

LESSON 2: THE PHILIPPINES CRISIS, 1899

Student Handout 1

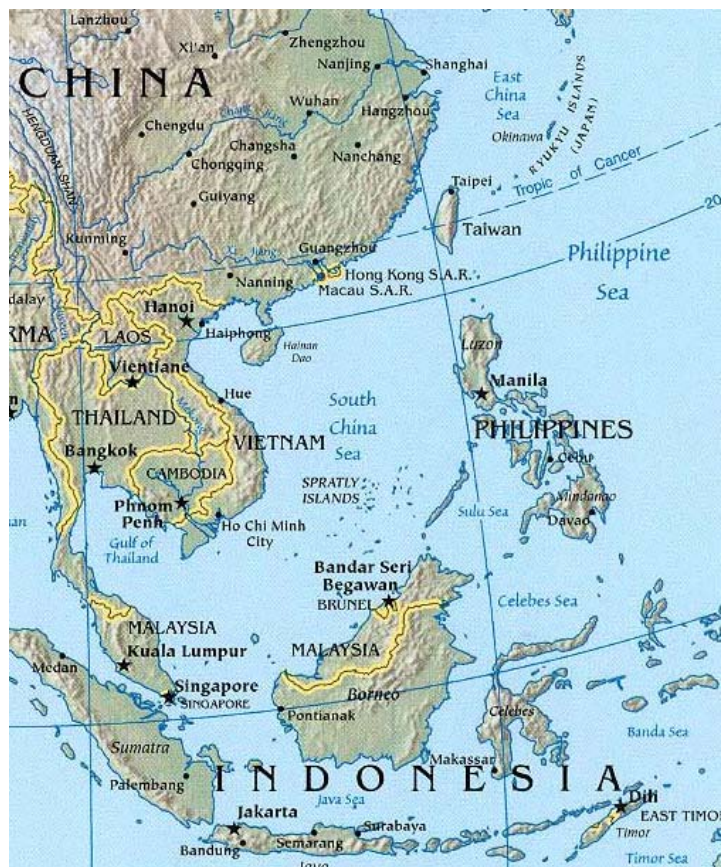


PROBLEM

The year is 1898, and you are President William McKinley. As president, you have a decision to make. The Spanish-American War was fought over Cuba, but the U.S. also defeated the Spanish in the Philippines, a nation made up of more than 2000 islands. The Filipinos did not take part in negotiating the Spanish surrender, nor did any Cubans or Filipinos participate in the Treaty of Paris, which formally ended the war. Upset at being left out, Filipino leaders have met to form their own government. You have to make a decision about whether to grant the Philippines independence or claim it as a colony. U.S. diplomats in Manila, Hong Kong (China), and Singapore believe Emilio Aguinaldo, who led the Filipinos in their fight for independence against the Spanish, would like the U.S. to take over the country.

Those who favor U.S. acquisition of the islands have made several arguments to support their case and have made the following claims:

1. The U.S. could establish a naval base in the Philippines so that American ships could transport and store coal and goods on their way to and from China.
2. If the U.S. doesn't assume control of the Philippines, some other imperial power such as Germany or Japan will.
3. The Filipinos will greatly benefit under U.S. control. Having lived under the Spanish for hundreds of years, they are unfamiliar with democracy. If the U.S. grants the Philippines independence right away, the country will



fall into anarchy. America needs to assume control so that it can teach the Filipinos how to run their country. The U.S. would then gradually withdraw over a period of years.

Opponents of taking the Philippines have countered with these arguments:

1. Taking control of the Philippines goes against the American belief in self-determination (i.e., that people should rule themselves). How can Filipinos learn to rule themselves unless they begin to actually do it?
2. If the Philippines eventually becomes part of the U.S., Filipinos will acquire the rights of U.S. citizens, and many may decide to come to the U.S. Assimilating the Filipinos would be impossible; one person even argued that “there are spotted people” as well as “striped people there.” In short, to many Americans, Filipinos have a strange appearance, language, and culture, and are just too different to be eventually allowed to become Americans.
3. Some military leaders have voiced concerns that the U.S. can’t effectively defend the Philippines—especially if the Japanese decide to attack—because the islands are too far away. In addition, the political and military situations in East Asia are volatile right now, and a real possibility exists that war could break out. If the U.S. took over the Philippines, it could more easily be drawn into such a war.

The press mostly favors American acquisition of the islands. Prominent Republicans, such as Theodore Roosevelt and Senator Albert Beveridge, received enthusiastic responses from crowds when they argued that the U.S. should retain the Philippines. Republicans won solid majorities in Congress in the November elections, showing that the public supports Republican policies in general. When you, the president, personally asked voters what to do about the Philippines, most felt the U.S. should keep the islands as a naval base.

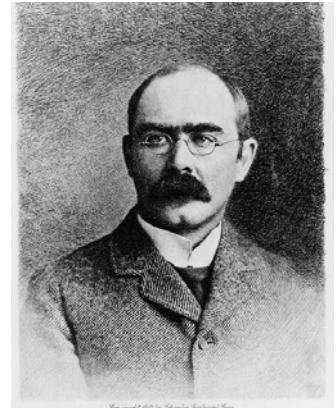
Some have cited economic reasons for acquiring the Philippines. Senator Orville Platt told you that “Manila [capital of the Philippines] has become one of the most important ports of the Orient.” Congressman William Smith argued, “If we take the Hawaiian Islands, hold on to the Philippines, and cultivate good neighborship with the Orient [China], to which they are key, the expansion of our commerce will be augmented [increased] a thousand fold.” Senator Beveridge called the Philippines the key to the “illimitable markets” of China.

As sentiment in favor of acquiring the Philippines has risen, more businessmen are supporting the idea. The National Association of Manufacturers advocates keeping the Philippines “for the protection and furtherance of the commercial interests of our citizens in the Far East.” A State Department paper projects that every year the U.S. will have a larger surplus of manufactured goods and that America would need new markets and customers in foreign countries to buy these goods. The paper maintains that the Philippines could help open up new sources of trade and provide access to new markets. Overall, a majority of U.S. businessmen favor keeping the Philippines, but their support is mild, not strong. They like the idea of new markets, but they’re not completely convinced that U.S. acquisition of the Philippines will result in increased business.

Farmers initially opposed acquisition of the Philippines because they didn't want to compete with cheap labor there. Now many farmers have become more open to taking the islands. Labor leaders are also divided on the issue, with a majority opposed to acquisition because they, too, don't want to face the prospect of cheap labor from the Philippines flooding the U.S.

Protestant missionaries have come out solidly in favor of taking the islands because it will provide them an opportunity to convert the Filipinos from Catholicism. Protestants form a large base of support for your reelection bid in 1900. German Americans oppose annexation because they foresee an eventual clash with Germany as the U.S. expands. They also believe expansion will reduce rights in the U.S. as it has in Germany under the expansionist leaders Otto von Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm.

You are aware that it took many years for the British to subdue citizens in India in order for them to take that colony, and years of bloody fighting for the French to acquire Algeria. It may be very difficult to take over a large territory (more than 2000 islands) inhabited by a racially and culturally different people. A British writer, Rudyard Kipling, has written a poem titled "The White Man's Burden," in which he argues that despite the difficulties, the United States should take on the "white man's burden" to spread democracy to the Philippines. In his opinion, the Filipinos may despise the U.S. ("The blame of those ye better/The hate of those ye guard"), but it must do it for their sake—it's their burden.



Rudyard Kipling

The following statements are paraphrased from a December 1898 U.S. Senate debate over the treaty regarding U.S. acquisition of the Philippines:

- George Hoar (Republican, MA): It's vulgar to take an empire.
- Knute Nelson (Republican, MN): We should take the islands to spread Christianity. We're ministering angels, not despots.
- George Vest (Republican, MI): We fought the American Revolution against colonialism. The Constitution doesn't grant power to the federal government to take colonies.
- Henry Cabot Lodge (Republican, MA): We must support the president and take our place among the great powers by acquiring the Philippines.
- William Jennings Bryan (Democrat, NE): When an individual steals he's called a kleptomaniac. When a country steals it's called "destiny."
- Claude Swanson (Democrat, VA): It will take at the very least 50,000 soldiers and several years to subdue hidden guerrillas in disease-infested jungles.
- Thomas Reed (Republican, ME): If we acquire the Philippines, we may be forced to take eight million barbarians and semi-barbarians (Filipinos) into the U.S.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. Everyone is waiting for your decision. Does the U.S. acquire the Philippines or grant the Filipinos independence?
2. What do you predict President McKinley actually did?