

William Jennings Bryan, "First Speech Against Imperialism"

Extract from speech delivered at Trans-Mississippi Exposition, Omaha, Neb., June 14, 1898.

Nebraska is ready to do her part in time of war as well as in time of peace. Her citizens were among the first to give expression to their sympathy with the Cuban patriots, and her representatives in the Senate and House took a prominent part in the advocacy of armed intervention by the United States.

When the President issued a call for volunteers Nebraska's quota was promptly furnished and she is prepared to respond to the second and subsequent calls.

Nebraska's attitude upon the subject does not, however, indicate that the state is inhabited by a contentious or warlike people; it simply means that our people understand both the rights conferred, and the obligations imposed, by proximity to Cuba. Understanding these rights and obligations, they do not shrink from any consequences which may follow the performance of a national duty.

War is harsh; it is attended by hardship and suffering; it means a vast expenditure of men and money. We may well pray for the coming of the day, promised in Holy Writ, when the swords shall be beaten into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks; but universal peace cannot come until Justice is enthroned throughout the world. Jehovah deals with nations as He deals with men, and for both decrees that the wages of sin is death. Until the right has triumphed in every land and love reigns in every heart government must, as a last resort, appeal to force. As long as the oppressor is deaf to the voice of reason, so long must the citizen accustom his shoulder to the musket and his hand to the saber.

Our nation exhausted diplomacy in its efforts to secure a peaceable solution of the Cuban question, and only took up arms when it was compelled to choose between war and servile acquiescence in cruelties which would have been a disgrace to barbarism.

History will vindicate the position taken by the United States in the war with Spain. In saying this I assume that the principles which were invoked in the inauguration of the war will be observed in its prosecution and conclusion. If, however, a contest undertaken for the sake of humanity degenerates into a war of conquest, we shall find it difficult to meet the charge of having added hypocrisy to greed. Is our national character so weak that we cannot withstand the temptation to appropriate the first piece of land that comes within our reach?

To inflict upon the enemy all possible harm is legitimate warfare, but shall we contemplate a scheme for the colonization of the Orient merely because our ships won a remarkable victory in the harbor of Manila?

Our guns destroyed a Spanish fleet, but can they destroy that self-evident truth, that governments derive their just powers, not from superior force, but from the consent of the governed?

Shall we abandon a just resistance to European encroachment upon the Western hemisphere, in order to mingle in the controversies of Europe and Asia?

Nebraska, standing midway between the oceans, will contribute her full share toward the protection of our sea coast; her sons will support the flag at home and abroad, wherever the honor and the interests of the nation may require. Nebraska will hold up the hands of the government while the battle rages, and when the war clouds roll away her voice will be heard pleading for the maintenance of those ideas which inspired the founders of our government and gave the nation its proud eminence among the nations of the earth.

If others turn to thoughts of aggrandizement and yield allegiance to those who clothe land-covetousness in the attractive garb of "national destiny" the people of Nebraska will, if I mistake not their sentiments, plant themselves upon the disclaimer entered by Congress and insist that good faith shall characterize the making of peace as it did the beginning of war. Goldsmith calls upon statesmen

"*** to judge how wide the limits stand
Betwixt a splendid and a happy land."

If some dream of the splendors of a heterogeneous empire encircling the globe, we shall be content to aid in bringing enduring happiness to a homogeneous people, consecrated to the purpose of maintaining a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.