the way McKinley saw things. The Spanish government, fragile in Spain itself, was unwilling to enter negotiations for the sale of its colony, knowing how unpopular such a sale would be in Madrid and among the Spanish people. Secondly, “autonomy,” while it had all the nice-sounding attractions of a compromise, was not actually acceptable either to the Spanish government or to the Cuban revolutionaries. It was unacceptable to the Spanish government for the same reason the sale of Cuba was: the home front—including the military—wouldn’t abide it. But—at least by the start of 1898—it was unacceptable also to the Cuban revolutionaries: their sufferings had led them past the point where they could regard even the best of reconciliations with Spain as tolerable; independence had become the goal that held them together as a revolutionary force. Further, to tell the truth, we weren’t ourselves sure how we would adjust to autonomy. Finally, leaving the Cubans to win independence on their own didn’t seem a realistic policy. Weak as Spain was, it had dedicated over two hundred thousand Spanish soldiers to suppressing the Cuban insurrection. It had suppressed Cuban insurrections before. Perhaps Spain had the power and quite possibly the will to annihilate all Cubans who opposed it sooner than grant Cuban independence. And, anyway, were Cubans really ready for Cuban independence? And were we?

Along such lines, one more gambit, short of all-out war, seemed open to an American administration burdened by genuine concern for the Cuban people. This was to play a part similar to the part France had played in the American Revolution. The United States could recognize the Cuban revolutionaries as the legitimate government of Cuba, and then do what it could as an ally to protect that government.
Perhaps this kind of tightrope walking could have worked; but in fact it was probably the least discussed of the options available. Not only was there a high likelihood it would provoke a conflict with Spain rather than avoid it, but—more importantly—this option didn’t fit the prevailing ethos of the American expansionist movement. It was outside the architecture of American political thought. The Monroe Doctrine wasn’t a principle of international law; it was, as clarified by Mahan’s advocacy of a strong navy, a proclamation of American intention—saying in effect America’s word was law in the western hemisphere. While Spain’s hold on Cuba had been, one might say, “grandfathered” into the American proclamation, clearly the writ permitting that unruly exception was running out. It was widely felt it was time for America to take Spain in hand. Further, had the United States enrolled itself merely as the ally of a Cuban struggle for independence, the tactical consequences would have been unacceptable to American policy-makers and military leaders. Our military maneuvers would have needed to coordinate with, and be subject to, initiatives of Cuban revolutionaries whom we knew very imperfectly—persons whose motives were anything but transparent to us. These were “untried” leaders, often squabbling among themselves. For all we knew, some were quite hostile to our ever-expanding participation in Cuba’s economy. For tactical as well as strategic reasons therefore, one can assume this particular alternative had few backers in Washington.

I’ve argued that McKinley’s vacillations concerned means to avoid war. Even in most of March 1898 (following the explosion of the Maine in February), McKinley seems to have been consistent rather than vacillating in his search for a peaceful resolution; it’s only when the moment arrives when he’s convinced that things he does want can’t be obtained without the war he doesn’t want, that he yields.

And only at that point, when he came to see war as inevitable, does it seem the real vacillation of McKinley came front and center. It wasn’t clear, even by the time McKinley requested war on April 11, what kind of Cuba he envisioned as the outcome of the war. He requested war because he became convinced it was necessary for his larger plans regarding American commerce abroad, and because he had been persuaded by Elihu Root and others that if he did not request it, his administration would fall apart.
Probably he hadn’t decided what he intended for the future of Cuba. On the surface at least, he left the matter to Congress. With its Teller Amendment (foreswearing annexation of Cuba), Congress attempted to clarify American intentions as it declared war. Even then, the matter remained ambiguous. (One can see why some Cubans have said with sardonic humor that Cuba lost the war for independence not to Spain, as some feared it would, but to the United States, as all Cubans should have feared it would.)

Regarding McKinley’s decision to ask for war, a fair summary statement is Warren Zimmermann’s: “McKinley was driven by inertia rather than design.” The inertia, to be sure, wasn’t that of immobility but of Newtonian forward momentum. While Hearst and (to a lesser extent) Pulitzer, and the Maine, and humanitarian sensibility are not by themselves sufficient to explain the decision for war, nonetheless when these are seen as forces drawn up into the groundswell of American expansionism, the war acquires an aspect of inevitability. While the expansionism itself was, one ought to conclude, a product of our collective freedom as people enjoying a form of self-rule, we preferred to see the matter differently. The war came to seem unavoidable as a step toward implementation of a destiny somehow imposed upon us. In this context as mentioned, McKinley came to feel—as both Henry Cabot Lodge and Elihu Root had warned him and as Roosevelt had relentlessly insisted—that if he wanted to maintain a measure of control over events (if, that is, he didn’t want to lose all public support and all confidence in his administration and in its plans to rescue our economy through an expansion of trade), he would have to opt for war.

In retrospect, both the critics of the decision and the defenders of the decision have tended to emphasize its novelty. I think they would do better to notice how unoriginal it was—how totally in keeping it was (as Theodore Roosevelt claimed) with the overall flow and momentum of American history. That we maintained this momentum in denial that it was we who were maintaining it was, we should notice, something that reinforced our continuity with our Puritan past. Manifest Destiny made us do it.

In the case of our Indian wars, it’s true we’d had on our side a kind of legal fiction in international law. This helped us feel our forward march was in the path of justice. Jefferson, for instance,
had bought the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon; therefore Indians who encumbered that territory and interfered with our plans for its development could be seen as infringing on our rights; they could, in effect, be cited as “trespassers.” In the case of Cuba, we lacked that legal cover.

Yet even a moment’s reflection on the Indian case must reveal how shallow that cover was. When, in the case of Cuba, we couldn’t claim even that legitimacy, the Monroe Doctrine supplied the lack. Here too though the stubborn problem remained. Neither could kingly grants nor could Monroe Doctrine really serve to anchor our policy. An axiomatic conviction, expressed eventually in that slogan “manifest destiny,” had been operating all along. It was our ethereal sense of privileged assignment—our sense of a divinely-directed mission—that gave the Monroe Doctrine its authority in our eyes. The mere fact Cuba (unlike, say, California) was not contiguous land was hardly a sufficient reason to require, beyond such exalted doctrine and destiny, any further invention of legal principle.

Thus did Cuba, in the anticipation of the war, and in the course of it, and in its aftermath, become, unofficially, something analogous to an American state. While the Teller Amendment had renounced annexation, the Platt Amendment (which declared an American right to intervene in Cuban affairs) effectively countered the sovereignty the Teller Amendment seemingly guaranteed. We mandated that the Platt Amendment be recognized in the Cuban constitution. The amendment provided to our federal government a veto power analogous to the power our federal government has exercised over our states (especially since the end of the Civil War)—a federal power, that is, to annul or restrict state laws when it finds them in conflict with American federal law and purpose. Garry Wills examines this evolution of federal supremacy in his work on the Gettysburg Address.\(^\text{24}\)

\(^{24}\) Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992). The special relationship thereby established with Cuba goes a long way toward explaining something that can be puzzling to non-Americans: the outrage felt by many Americans over the seizure of power in Cuba by Fidel Castro—a man who surprised us by resolutely turning his back on Washington. Many an American has felt toward Castro something similar to what the typical northerner may have felt toward Jefferson Davis at the outbreak of the Civil War.
In coming so far, we’ve surveyed the complex motivations for the Spanish-American War. What remains for further discussion is examination of what motives led to the annexation of the Philippines.

Here too let me suggest there’s less mystery than meets the eye. If one is asking simply why the seizure of the Philippines got “added” to our effort to establish stability on the island of Cuba, the problem may appear beyond solution. But the wrong question has been asked. The Philippines was never just an add-on. It was, from before the war with Spain, a key piece in the scaffolding of our strategy.

That Roosevelt was not countermanded in his Friday telegram to Dewey is a clue. Unlikely as it seems, from early in McKinley’s first term there had been lengthy afternoon carriage-rides of President McKinley with his irrepressible and insubordinate young Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt. What did they talk about? It’s likely they talked about Manila among other things. They talked of Mahan’s grand scheme, in which America could not thrive without foreign trade (foreign trade being, as noted, a subject McKinley had concerned himself with throughout his whole career); and it seems likely, at Roosevelt’s instigation, they talked of how, in accord with Mahan’s scheme, trade required (1) pacification of Cuba, (2) a canal through the Isthmus, (3) annexation of Hawaii, and (4) possession of a far-east port like Manila.

We’ve noted it was the lure of Chinese markets (and our wish to settle the Cuban issue quickly so we could address this “larger” issue) that generated urgency and impatience in the last days of

 Castro, they have felt, is a secessionist and impostor, a violator of American sovereignty—one whose usurpation should not stand. This in turn helps explain, among other things, the extreme animosity toward John F. Kennedy—the sense in fact of sacrilege—felt by some in America’s high command and in the CIA over Kennedy’s alleged failure, first during the Bay of Pigs Fiasco and then during the Cuban Missile Crisis, to reaffirm our traditional jurisdiction where Cuba was concerned. Kennedy, they would have it, was the un-Lincoln—was in fact a traitor who let secession go forward. (James Douglass among others has regarded this high-level outrage at Kennedy—who had seemed in his campaign to promise he would do something about Castro—as an important factor in motivating the assassination of Kennedy.)
our negotiations with Spain, and that led McKinley finally to
terminate discussion and issue an ultimatum that led to war.

Once we’d terminated Spain’s military hold on the Philippines,
the expansionists (Roosevelt, Mahan, Hay, McKinley, etc.) could
ask critics in America who opposed them (critics sometimes
called “anti-imperialists”) what was to be done with the Philip-
pines other than to hang onto it. The anti-imperialists had no
good answer. We seemed to have a hot potato in hand. Were
we to drop the potato and run, it seemed there would be mas-
sive confusion and lethal civil unrest in the Philippines; and it
seemed likely the islanders would soon become the victims of
new European powers and/or Japan. We’d shattered what order
there’d been for the people of the Philippines, and the respon-
sible thing was to remain and do what we could to establish new
order in its place.

But to have framed the discussion this way seems to have been
to pretend the acquisition of the Philippines was accidental—
was something that happened to us. It takes up the annexation
after the fact, which as I’ve said above is a mistake. Granted soon
after in the early 1900s, the Philippines and our urgent desire to
maintain and increase our share in the “China market” slack-
ened some; yet it’s in just such matters that time, with its shifting
frames of reference, can trick us. In 1898 the desire to take the
Philippines and hold it can’t accurately be judged to have been a
minor concern. That would be to ignore history as it was being
made, and to note it only as it settles into a fixed place in the past.

McKinley may have given a group of Methodist clergymen to
understand the Philippines had fallen into our lap from heaven,
but that’s not how it happened; an administration is more than
one man. What happened is that within a week of our declaration
of war, Commodore Dewey (acting in accord with Roosevelt’s
pre-war telegram) entered Manila Bay and altogether destroyed
the Spanish fleet. This was no act of God or gods. Though we
subsequently came to regard our acquisition as something of a
liability, the logic of our program in 1898 seemed to require this
acquisition. Without it, the Open Door Policy (which, as I argue,
has provided us with our sense of what we’re about ever since)
would most likely never have become the charter for American
foreign policy it did. The assertion of a right to an open avenue
of trade with China would have been abstract and meaningless had we not been fore-positioned in the Philippines to exercise it.

If anywhere, it is in the Philippines that our reliance on naked force for the achievement of our “destiny” should have become evident. Many Filipinos simply did not acquiesce in our assertion that we were their new masters. Yet it wasn’t possible to portray the local freedom-fighter Emilio Aguinaldo, and the *insurrectos* whom he led, as aggressors against the people of the United States. With some pushing and pulling and blinking, we’d managed to do that with American Indians—had done it with the likes of John Ross, Sitting Bull and Chief Joseph. Here though the vast geographical separation of the two peoples left that psychological maneuver out of bounds. Instead, the whole context had to be reconfigured mentally (and without aid of some manifest geometric rectangularity to feed our imaginations) to make our cruel war against Filipinos palatable.

The new configuration in our thinking was along these lines: “Here are us Americans—selflessly attempting to provide the Filipinos with a share of those blessings with which God has abundantly blessed us. In their benighted and un-Christianized state however, many of the Filipinos lack the wisdom to grasp the motives that inspire us. Unfortunately therefore it’s necessary to fight a goodly number of Filipinos to the death—until such time as a majority of the survivors come to see the light. At that point, we can begin to treat Filipinos as a people possessing all those rights of human beings which our traditional values require us to respect.”

For all that, not surprisingly, our government preferred not to be too explicit regarding the particulars of what was taking place.

Five years after we’d managed in 1901 to capture our former ally Aguinaldo through a pretense of having been captured by his troops, and long after Roosevelt’s proclamation of general amnesty in 1902 that was supposed to end hostilities, there was under General Leonard Wood (buddy of T.R. during the campaign in Cuba) a massacre of roughly 600 Moro Filipinos. These were Muslims, and it was thought, because of their recalcitrant ways, to be a kind of economy of energy to kill them all when the opportunity presented itself. That’s what the American soldiers under Wood’s command did.
We’re told in the official report to Washington that every man, woman, and child of these Moro villagers, trapped in the crater of a volcano to which they’d fled, was killed by Wood’s well-armed American troops shooting from the crater’s rim.

On Monday, March 12, 1906, three days after reports of this incident had been published in American newspapers, Mark Twain attempted to dictate a satirical reaction to it. He resumed the effort two days later on March 14. One can say of this writing endeavor that it was one of those rare occasions when Twain’s voice deserted him. Later in the year when Twain was marking writings for inclusion in his autobiography, excerpts of which were being published in the North American Review, he marked this dictated material on the Philippines “not usable yet.”

Twain’s problem was he couldn’t maintain the satirical distance which might have made the piece work. He gave it his best shot, speaking with mocking praise of “the brilliancy of the victory” and referencing the official report as registering the “heroism” and “gallantry” of our troops as they murdered the helpless Moros. But Twain was altogether unable to harness his despondency and outrage into a disciplined work of satire. When he remarked on a commendation of the incident by President Roosevelt, Twain bluntly said:

His whole utterance is merely a convention. Not a word of what he said came out of his heart. He knew perfectly well that to pen six hundred helpless and weaponless savages in a hole like rats in a trap and massacre them in detail during a stretch of a day and a half, from a safe position on the heights above, was no brilliant feat of arms—and would not have been a brilliant feat of arms even if Christian America, represented by its salaried soldiers, had shot them down with bibles and the Golden Rule instead of bullets.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{25} Mark Twain, \textit{The Autobiography of Mark Twain, Vol. 1} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 405.
You can hear Twain reaching back toward a tone of irony as he approaches the end of that long third sentence; but it’s too late. His temper is already lost, and the piece has simply the flat character of a white-hot denunciation. The gross necrophilia of TR is too much for Twain’s stomach. A further two days later, recounting a going-away party of the previous day for his friend George Harvey, Twain remarks how all the guests were condemning the behavior of Wood and company. Twain comments:

Harvey said he believed that the shock and shame of this episode would eat down deeper and deeper into the hearts of the nation and fester there and produce results. He believed it would destroy the Republican party and President Roosevelt. I cannot believe that the prediction will come true, for the reason that prophesies which promise valuable things, desirable things, good things, worthy things, never come true. Prophecies of this kind are like wars fought in a good cause—they are so rare that they don’t count.\(^{26}\)

Again, one can see Twain reach for wit and irony, but the character of the whole is bleak anger.

One can imagine history teachers encouraging their students to write essays about heroic Patriots holding off the British at Bunker (or Breed’s) Hill. One can’t imagine any history teacher ever inviting students to write essays about how we heroically killed Philippine Moros in 1906. (Surely no teacher has ever given such an assignment; instead the incident has been let gently disappear from The American Story and from American memory.)

The question those insisting on annexation asked anti-imperialists in 1899 and 1900 was: “How do you propose we handle with honor our current predicament of being the only source of order in the Philippines today?”

It was, again, the wrong question. It’s like the fellow whose loving and trusting wife has found him in a compromising relation to another woman. Suppose he asks you, his friend, how he’s

\(^{26}\) Twain, *Autobiography*, 407.
to extricate himself from the situation with honor. The error of
the question is that it presupposes there’s a way to come out of
such a situation with honor.

There was no answer to the question about the Philippines
once the question was so framed. The condition we were in was
dishonorable. To treat it subsequently as something destiny had
dropped on us from the sky (as even the realist Mahan tried to
do) was simply to compound our guilt by adding denial. It was
quite in the Puritan mold: we don’t do things; God does them
through us.

Honor would have been not to present ourselves as a conqueror
in the first place. Once we’d compromised ourselves thus, it
wasn’t incumbent upon those who’d opposed the project to come
up with an honorable way out.27

There was no honor in staying; and there was no honor in leav-
ing. We should simply have extricated ourselves. An apology
might have helped.28

The argument that we felt Filipinos were not ready to govern
themselves should have had no traction. There were people all
over the world whom we felt were not ready to govern them-
selves (as there continue to be to the present moment). And the
argument that “if we don’t rule the Filipinos, some other power
will,” seems specious too—even if touched by realism. For if, as

27. Brooks Adams became so confused on this point that even though
he’d opposed the conquest, regarding annexation as the wrong way to
expand, he nonetheless reversed himself once the Filipinos engaged in
lethal resistance, saying, “Now our honor requires that we fight them to
the finish.”

28. While Roosevelt lusted for the Philippines and acted coolly and cru-
elly toward Filipinos, the portly presence of William Howard Taft as a
benign administrator there in the opening years of the twentieth century
provided some Filipinos a cushion against the sense of being oppressed. A
generation later a romantic with an off-the-scale ego to rival Roosevelt’s,
Douglas MacArthur (perhaps in an effort to expiate the cruelty towards
Filipinos of his own father) seems to have forged a lifelong bond with the
Phillipine people which went far toward assuaging the insult of annexa-
tion. Whatever the faults of this later man, clearly he had gifts of intel-
ligence and empathy that exceeded Roosevelt’s.
it pretends, the argument looks to the interest of Filipinos, surely that was their risk to take. Had they wished to dodge that risk, they could have invited us to protect them. Their fierce resistance showed they did not so wish. If the argument for annexation looked to our interest (and this is where the real argument resided), its premise was that we were entitled—at whatever cost to others—to do whatever we thought would secure us advantages or protect us from disadvantages. On such a pretext, all men can become robbers.

**Conclusion Of Discussion On Force**

My purpose in this survey focusing on four uses of force (against the Cherokee, Mexicans, Plains Indians, and, lastly, against—or to the disadvantage of—former subjects of Spain) has been an attempt at demonstrating how our uses of force are typically invisible to us. We tend to think all our wars have been defensive, or at least humanitarian. Thus, when the internal logic of capitalism (“pay the laborer as little as possible”) began to contract our market, and we began to feel a more urgent need for markets abroad, we simultaneously came to feel that anyone in the world who didn’t serve as a means for advancing that purpose of ours was, by that fact, a self-designated enemy—deserving whatever retribution we saw fit to mete out. Such people were no more than obstacles to a rightful ordering of the planet. For the sake of order, we would punish and incapacitate them. Repugnant as the task might be, God or destiny had assigned it. Once those others submitted, they could begin to participate in the benefits of the order we were establishing. History would justify us.

The special convenience of the “Open Door” is that its humanitarian aura was ideal for blinding us to the brute force required by our method. We said we wished only to set in place the rightful rules of the road. We wished only to take our place among the nations of the world—to stake out, among the peoples of the world, our place in the sun. We wished to be a city on a hill, and to exercise from there our God-given right to compete on equal terms for the opportunities and riches the world had to offer.
Doing so, we would be a beacon of light to all, and humankind’s last best hope.29

Lest it seem I’ve gratuitously ascribed to the Spanish-American War a selfishness and racism which weren’t really a part of the picture, it might be helpful to grant the last word to Senator Albert Beveridge. While his was not the only voice in the long debate over acquisition of the Philippines, his was a voice of the party that prevailed. On January 9, 1900, speaking in favor of the majority consensus in the Senate, Senator Beveridge proclaimed:

Mr. President: the times call for candor. The Philippines are ours forever.... And just beyond the Philippines are China’s illimitable markets. We will not retreat from either.... We will not renounce our part in the mission of our race, trustee, under God, of the civilization of the world.... The Pacific is our ocean.... Where shall we turn for consumers of our surplus? Geography answers the question. China is our natural customer.... The Philippines give us a base at the door of all the East.... My own belief is that there is not 100 men among them [the Filipinos] who comprehend what Anglo-Saxon self-government even means, and there are over 5,000,000 people to be governed. It has been charged that our conduct of the war has been cruel. Senators, it has been the reverse.... Senators must remember that we are not dealing with Americans or Europeans. We are dealing with Orientals.30

---

29. Surely this kind of Puritan acquisitiveness proceeding under the umbrella of Enlightenment rhetoric has only grown in the century and more since the Spanish American War, and is very much with us today—relying on ever more lethal technology, and ever more sophisticated means of monitoring and intruding, to smooth its path.