

## 4 The annexation of the Philippines

► **Key question:** *Why did the USA colonize the Philippines?*

The annexation of the Philippines was a type of colonization unique in US history. It was never repeated. In this section we investigate why the Philippines, islands many thousands of miles from the USA, were colonized and how successful that colonization was. The English poet Rudyard Kipling had no doubts where the responsibilities of the USA lay. His poem ‘The White Man’s Burden’, with a subtitle, ‘The United States and the Philippine Islands’, was published in *McClure’s* magazine, a popular publication during the early 1900s in the USA (see Source E).

### SOURCE E

**An excerpt from ‘The White Man’s Burden’ by Rudyard Kipling, from Rudyard Kipling’s Verse, Inclusive Edition, 1885–1932, published by Hodder & Stoughton in 1934.**

*Take up the White Man’s burden –  
The savage wars of peace –  
Fill full the mouth of Famine  
And bid the sickness cease;  
And when your goal is nearest  
The end for others sought,  
Watch sloth and heathen Folly  
Bring all your hope to nought.*

In Source E, what is Kipling warning the Americans about?



### The Paris Peace Conference and Filipino independence

The Paris Peace Conference took place between September 1898 and February 1899. Spain relinquished control over its possessions in the Caribbean such as Cuba and Puerto Rico, and Guam and the Philippines in the Pacific, in return for \$20 million. After extensive negotiations, the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico were ceded to the USA, although the Teller Amendment (see pages 40–41) precluded annexation of Cuba. The

annexation of the Philippines caused bitter resentment among those who had fought with the US believing they would win independence from Spain. They could not have imagined they would have done so to be colonized by the USA. A Filipino government under Emilio Aguinaldo had already been formed; after annexation, it declared war on the USA and, as we will see (pages 53–54), a bloody war of independence resulted.

How valid are the arguments offered in support of annexation?

## → Supporters of annexation

The USA's treatment of the Philippines broke with its former policies and saw the creation of a colony on European imperialistic lines. This needs careful explanation. The successes against Spain had undoubtedly seen the USA rise to the status of a Great Power and many sought to capitalize on this. Political leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt and John Hay were explicit expansionists. Roosevelt, who succeeded McKinley as president, was a keen proponent of empire and sought to develop a naval base at Subic Bay as the main US naval base in the Pacific. Believers in white (and specifically US) superiority over other races were confirmed in their view of the USA's historical destiny (see page 22). Allied to this was how the creation of an empire and national pride could be deployed to bind Americans together through patriotism – in the same way that empire was used in European countries. McKinley spoke of 'benevolent assimilation' by which he meant that subject peoples could only benefit from US governance. He said, 'Our priceless principles undergo no change under a tropical sun. They go with the flag.'

### Reasons for annexation

Various reasons have been given for annexation by contemporaries, including President McKinley and his supporters.

- The islands could not be returned to Spain because the war had, in part, been about prising them away from her.
- Other imperialistic countries such as Germany, Britain or Japan could not be allowed to take them. With hindsight, this would be another example of William Langer's concept of preclusive imperialism (see page 23). Indeed, at the time the decisions were taken a German fleet was steaming perilously close to the Islands.
- The Filipinos were not considered capable of governing themselves.
- Allied to this was the racist argument that if Filipinos weren't capable of ruling themselves, equally they were not capable of being absorbed into the USA as a state; therefore the relationship between them and the USA could not be on the basis of statehood. Nevertheless the USA felt some responsibility for the well-being of the Filipinos – therefore the creation of a colony seemed the only option.
- The US had a duty to raise the Filipinos up to higher standards, particularly through Christianization and exposure to the example of the USA.

Of course, the Filipino fighters disagreed. They had assumed the US would support their independence once Spain was defeated. However, the USA argued that Aguinaldo, who came from the upper classes, neither had the support to take power nor the resources to defend an independent Philippines from aggression from the Great Powers. It discounted his announcement of a 'provisional dictatorship'. McKinley told his military to compel Filipino rebels to accept its authority and made no mention in any of his speeches of Filipino self-government.

President McKinley allegedly agonized over his decision to annex the Philippines.

#### SOURCE F

**An excerpt from General James Rusling, ‘Interview with President William McKinley’, *The Christian Advocate*, 22 January 1903, page 17. Reprinted in *The Philippines Reader*, edited by Daniel Schirmer and Stephen Roskamm Shalom, published by South End Press, Boston, 1987, pages 22–3 (found on History Matters at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5575/>).**

*I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen that I went down on my knees and prayed to Almighty God for light and guidance ... And one night it came to me this way ... There was nothing left for us to do but to take them all and to educate the Filipinos and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God’s grace do the very best we could by them.*

That neither McKinley nor anyone else involved in the debates had ever been to the Philippines is perhaps illustrated by the fact that, in giving his main reason for annexation as one of Christianization, either he did not realize that over 7 million Filipinos were already practising Catholics, or else he assumed Christianization was restricted to Protestantism.

As it was, the vote in the Senate to annex the Philippines was close. It achieved the required two-thirds majority by only one vote, that of Vice President Garret Augustus Hobart. Tellingly, two of the Democrat Senators who voted for annexation had recently been offered choice political appointments by McKinley.

One of McKinley’s successors as president, Woodrow Wilson, then recently installed as President of Princeton University, also agreed with annexation.

#### SOURCE G

**An excerpt from *The Politics of Woodrow Wilson: Selections from his Speeches and Writings*, by Woodrow Wilson, published by Harper and Brothers, New York and London, 1958, page 52.**

*The East is to be opened and transformed, whether we will it or no; the standards of the West are to be imposed upon it; nations and peoples which have stood still the centuries through are to be quickened and made part of the universal world of commerce and of ideas which has so steadily been a-making by the advance of European power from age to age.*

## Opponents of annexation

However, there was an equally vociferous movement within the USA against the creation of an empire. The **Anti-Imperialist League** was composed mainly of Democrats but contained groups that otherwise might not have been expected to co-operate, such as union leader Samuel Gompers of the **American Federation of Labor** (AFL) and industrialist Andrew Carnegie – Carnegie indeed offered to

What reasons does McKinley offer for annexation in Source F?



#### KEY TERM

##### **Anti-Imperialist League**

An organization of different groups that opposed US imperial expansion.

##### **American Federation of Labor**

An organization of craft-based labour unions formed in 1885.

What can you infer from Source G about the future relations between Eastern and Western countries?



Which groups opposed annexation?

buy the Philippines to give it back to its inhabitants. Many intellectuals such as Charles Eliot, President of Harvard, joined its ranks as did the novelist Mark Twain.

Opponents of annexation put forward various arguments:

- The Filipinos would lose their right to govern themselves.
- The USA had nothing to gain from annexation. Besides the economic costs involved, many of the more learned members cited the Roman Republic, which, they argued, lost its virtue through gaining an empire and became corrupt and decadent as a result – implying, of course, the same thing could happen to the USA. More humorously, the journalist E.L. Godkin wrote, ‘We do not want any more states until we can civilize Kansas.’
- Senator Benjamin Tilman of South Carolina was one of many who rehearsed the familiar arguments of racial mixing diluting the pure Anglo-Saxon blood of Americans as a reason for non-involvement.
- Mark Twain wrote an impassioned argument that the USA should be the protector of Filipinos not their oppressor. He referred to the annexation as a ‘mess’ and a ‘quagmire’ which he could neither understand how the USA could have gotten into nor how it was going to get out of.
- In his 1899 book, *The Conquest of the United States by Spain*, William Graham Sumner, pioneer sociologist and Vice President of the Anti-Imperialist League, argued that annexation would ruin the US financially as it had helped ruin Spain. The necessary growth of the military would lead, he argued, to higher taxes and a greater and more expensive government role with a concomitant harm to democracy. Sumner was vilified by his opponents, notably Theodore Roosevelt, but few could disagree when he argued that, ‘My patriotism is of the kind which is outraged by the notion that the United States never was a great nation until in a petty three months campaign it knocked to pieces a poor decrepit bankrupt old state like Spain.’

## The 1900 presidential election

Opposition to annexation gathered within the USA; the issue of Filipino independence was one of the platforms of the Democrats in the 1900 presidential election. However, Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan somewhat scuppered the impact of this for reasons of political self-interest. He realized that the USA was still technically at war with Spain until the peace treaty was signed and wanted the question of ending the war, if not that of what to do with the Philippines, resolved before the actual election took place. He advised his supporters in the Senate therefore to approve the treaty, which included the ceding of the Philippines to the USA.

Bryan argued that acceptance of the treaty did not necessarily mean support for annexation of the Philippines because the treaty didn’t actually specify annexation. There was nothing to prevent the USA giving the Philippines its independence, having been ceded the islands. Indeed, the 1900 Democratic manifesto argued along these lines.