

## Before the Responsibility to Protect: The Humanitarian Intervention in Cuba

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**Abstract:** Prior to the creation of the United Nations and even prior to Woodrow Wilson's philosophy of intervention, members of Congress called for a humanitarian intervention to aid the people of Cuba as they fought against the violent oppression of the Spanish government. Spurred on by the first-hand accounts of horrifying atrocities, President William McKinley overcame his reluctance and called for the American military to aid the revolutionaries in Cuba. This initial decision marks the beginning of a very different path towards international dominance than the one created by European empires. Unlike their European counterparts, the United States would claim to use its military to protect those fighting for their freedom all over the world due to their longstanding commitment to the liberal ideal of self-determination. While it may appear benevolent, the United States struggled with questions about how a self-governing people could develop and use a large military to overthrow governments as well as whether these actions could be considered imperialism. Looking into this early effort to rid a country of violent oppression by offering military assistance provides a prism through which to view the ongoing struggles of liberalism that informs American foreign policy decision making.

**Keywords:** American Foreign Policy, American Exceptionalism, Spanish-American War, Cuba, US-Cuban Relations, Democratic Peace Theory

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Those who can win a war well can rarely make a good peace, and those who could make a good peace would never have won the war  
—Winston Churchill (1930).

From the formation of the United States, they have considered themselves at times a City on a Hill and at times an Empire of Liberty. Where one suggests isolating the country to keep out the influence of others, as well as avoiding the temptation to go abroad looking for “Monsters to destroy” (J. Q. Adams 1821) the other suggests a desire to spread the “self-evident” truth “that all men are created equal” in possession of “unalienable rights....” These countervailing ideologies often act with similar force when American leaders have to decide how to react to the efforts of other people or nations attempting to overthrow their oppressors.

On a theoretical level, how can a people who appeal to a universal principle that “all men are created equal” deny their assistance to those who have engaged in the same struggle against tyranny? They have a duty to provide at

least an example of a well-functioning free government, if not more. In the eyes of many, the United States started a democratic revolution that would sweep through all of the Americas and hopefully lead to the end of European despotism. As Peter Onuf notes, “The new nation’s ascendancy might be realized *in history*...with the United States extending its influence and promoting its interests on the continent, through the hemisphere, and around the world; or it might take place at the “*end of history*” when all nations of the world embraced...liberal democracy...” (Onuf 2015, p. 24). As a consequence, some leaders felt they were compelled to help other nations trying to fulfill this destiny. But what does that assistance entail? Do they merely express their support for the efforts of the rebels? Do they have to act? Do they have to oppose what are likely strong imperial powers and provide assistance? Do they have to provide military assistance? Do they have to do what the French did for the Americans and send military support as well as funds? Once an oppressive regime is removed, do they have to help those rebels establish a new government? Continue to help with governance? For how long? While the size and scope of the US military was not large enough to be very influential until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, these questions date back to the beginning of the republic when the United States confronted the French Revolution and the rippling effects it had in the Caribbean.

On a pragmatic level, in the early days of the republic, the United States had to worry about their capacity to survive if they took sides in the ongoing battles for freedom near and far. As a consequence, they were extremely hesitant to even provide diplomatic recognition of independence movement. With the French Revolution, it went even farther. Due to a 1778 Treaty of Alliance with France, they were duty bound to assist the French in the Caribbean. The treaty would have required the United States to stand up against the mighty British navy, once again, which would have been devastating for a country with limited military resources and even more limited funds. As a consequence of these circumstances, George Washington and the members of his administration collectively agreed to disavow the need to protect an ally by declaring neutrality (Burns 2019, pp. 82–88).

In an even more complex circumstance, when slaves overthrew their French masters in what came to be Haiti, Americans showed little sympathy with the freedom fighters. Thomas Jefferson called the fleeing colonists “fugitives” who deserve our “pity and charity” while the “people of colour” who took over threaten to inspire “bloody scenes which our children certainly and possibly ourselves (South of Patowmac) have to wade through, and try to avert them” (Jefferson 1793). Even after the Haitians finally won against the French and declared independence, the US government consistently refused to recognize the new republic diplomatically (Hunt 2009, p. 100)—showing a collective disinterest in the spread of freedom when it was due to a slave revolt.

## THE MONROE DOCTRINE AND THE ROOSEVELT COROLLARY

The question of how to react when others seek independence continued to receive attention among American leaders. The famous Monroe Doctrine of 1823 is one of the first examples of the United States asserting *their* capacity to decide what would happen to countries outside their borders. Essentially conveying a message to Europeans that they could not create new colonies or attempt to oppress those “who have declared their independence and maintain it” in the Western Hemisphere. If they attempted any of these actions, Monroe warns, he cannot see it “in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States” (Monroe 1823).

This is one of the first examples of the quasi-liberal way Americans have formed foreign policy. In June of 1823, James Monroe wrote to Thomas Jefferson that he wanted “to strike a bolder attitude on liberty’s behalf” by forcefully telling European powers to reduce their meddling in countries that clearly wished to throw off the imperial shackles. Monroe included these ideas in his initial draft which not only discussed the Western Hemisphere but also “declared Greece independent from the Ottoman Turks, and recommended sending an American minister to Athens” (James Monroe quoted in Edel 2014, pp. 176–78). As the Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams advised Monroe to tone down the message lest it act as a call to arms against the United States for interfering so forcefully in the internal affairs of other countries. With

the caution Adams suggested, the Monroe Doctrine became a clearer statement about European meddling in the internal affairs of countries the United States now considered to be within their sphere of influence (Edel 2014, pp. 177–78). By these means, John Quincy Adams hoped the Monroe administration would display the somewhat paradoxical concept of presenting the “principles of this government, and a brief development of its political system as henceforth to be maintained...and respecting that of others” while simultaneously telling European powers that the United States would deny Spain the ability to restore “dominion on the American Continents or...transfer any portioning...to any other European power” (John Quincy Adams’s Diary, November 23, 1823 quoted in Edel 2014, p. 178).

Without realizing it, however, Monroe and Adams displayed the same blindness as leaders like Thomas Jefferson. They were convinced by the benefits of liberal democracy and convinced that nations would choose democracy if given the power of self-determination, just as the United States had. While Adams maintained a concern that those in Spanish America could not actually achieve self-governance, despite many independence movements at the time, others like Henry Clay thought these activities demonstrated the influence of the American example (Gilderhus 2006, p. 6). US leader consistently fail to realize that other people, with the freedom to choose what system to adopt, may choose to adopt a system other than liberal democracy. For that reason, what was intended to be a command to Europeans to avoid suppressing independence movements in the Western Hemisphere morphed into the ideological foundation for the US military to force others to “choose” democracy when they achieved independence.

While some have interpreted the intention as “a projection of power,”<sup>1</sup> as Edel notes, Monroe and Adams intended it to be “a statement of principles, an expectation of future growth, and perhaps most importantly, a simultaneous limitation of activity abroad and an expansion of interest” (Edel 2014, pp. 181–82). According to Gilderhus, it “committed the United States to do very little, except to defend its own basic interests” (Gilderhus 2006, p. 8). This would change, however, as US power grew alongside the size of its military forces.<sup>2</sup> By the late nineteenth century, Secretary of State, Richard Olney, deployed the Monroe Doctrine in a debate with the British over the border between Venezuela and Guiana in 1895 (Gilderhus 2006, p. 10). The successful brokerage of a treaty by United States, presaged the growing interest in projecting power through a large military presence used to dissuade European powers and subsequently the USSR from meddling in the Western Hemisphere. They had begun the process of militarizing the Monroe Doctrine (Smith 2005, p. 59).

This became even more militant in the Spanish-American war of 1898 and eventually resulted in the creation of the Roosevelt Corollary that formalized the desire and intention of Americans to justify *their own* meddling in the internal affairs of various countries. In principle, it was done in the name of helping others to enjoy free government. In practice, however, the US forced others to adopt the kinds of institutions America had created and forced those countries to continue using these institutions even if they did not suit them (Brands 1998, pp. 436–45). In this way, the Monroe Doctrine and its corollary became the ideological foundation for a unique form of imperialism: Americans would engage in empire light. They would remove Europeans and keep other nations under their control while telling themselves they were facilitating the transition to republicanism (Herring 2011).

## FROM ISOLATION TO EMPIRE

Prior to becoming a new kind of empire, American leaders had trouble determining how to react to independence movements. In 1850, members of Congress talked about condemning Austria for suppressing Hungarian independence. This condemnation would judge the actions of the Austrians to show solidarity with those who desire self-determination. In response to this desire, Senator Henry Clay claimed if the United State openly condemns these actions, they apply “our notion and judgment of what is right and proper in the administration of human affairs” and assumes “the right of interference in the internal affairs of foreign nations.” If that is the case: “Where...are we to stop? Why should we not interfere in [*sic*] behalf of suffering Ireland? Why not interfere in [*sic*] behalf of suffering humanity wherever we may find it?” If the

Senate passes the condemnation of the Austrians, they “open a new field of collision, terminating perhaps in war...”<sup>3</sup>

As the Ottoman empire attempted to maintain control over its holdings despite growing nationalist movements spurred on by European ideas of statehood, the United States took a more hands off approach. As Grover Cleveland noted, the actions of the Turkish in Armenia against Christians “excite[d] concern” but the United States would only focus on protecting the American Christians who “reside in Turkey” and engage in missionary work. He was careful to say that this was not, however, Americans meddling “in the so-called Eastern questions.” Even the efforts to obtain information only “arose” out of “our desire to have an accurate knowledge of the conditions...[of] those entitled to our protection” (Cleveland 1895).

Decisions about how to react to world events changed considerably as US military power grew and it watched with alarm as European empires continued to increase their holdings in the late nineteenth century (Moran 2001, p. 140). As Walter LaFeber notes, the Civil War “marked the shift of political power from planters to the industrialists and financiers.” This shift was “a prerequisite to the creation of a new commercial empire...” (1967, p. 7).<sup>4</sup> When combined with the growth in the power of the federal government as Burns notes, the resulting institutional structure “was a state with strong institutions capable of competing on the world stage with developed European nations” (Burns 2019, p. 120).

The changing economy required new markets and people started to look to “the vast China market” and “such areas as California and Hawaii to serve as stepping-stones to that market.” As Europeans attempted to close off trade to other nations, Americans sought to wrench open ports. To achieve these ends, commercial leaders pressed the government to ensure “that these men had enough foreign markets, even if the State Department had to use force to obtain the markets” (LaFeber 1967, pp. 6, 7, 20). How the government would support the growing commercial interests of leading industrialists became an issue that could be determined by the US military.

When leaders of empires use heavy handed tactics to maintain their power, US policy makers selectively engaged through formal support or censure, humanitarian aid, or in more rare instances weapons or military support. As American power grew, supporting independence movements in other nations or among other people became a means of asserting US interests internationally while appearing benevolent to the American voters. Americans are most likely to intervene aggressively when the complex mixture of norms, interests, and ideals align. What role they want to play; why they want to play that role; and how they would justify that role became an increasingly important issue as the US found itself more capable of enforcing its views on a changing world order.

## THE CUBA DEBATE

The alignment of this complex mixture of interests has regularly comes together in the case of Cuba. Since the presidency of Thomas Jefferson, American leaders have contemplated taking over Cuba from the Spanish (Cogliano 2014, p. 245). In 1854, the United States attempted to secretly negotiate annexing Cuba in what is known as the Ostend Manifesto in the hopes of adding another slave state to the union. The authors of the work claimed “Cuba is as necessary to the North American republic as any of its present members” believing that “the great law of self-preservation” justified the United States taking the island by force, if necessary, from the Spanish (quoted in Hendrickson 2009, p. 199). The discovery of the plan led to its defeat in a scandal.

Soon after the American Civil War, Cuba descended into its own struggle that was closely watched in the United States. Many sympathized with the long-oppressed people of the island.<sup>5</sup> Despite this sympathy, President Grant decided not to intervene. He explained the US offered to act as a peace-maker but Spain refused this offer and for that reason, the US must “endeavor...to execute the neutrality laws in good faith, no matter how unpleasant the task” (Grant 1869).

Despite this message, or perhaps because of the decision to remain officially neutral, two generals went to assist the cause, only to see it falter as it dragged on and eventually the Spanish brutally quashed that re-

bellion (Campbell 1976, pp. 53–59). There was a possibility that this same scenario would play out at the end of the nineteenth century, but that did not occur for a few reasons.

In the late nineteenth century, due to the growing economic opportunities on the island, Americans started moving there in droves, becoming a large portion of the island's wealthy population. As this connection increased, so did the number of Cubans going to America in the hopes of drumming up support for their growing revolutionary movement. When the second major rebellion occurred in Cuba in 1895, it set the stage for what culminated in the Spanish-American war. The confluence of events made war nearly inevitable. The United States claimed they had to declare war against Spain due to the "abhorrent conditions which have existed for more than three years in the island of Cuba" that have "shocked the moral sense of the people of the United States" and has "been a disgrace to Christian civilization..." (McKinley 1898a). The humanitarian crisis was not the only reason, however. There was a war fever created by the mysterious circumstances around the sinking of the *USS Maine* in the Havana harbor. There was yellow journalism wiping up sympathy for the plight of the Cubans and castigating the Spanish. Finally, Democrats in Congress tried to use McKinley's inaction to demonstrate his weakness as a leader. All of this pressure, eventually caused McKinley to capitulate and call for war.

Interestingly, though, the United States did *not* take the opportunity to annex Cuba. Having declared war against Spain in order to address the humanitarian crisis in Cuba, the United States takes a peculiar turn, unlike those taken by many imperial powers. The United States expressed no "disposition or intention to exercise sovereignty, jurisdiction, or control over said island except for the pacification therefor, and asserts its determination when that is accomplished, to leave the government and control of the island to its people" (McKinley 1898b). By this measure, the United States set itself up as the champion of freedom-loving people rather than the greedy young empire looking for new holdings.

Despite their claims to be free and despite their arguably genuine desire to help others enjoy self-governance, this is not how others will necessarily interpret American assistance nor are American actions exclusively benevolent. This is especially problematic when the US asserts that it is acting purely in the interest of "humanity" or the more antiquated term "civilization." For those on the receiving end of American assistance, their efforts to promote human rights and self-governance can look imperial rather than humane, especially when the US military remains and the US retains some sort of control over the territory, acting, ostensibly in the best interests of the people without giving those people a say in the matter. In the case of Cuba, they also imposed restrictions on their foreign policy as well as protecting domestic industries from Cuban competition through the Teller and Platt Amendments.

This was especially problematic at the time when the United States started to see itself and style itself an imperial power on the same level as the European and Asian empires at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It flies in the face of the very nature of a democratic government: how can a free people create an empire and rule over others? And yet, leaders like Henry Cabot Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt saw the United States and the "civilization" they embodied as the highest pinnacle of human development (Thomas 2010, pp. 51–61). Other nations and cultures would be, in their opinion, fortunate to receive the guidance and assistance of the American way of life. These conflicting and confusing elements of US foreign policy came together in the activities of the US government towards the Spanish in Cuba at the end of the nineteenth century.

## US POSTURE TOWARDS OTHER COUNTRIES/CULTURES

When examining how the United States reacts to the efforts of rebels to overthrow a government, there are a spectrum of responses when events in the rest of the world rise to national attention. Americans range from supporting the traditional government against the rebelling party or at the other end of the spectrum they condemn the government and support the rebels against their "oppressors." The American reaction can then range from a comment in support of either side while remaining officially neutral to a full-scale military intervention in favor of either side. Finally, the reaction can be caused by liberal concerns, stem-

ming from a desire for a more open, globally integrated world where connections among people reduce the likelihood of hot conflicts.

This is connected to the broader liberal project and defines liberalism associated with the ideals listed in the U.N. Charter. It states that in order to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war...and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties...can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom” occasionally the broader global community must act. If the global community determines it must act, it must do so “in the common interest, and to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples” (United Nations 1945, Preamble). By this reading of military intervention, it *cannot* be used for national gain, however, if there happens to be a positive result for a given nation—beyond peace and stability—that does intervene, they are not precluded from intervening.

Alternatively, on the other end of the spectrum from a liberal world order, the ethno-nationalist interests of the United States can cause policy makers to react in the ways stated above. This element, referred to as Ascriptive Americanism by Rogers Smith relates to the unique qualities associated with those who have traditionally held power in the country. Unlike the “comparative moral, material, and political egalitarianism that prevailed at the founding” the “ascriptive systems of unequal status” developed over time due to the pervasive and consistent capacity of white Anglo-Saxon men to maintain control of the political and economic levers of power. As Smith explains, these are not “merely emotional prejudices or “attitudes.”” Over time, American intellectual and political elites elaborated distinctive justifications for these ascriptive systems, including inegalitarian scriptural readings, the scientific racism of the “American school” of ethnology, racial and sexual Darwinism, and the romantic cult of Anglo-Saxonism in American historiography.” This element of the American psyche better explains the course of U.S. history than a merely liberal explanation. Many “accounts fail to explain how and why liberalizing efforts have frequently lost to forces favoring new forms of racial and gender hierarchy.” Domestically, according to Smith, these forces “sometimes negated major liberal victories...” (Smith 1993, pp. 549, 550).

These ideas have a similar impact on foreign policy decision making, causing it to have an illiberal or ascriptive American rationale. Especially when determining whether to integrate a new community into the United States, policy makers take the Christian Anglo-Saxon roots of the country seriously. This goes as far back as John Winthrop, the colonial governor of Massachusetts who claimed they could close the door to immigrants—even devout Christians—in order to ensure the success of the colony. In Smith’s telling, Winthrop argued that they had to select immigrants based on them sharing the same principles which went above and beyond sharing a religion (Smith 2015, p. 149).

Whether to integrate new territory into the social contract would therefore be a fraught argument related to what John Jay calls a “band of brethren” in *The Federalist Papers*. As Smith notes, “this was a vision of peoplehood that could make demands for women’s rights, rights for racial, ethnic, and national minorities, and linguistic, religious, and cultural rights all appear immorally divisive” (Smith 2015, p. 154). As a consequence of these competing visions of the United States, the rationale for policy choices can be a mixture of the two elements both liberal and illiberal/ethno-national and it is possible that an intervention can occur with one end of the spectrum in mind, only to achieve the opposite or a combination. The following section will demonstrate that the US is most likely to intervene with a large force to engage in regime change when there is a combination of liberal and illiberal reasons as well as security concerns.

## THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS: A LIBERAL JUSTIFICATION FOR INTERVENTION IN CUBA

As early as June of 1897, McKinley had good information that there was a serious humanitarian crisis in Cuba. While he had seen newspapers reporting on the atrocities for a while, McKinley worried that yel-

low journalism had overblown the nature of the problem (Thomas 2010, pp. 159–61). He appointed his friend William J. Calhoun as special counsel to the US Consul in Cuba, to investigate the state of affairs. According to Calhoun, the country outside of Spanish controlled cities was “practically depopulated. Every house had been burned, banana trees cut down, cane fields swept with fire, and everything in the shape of food destroyed.” There was not “a house, man, woman or child, a horse, mule, or cow, nor even a dog.” He goes on to say “I did not see a sign of life...the country was wrapped in the stillness of death and the silence of desolation” (quoted in Reynolds 2009, p. 293). Calhoun recommended war with Spain. Despite this fact, McKinley hesitated (Campbell 1976, p. 253).

There were a few practical concerns. The US military, in McKinley’s opinion, was not ready to engage in a large-scale battle. He also questioned whether the Cuban rebels possessed “the essential qualifications of sovereignty” that they would have to have for the United States to credibly recognize an independent government. Even the possibility of recognizing the rebels as belligerents appeared hasty to him in December of 1897. If he recognized the insurgents as belligerents, that was normally done through a letter expressing neutrality, making the United States unable to provide any kind of aid or intervene in any way. As he saw it, by the standards of international law, if he recognized the two warring sides, he would have to do so in a message pronouncing US neutrality (McKinley 1897). The veracity of this claim is disputable, however, given how strongly McKinley fought against initiating a military operation.

Finally, a new government had taken power in Spain and promised to free all of the Americans currently held in jail for allegedly aiding rebels as well as ending the reconcentrado policy. Freeing Americans significantly decreased the justification for a military intervention on behalf of Americans held in foreign jails (McKinley 1897). Ending the reconcentrado policy would go a long way to removing the humanitarian objection to Spanish conduct. The conditions of these camps were bone chilling. As Senator William Frye noted from his own trip to Cuba:

It is not within the narrow limits of my vocabulary to portray it. I went to Cuba with a strong conviction that the picture had been overdrawn...I could not believe that out of a population of 1,600,000, two hundred thousand had died within these Spanish forts, practically prison walls...I saw it when 400 women and children were lying on the floors in an indescribably state of emaciation and disease, many with the scantiest covering of rags—and such rags!—sick children, naked as they came into the world; and the conditions in the other cities are even worse (Frye 1898, p. 2917).

Despite these conditions, McKinley still hesitated to intervene on humanitarian grounds. In his annual address to Congress in December of 1897, he said “It is honestly due to Spain and to our friendly relations with Spain that she should be given a reasonable chance to realize her expectations and to prove the asserted efficacy of the new order of things to which she stands irrevocably committed.” He goes on to say that no American is currently jailed and it has yet to be determined if the conflict can end in a “righteous peace” that is just for both the Spanish and the Cubans and “equitable to all our interests so intimately involved in the welfare of Cuba.” He had even reached out to the Spanish and Cubans about negotiating a peace. Spain refused and McKinley told them the United States could only wait so long “for the mother country to establish its authority and restore peace and order” on the island. To press the point, he claimed “we could not contemplate an indefinite period for the accomplishment of this result” (McKinley 1897).

In the same message, he said if Spain failed to follow through on these promises, he saw the need for action but again, he hedged. He wanted to be confident he had exhausted every other option. He claimed, if it is “a duty imposed by our obligations to ourselves, to civilization and humanity to intervene with force” he would do so but only after “the necessity for such action will be so clear as to command the support and approval of the civilized world” (McKinley 1897). This concept comes out of the Kantian tradition of liberalism that requires countries to ignore sovereignty if a military commits atrocities against civilians (Doyle 1983).

While many claimed the humanitarian crisis justified US intervention, McKinley remained reluctant

to act. As a Civil War veteran, he did not want to cause “human suffering...[to] come into thousands of homes” (quoted in Olcott 2017, p. 400). He kept the United States neutral in the conflict for many more months. When events conspired to require him to act, it is clear that one of the main reasons related to the humanitarian crisis that existed on the island. As he claimed in his war message in April of 1898, he had already gone to great lengths to relieve the suffering. He had established the Central Cuban relief committee to collect funds to distribute to those who were suffering from the reconcentrado policies. They organized humanitarian aid, starting in December 1897, and they raised over \$200,000. The Red Cross had penetrated into the interior where it was previously confined to larger cities, like Havana, to distribute aid. This has saved “thousands of lives.” As he notes, this is “friendly intervention” in the name of attempting to “exer[t]... a potential influence toward an ultimate pacific result, just and honorable to all interests concerned.” These actions were undertaken by an “unselfish desire for peace and prosperity in Cuba” (McKinley 1898a).

We see in this language one of the earliest examples of the United States claiming it had a moral obligation to use its military to stop a humanitarian crisis. As US power grew, the calls for larger and more involved operations would overcome the voices favoring isolation or those like Henry Clay who claim the US cannot tell others how to live based on their own standards. I would argue this understanding of America’s role in the world reaches all the way back to the founding if not further. For the first 100 years of its existence, it had to compete against fears that the size and scope of the republic would cause corruption at home as well as isolationist voices. While it would take two world wars to completely sideline the isolationist, the United States emerged from WWII as a power capable and willing to project its military all over the world. America became especially aggressive with humanitarian intervention after the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s while maintaining that they were using their military selflessly to provide aid. As Richard Maass notes, “when the Senate Foreign Relations Committee finally issued its report calling for U.S. intervention in Cuba, it presaged the twenty-first-century doctrine known as the Responsibility to Protect, proclaiming that “the state which thus perverts and abuses its power thereby forfeits its sovereignty...”” (quoted in Maass 2020, p. 177). McKinley goes on to justify these actions on “rational grounds” as well as “historical precedents” of “neighboring states” to “interfer[e] to check the hopeless sacrifices of life by internecine conflicts beyond their borders”(McKinley 1898a). By April of 1898, he deemed it necessary to intervene, but he is very careful to explain that he took this action reluctantly.

According to McKinley, by April the United States has to intervene because “the war in Cuba is of such a nature that, short of subjugation or extermination, a final military victory for either side seems impracticable.” It is likely one side will succumb to “physical exhaustion” which is how the last war ended. That time it took 10 years and with prevaricating language, McKinley says that result is “hardly to be contemplated with equanimity by the civilized world, and least of all by the United States.” It has to intervene to “put an end to the barbarities, bloodshed, starvation, and horrible miseries now existing there, and which the parties to the conflict are either unable or unwilling to stop or mitigate.” Due to actions of the Spanish, by “conservative estimates...the mortality among the reconcentrados from starvation and the diseases thereto incident exceeded 50 percent of their total number.” This is not “civilized warfare; it was extermination” (McKinley 1898a). We see that while there are humanitarian reasons and a genuine and legitimate effort to address these issues in the name of humanity, these are not the only reasons associated with the US intervention.

## PROTECTING AMERICANS AND THEIR PROPERTY ABROAD: A QUASI-LIBERAL JUSTIFICATION FOR MILITARY INTERVENTION

He provides four reasons for the necessity of intervention, the first was discussed above, the other three are more related to the protection of Americans and the expense to the American government due to the civil war in Cuba. His language hints at ethno-nationalism when he says the United States is “affected and injured...deeply and intimately, by [the war’s] very existence.” American citizens in Cuba cannot achieve the protection for their person or property from the government; there is serious impediments to American ef-

forts to engage in commerce on the island due to the “wanton destruction of property;” the “present condition” on the island is a “menace to” US “peace and entails upon this Government enormous expense” due to the requirement to keep a “semi war footing” despite the *de jure* state of peace between the two nations. He even uses the destruction of the *USS Maine* as an example that the Spanish were unable to ensure the safety of the American navy in Cuba, despite the mysterious circumstances around its destruction. As Campbell notes, the United States never received a satisfactory answer to what actually happened.<sup>6</sup>

It’s certainly reasonable for a government to suggest they can and should protect their people and their property abroad. This is rooted in part in a liberal understanding of the right to self-defense. The *USS Maine* was originally sent to Havana in order to have marines available to protect Americans and their property from the rioting that occurred in the cities due to the reconcentrado policy (Reynolds 2009, p. 293).

As the people are attacked, even in another nation, they can appeal to their government to use the military to defend them in that foreign nation. At the same time, it is suggesting that in this case, the United States has the right to intervene in the internal affairs of another country in the name of protecting American citizens and their interests. Furthermore, in this instance, they were placing American forces in harm’s way, which increases the possibility of a hot conflict if that leads to the death of members of the military at the hands of another military (as it appeared in the case of the *Maine*). This places the protection of Americans *above* the right of sovereignty which is an important element in international law; and one that the US claimed to respect a few months earlier. As McKinley notes, in his December 1897 address, the United States does not involve itself in the internal affairs of other countries, even though in truth it does so selectively. He goes on to say, the US does reserve the right to protect its commerce and people abroad; Thomas Jefferson initiated this practice during his presidency to protect US merchants from Barbary pirates (Fisher 2013, pp. 32–36). As with many other elements of international law, the United States does not do this uniformly nor does it necessarily use the military to do it. As such, McKinley could have easily argued in April of 1898 that he *had* to respect sovereignty just as he had in December.

McKinley had a further complication in this realm. The war between the Spanish and the Cubans had disrupted American business on the island. As a consequence of the fighting “trade dropped by more than two thirds” leading “import-export houses and shipping firms” to “petition Washington to pressure Spain to restore peace and Cuban-American trade.” At the same time, some American investors on the island “condemned the Cuban arsonists and looked to the Spanish army for protection.” The business community did not provide a clear message, however. Some “wanted intervention to save and extend their property holdings” (Williams, Bacevich, and Gardner 2009, p. 37); others wanted the US to work with Spain to quell the rebellion (Offner 2004, p. 52).

Further tipping McKinley towards intervention was the broad public support for Cuban independence rather than annexation. Due to the persistent fear of “racial mixing” and the “racially degenerate” state of those in Cuba, policy makers decided to shift their focus from annexation to facilitating independence. They could continue to see their actions as “supposedly benevolent” by connecting the fight for freedom to their own revolutionary desires (Hunt 2009, p. 61). This “reinforced a rapidly growing American perception that Spain should end its unjust and inhumane war and leave the New World” (Offner 2004, p. 52). Much like the business interests, there were illiberal elements to the policy decisions due to the prejudices against the Spanish. As Offner notes, “a common view in the United States was that a cruel, backward, and decadent monarchy ruled Spain...[and] Protestant religious denominations were largely anti-Catholic” (Ibid.). The emphasis on using the US military to achieve this objective is similarly quasi-liberal and quasi-illiberal. As Chris Preble notes, the most important thing to emphasize in a liberal world order is achieving the highest level of freedom using *peaceful* means (Preble 2019). Once the military is involved, we run the risk of unintended consequences, especially the Cubans, in this instance, feeling like the United States is not there to liberate them but instead there to protect US interests, potentially by annexing the island or controlling it in some way. In this instance, the Cubans would have been correct to worry about this element.

## THE ETHNO-NATIONAL INTEREST: AN ILLIBERAL JUSTIFICATION FOR INTERVENTION IN CUBA

There were a variety of voices advocating against intervention in the interest of protecting American industries and the arguments took a few different forms of ethno-national interests. Due to the expansion of economic activity in the United States in the late nineteenth century, there had been a series of crippling depressions which caused many to look to the government to protect American industries from foreign competition. As Williams notes, “in the Crisis of the 1890s...they advanced and accepted the argument that continued expansion in the form of overseas economic (and even territorial) empire provided the best, if not the only, way to sustain their freedom and prosperity” (Williams, Bacevich, and Gardner 2009, p. 23). Policy makers still had to answer to their constituents domestically, however. As a result, in 1897, the government once again used protectionist policies, passing the highest and longest lasting tariff in US history: the Dingley Tariff. Initially, it provided a great deal of protection to a variety of American industries before it created ballooning inflation (Fetter 1922, p. 220).

One of these industries was beet sugar. The government placed a high duty on imported sugar, much of which came from Cuba. There were further complications, however, in Cuba’s case. There were many Americans living in Cuba working in the sugar industry. As such, they were negatively impacted by both the civil war in Cuba and the tariffs imposed by their home country. McKinley’s administration had to balance the interests of these Americans as well but due to his protectionist views and his desire to continue moving the United States out of the most recent depression, he worked with American industries to ensure their stability rather advocating for freer trade.

McKinley also made the claim that the United States had a “uniform policy and practice of...avoid[ing] all interference in the disputes which merely relate to the internal government of other nations,” only recognizing a new nation once a “prevailing party” is established “without reference to our particular interests... or to the merits of the original controversy” (McKinley 1898a). This falls on the side of ethno-nationalism because he favors respected sovereignty rather than favoring his responsibilities to the “civilized world” which would call him to intervene in Cuba or the desire for freer trade that would positively benefit a foreign industry over the domestic one.

In a similar vein, he decides to avoid recognizing “the independence of the so-called Cuban Republic” because it could put the United States under “embarrassing conditions of international obligation toward the organization so recognized.” He will only recognize a government “capable of performing the duties and discharging the functions of a separate nation” so the government can “promptly and readily recogniz[e]... relations and interests of the United States...” (McKinley 1898a).

This is all hedging language disguises the focus on the ethno-national interests as a respect for international law. McKinley had many strong voices in Congress wanting high tariffs to protect domestic industries, especially those who feared sugar imports coming from Cuba. Senators from Colorado, California, Michigan, and Louisiana stood firmly for high tariffs to protect their agricultural production. Henry M. Teller went so far as to offer an amendment that would bar the annexation of Cuba, lest the integration of the island completely destroy beet sugar production in Colorado (LaFeber 1967, p. 415; Merleaux 2012, p. 35). Had US interests flowed in a different direction, towards aiding Spain or a strong desire to recognize a nation asserting their right to self-determination, McKinley would have simply used different language and respected a different aspect of international law, drawing from a different set of examples to justify that path.

This protectionist path had to contend, however, with the loud and growing expansionist argument coming from those who wanted the United States to copy European empires or at least take a lightly imperial approach in order to further open the world to US interests and US goods. As the European powers found themselves in an unstable position due to growing nationalist movements around the world, they were also increasingly using protectionist policies to maintain their dominance and closing markets to US trade (Reynolds 2009, p. 160). Americans worried that many countries, now open to trade with the US,

would suddenly and aggressively close. Some made the case that the United States had to use the military to keep ports open to their trade, especially as they had dramatically increased production over the late 19th century and their goods needed to go to foreign markets (Nugent 2009, pp. 295–99). These arguments combined with the Social Darwinism made popular by Herbert Spencer.

Spencer claimed that we could apply the concept of survival of the fittest in the natural world to the world of human interactions. When applied to foreign policy, that caused many to think that the United States had to either “progress or decay” by “compet[ing] fiercely with other nations.” It had to “fight unceasingly for its place in the sun” by “ruthlessly swallow[ing] up weaker lands” (Campbell 1976, p. 147). John Fiske popularized this idea among Americans by claiming the United States was “destined to go on until every land on the earth’s surface that is not already the seat of an old civilization shall become English in its language, in its religion, in its political habits and traditions, and to a predominant extent in the blood of its people” (Fiske 1884).

There were vocal advocates for a military effort to enact this policy. Leaders like Theodore Roosevelt and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge as well as the newspaper magnet William Randolph Hearst wanted to see the American “civilization” spread internationally through a concept akin to the empire of liberty but using a level of force that would require other nations and people to submit to the American way (Thomas 2010). As Charles K Adams claimed, the same impulse that led the United States to engage in “repeated annexations [until] we advanced to the Pacific” will cause the US “to advance still further...in accordance with the uninterrupted tendency of the country...” (Adams 1899, p. 46). Along with this civilizing mission would come training from American occupiers until they deemed these nations capable of self-governance. In the case of the Philippines, John Barrett, former American minister to Thailand (then Siam), claimed “The independence of the islands may sound well, but...the natives themselves are not equal to it.” Without “supervision” they will descend into a civil war. He made a rather bold assumption that Americans would be greeted as liberators. The insurgents would “drop all agitation for independence” if “the United States [were] to signify the intention of holding the Philippines as a colony” (quoted in Dilke, Barrett, and Lusk 1898, pp. 262–63). Much like the Philippines, these advocates would have preferred either annexing Cuba or at least maintaining more direct control in order to complete this mission but the protectionist wing of both parties won out.

McKinley had to walk a very narrow path due to the very clear and very loud directions Congress and arguably the American people proverbially shouted at him: many wanted industries protected from competition from Cubans; others wanted to see America become a great empire that dominated islands like Cuba. Congress then developed a way to keep Cuba out of the hands of European hands while pleasing the protectionists using the Teller Amendment. The Teller Amendment, added to the Declaration of War against Spain, places limits on US control over Cuba by saying the United States “disclaims any disposition or intention to exercise sovereignty, jurisdiction, or control over said Island except for the pacification therefore, and asserts its determination, when that is accomplished, to leave the government and control of the Island to its people.”<sup>7</sup> We see in this document a desire among some on Congress to ensure the protection of US industries over and above exporting the American “civilization” to Cuba by absorbing it. American protectionists wanted to make clear that the United States was *not* taking possession of a population they viewed as a risk to the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon race in the union. As Offner notes,

[I]f the United States forced Spain off the island, many people believed that the Cuban insurgents were incapable of governing the island. Some anti-interventionists warned that four centuries of Spanish misrule had not prepared the Cuban people for self-government. The result could be an extended U.S. imperial control of Cuba or even annexation of an island where one third of the people were African descent and nearly all were Catholic (Offner 2004, p. 52).

The desire to keep Cuba within the American sphere of influence without fully integrating it into the American republic came out of the racial concerns of many at the time. There were many who thought the

“mixed and mongrel people” of the island of Cuba would be too difficult for the United States to digest and assimilate (Secretary of State James Blaine quoted in Maass 2020, p. 173). They used the language of self-governance while applying the tools of racial control. As Richard Maass notes, many generations of US leaders used policy “to recreate racial hierarchies on the frontier, promoting the Anglo-American domination...” By “refusing to annex populous territories like Quebec and Cuba [they] reinforced those hierarchies within the federal government by preventing its early racial, religious, linguistic, and cultural diversification” (Maass 2020, p. 6).

One may be inclined to see the Teller Amendment as a liberal document due to its recognition of Cuban independence. It was not, however. It was predominantly motivated by the desire to protect domestic industries from Cuban competition as well as avoiding a lengthy and costly American occupation of Cuba. Many of the voices against war did reference the illiberalism of occupying the island of Cuba but there was a much stronger sense that Americans wanted to keep Cuba within its sphere of influence, out of the hands of European influence, but without being directly responsible for it. For that reason, one of the many conditions of US withdrawal from Cuba required that Cuba could *not* sign any treaty forfeiting their independence and the United States would maintain the power to re-occupy the island for any reason they deemed necessary. They did several times during the first half of the twentieth century. In another moment of asserting its quasi-dominance over Cuba, in exchange for US withdrawal from the island, Cuban leaders had to sign the Platt Amendment in 1903.

Walking the tightrope between ensuring that the United States would not have to integrate Cuba into the republic while also ensuring other great powers could not impose their will on Cuba, the Platt Amendment gave the United States a remarkable set of powers over the internal affairs of the island nation. Based on this document, Cuba did not have complete control over its foreign or domestic affairs. They could not “impair or tend to impair” their independence by giving any foreign power control of the island or her ports. If they do anything of the kind “the United States may exercise the right to intervene” to preserve their independence as well as to ensure “the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty...” In order to allow the United States to perform these duties the government in Cuba “will sell or lease...lands necessary for coaling or naval stations...”<sup>8</sup>

By these means, the United States enforced a version of aiding those who seek freedom that is in line with the Monroe Doctrine: you can enjoy freedom the way we define it and the way we allow you to enjoy it, using terms that are favorable to our interests. This had the added bonus of convincing Americans that they were genuinely helping others rather than ruling them the way traditional empires did. They created a “self-image as an exceptional nation acting on a higher moral plane than the old empires of Europe” (Maass 2020, p. 7) but they perpetuated the same system of exploitation in the European models.

## CONCLUSION

Americans have frequently struggled to understand the desires and interests of peoples from other countries. They frequently mistake their own interests and desires for a universal interest in freedom. Another interesting and glaring example comes in 1943 when Franklin Roosevelt said this of Joseph Stalin: “I have just a hunch that Stalin doesn’t want anything but security for his country, and I think that if I give him everything I possibly can and ask nothing from him in return, noblesse oblige, he won’t try to annex anything and will work for a world of democracy and peace” (quoted in Bullitt 1948).

While many people have a desire to be free, how they define freedom may not entail the same elements as Americans and it is not what they perceive Americans offer when they “help” overthrow a government. In the particular case of the Spanish-American War, the United States perceived itself as a liberator that would be well-received as they helped eliminate the imperial control of the Spanish. As Ambassador John Hay wrote “It was a splendid little war,” “begun with the highest motives, carried on with magnificent intelligence and spirit, favored by that fortune which loves the brave” (quoted in Zimmermann 2004, p. 310). But this perception takes the short view and misperceives both American interests and the interests of lo-

cal populations. As Chris Coyne notes, the decision to occupy Cuba and control it “marked one of the first U.S. attempts to shape political, economic, and social outcomes via military intervention and occupation” (Coyne 2007, p. 3).

After this point, the United States decided it had to regularly intervene in Cuba in order to maintain what they thought they wanted. Despite this close relationship and constant meddling, Americans could not stop Cuba from becoming communist under Fidel Castro nor could they stop Castro from becoming a dangerous Soviet ally. All attempts since that time to normalize relations and integrate Cuba more into the liberal democratic camp have failed. For that reason, “if the goal of this series of U.S. occupations of Cuba was to plant the seeds of a sustaining liberal democratic government that would ultimately become a long-term ally of the United States, one must obviously consider it a failure” (Ibid.).

Despite this early and continued example of failure, the United States has attempted to aid countries attempting to eliminate authoritarians with almost no success besides in Japan and Germany. What explains these consistent efforts despite the consistent failures? The ethno-national perception of American Exceptionalism combined with the mistaken belief that everyone wants exactly the kind of freedom Americans enjoy tricks leaders into thinking that the next experiment will be different. Technological changes and the expansive power of the US military further convince them that they have the tools at their disposal to reshape any country in their image. American dominance internationally and their ability to project their interests globally make it possible to use this ideology and tools to make these attempts with staggering regularity. Unless or until any of these factors change, it is likely the United States will again try and fail to reshape countries in its image costing blood and treasure on both sides without achieving the positive result that would merit such expenditures.

## NOTES

- 1 One example is William Appleman Williams who said “The vigorous expansionism manifested in the Monroe Doctrine was only the continuation and maturation of an attitude held by the Revolutionary generation. Americans thought of themselves as an empire at the outset of their national existence...” (Williams 2009 [1959], p. 21).
- 2 As an example of the continuing relevance of the Monroe Doctrine, in the 1896 Democratic Platform they claimed the doctrine “as originally declared and as interpreted by succeeding Presidents, is a permanent part of the foreign policy of the United States, and must at all times be maintained” and they referenced their “sympathy to the people of Cuba in their heroic struggle for liberty and independence” (DNC National Platform, 1896).
- 3 He continues: “exposing ourselves to the reaction of foreign Powers, who, when they see us assuming to judge of their conduct, will undertake in their turn to judge of our conduct.” Henry Clay, *Congressional Globe*, 31st Cong., 2nd Sess. January 7, 1850, p. 115, quoted in Schlesinger 1978.
- 4 See also, Williams 2009 [1959], pp. 25-26.
- 5 As McKinley notes: “The prospect from time to time that the weakness of Spain's hold upon the island and the political vicissitudes and embarrassments of the home Government might lead to the transfer of Cuba to a continental power called forth between 1823 and 1860 various emphatic declarations of the policy of the United States to permit no disturbance of Cuba's connection with Spain unless in the direction of independence or acquisition by us through purchase, nor has there been any change of this declared policy since upon the part of the Government” (First Annual Message, 1897).
- 6 Due to the experimental nature of steel ships at the time, it is possible, perhaps even probably, that an internal explosion could have caused the damage that appeared to be caused by a Spanish mine (Campbell 1976, p. 252).
- 7 *Teller Amendment*, H. J. Res 233, 55th Cong. 2nd Sess., April 16, 1898, p. 4062.
- 8 *Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Cuba Embodying the Provisions Defining Their Future Relations as Contained in the Act of Congress*. Approved March 2, 1901, signed 05/22/1903; General Records of the United States Government, 1778 - 2006, RG 11, National Archives.

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