

LETTERS FROM THE PEOPLE

WHAT SHALL BE OUR COLONIAL POLICY?

To the Editor of The New York Times:

It seems inevitable that the United States is about to enter, by force of circumstances, upon an era of colonization, and as such a policy is an absolute reversal of our traditions and political doctrines, we must enter upon it not only uninfluenced by all those precedents afforded by the experience of colonizing nations in the past, but as well, if possible, with new ideas and novel methods which, if successfully carried to their full fruition, must result not only in our material advantage, but also in the increased welfare and happiness of the peoples over whom we extend the sway and protection of the Republic.

The two great exemplars of colonial expansion have been, as every student of history knows, Spain and England, and they stand and have stood for centuries as exponents of policies diametrically opposed in their nature, operation, and effect. On the one hand, the exploitation of the newly conquered or acquired territory for the sole benefit and profit of the insular Government; the harassing, the torture, the grinding down of the colonial peoples, the denial, not only of the rights of citizenship, but of the commonest rights of safety in person and property as well; a system of slavery, and, when under the influence of advancing civilization, the abolition of actual slavery had become necessary, a system of peonage, worse, perhaps, than the former state; and all these for one sole purpose, the enrichment of the conquerors, regardless of its effect upon the conquered or upon the territory occupied by them. The system, for it seems at this late day to have been a system, of crime, of rapine, and of carnage, which has characterized the rule of Spain wherever found, has never been and can never be, adequately described; and in the Low Countries, in Peru, in Mexico, in all her former possessions, from Alva in the Netherlands to Weyler in Cuba, the sickening tale of cruelty and barbarity is the same; and it is, when this unbroken history of crime is reflected upon, a source of wonder and surprise that modern civilization should have permitted this monster among nations to have exercised its sway over so great a portion of the earth's surface as has been up to the present in its possession. Spain's days of colonial power, however, are drawing to or have reached their close, an event which makes for better government, better homes, and a happier condition of the peoples formerly under her sway.

On the other hand, with few exceptions, the colonial policy of England has been one which might be, were it not for our differing forms of government, followed by the United States with the certainty of an immense amount of resulting happiness and profit to all concerned. Whatever else may be said, the British flag wherever planted has brought in its train absolute security to the citizen or subject in his person and in his property, and unless prevented by savagery or racial or tribal hatred has insured to every one beneath its folds the right, first of ownership, and secondly, the right to deal with his own, within certain well-defined limits, applicable to all alike, as he should see fit to do. Instead of grinding down the peoples of conquered or acquired territory, for the purpose of enriching the mother country, England—selfishly, perhaps, but the fact remains, nevertheless—has sought to raise them to her own level, and by their increase of thrift and industry to open new and profitable avenues of trade. Torture has been unknown, butchery, rapine, carnage, all have been banished, and that curse of cursed human bondage—the awful crime of slavery—received its deathblow at the hands of the English people and Government.

The two policies have gone on these many years side by side, until at last to the whole world their results are apparent. On the one hand, loss of territory, of prestige, and of power, both at home and abroad; on the other, the mightiest empire in history, and one whose expansion has by no means reached its legitimate limit, for at no period in its long and eventful history has England had in her service a more masterful mind, a more skillful pilot than he who shapes her colonial policy and directs its course to-day.

And yet the policy above described, so successful from every point of view in its results, both to the mother country and to the colonies, would hardly serve as a safe guide for this Nation for one very cogent reason, which is by no means the only one than might be successfully urged against its adoption. At the time of the separation of the American Colonies the lesson was thoroughly learned by the mother country that enlargement of liberties rather than their restriction, or augmentation of privileges rather than repression, affords the true solution to the problem of colonial government and strengthens rather than weakens the ties binding the countries together—a more striking instance of liberality in this regard cannot be found in history than the sanction by the home Government of colonial legislation setting up tariffs on imports, not only against other countries, but as well against the mother country itself—and this very liberality is in itself the potent force resulting in a strengthening of the allegiance of England's colonial peoples with an accompanying sentiment of loyalty which an opposite policy would certainly diminish and ultimately utterly destroy.

Our institutions and traditions would not permit the exercise of a like policy and spirit toward our colonies on the part of the United States. On the contrary, the ultimate end and purpose of our colonial policy must be the extinction of all colonies, however acquired, as colonies, and their absorption into the United States. It is indisputable that the temper of our people has undergone in recent years a marked change; that old ideas, old theories, old policies, are surely to be set aside in favor of those as yet novel and untried. This readiness to throw over ancient traditions heretofore venerated in a greater or less degree, has not escaped notice among other nations. A writer of eminence, in a recent paper, has truly said:

"Every one remembers now that for years past the American people have shown increasing signs of discontent with a rather undistinguished place in the scale of nations. Boundless energy, ingenuity, vigor, audacity, a vast population in a great range of country, and yet little that could be called national distinction were it continued for a thousand years. The diffusion of enlightenment is not at all an affair of conquest and colonization. Religion and philosophy agree that the American Republic has within its own pale opportunity and space enough to work out all the nobler ambitions, including those that need the aid of great wealth, or that great wealth rewards; and it may be added that, so far, those ambitions have been handsomely served. But for all that, it is a national life that does not satisfy. It does not satisfy, in spite of the grand consideration that it is carried on with the utmost possible security for peace. In point of fact, it is there that our cousins feel the rub. Something irrepressible and apparently immortal in human nature murmurs, 'Utmost possible security for peace, and utmost possible denial of adventure. The portion of the home-keeping youth. Rejection, rejection by a people 60,000,000 strong, of the dominion and the glory by which great races are honored and remembered. Choice of a back seat in history, and even to-day behind every living Englishman, Frenchman, Dutchman.' There is a great heart of the United States as well as a great heart of England; and the ear that could listen at the republican organ as it listens at the lips of a seashell would have heard a murmur with these meanings long ago. Two things have brought them out in something like articulate speech, but more significantly in action. One of these two things is that same rise of Japan * * * a stirring and challenging event. The other was a thing of home production, namely, the suggestion, the appeal, the incitement of Capt. Mahan's writings, which have told upon every nation with a seaboard.

"But whether with or without such explanation, small is the doubt that the American Republic is casting loose from, I will not say a splendid isolation, but comfortable, secure, and very much more approved than regretted by the rest of the world. This energetic, self-sufficing Nation sets out at last to be glorious, to make history, to be a 'world power,' as they say over there, but, although we all agree that the change begins, its magnitude seems to be as slowly perceived in England as were the consequences of the rise of Japan. Or if it be not an insufficient, it is a shelved understanding—put off to make room for a flattering expectation which is itself, perhaps, imperfectly understood."

It cannot be doubted that perspective has in this case lent clearness to the vision, and that the writer, with doubtless many of his fellow-countrymen, sees plainly that which has not been generally observed on this side of the Atlantic, and has announced a fact, the existence of which by not a few Americans would be absolutely denied. Nevertheless, it remains that the very exigencies of the present situation urge on the American people to an abandonment of their splendid isolation, with its absence of interest in the affairs of the outside world,

into an assumption of place and rank among the great powers of the earth, and an active and potent interest in the welfare of mankind as well as an important and commanding place in the council of nations. If at the outset of what may perhaps justly be termed the new career of the United States; if in the beginnings of our efforts at colonial government, we are guilty of serious errors, we shall not lack instances to remind us of our faults or shortcomings, nor shall we fail to reap the legitimate results of our lack of judgment.

It has been suggested without any great degree of organization that a territorial form of government will solve all our difficulties in this direction, but it must be remembered that Arizona is not Puerto Rico, nor is Alaska the Philippines, and a form of government suited to the one would hardly be available or advisable in the other. No objections can be urged to the new name; our new possessions might with propriety be called Territories, and possibly their form of representation might be the same in the National Congress, but there must be in ruling in these newly acquired countries, until their ultimate absorption into the Union, a flexibility in the form as well as in the actual workings of their government not at present known, and one which has no present prototype.

Whatever then may be the new form of government imposed upon our newly acquired colonies, let it be understood at the outset that it is merely tentative and pending their entry into the Union, with all the rights of Statehood, subject to such healthy change as the development of all or either of the several countries may require. It is quite likely that a marked variation of the workings of the various colonial governments suited to their varying conditions may be found advisable, and as has been suggested, the absence of precedents and colonial traditions leaves the United States the utmost freedom of action in determining the method by which our dependencies shall be ruled. Of one fact the whole world may take cognizance. The American people will resent quickly, forcibly, and with the utmost decision a policy which looks toward the relinquishment of any territory over which the flag of the United States once floats into the hands of Spain or any other nation, and they are equally determined that expansion of territory shall bring in its train the blessings of liberty to the peoples now for the first time brought under their sway, whose ultimate destiny is an equal share in the councils of the Nation.

HOWARD THOMAS.
Norwich, Conn., Aug. 11, 1898.