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Some Needed Words

In the matter of words the demand does not always bring the supply. If we had all the words that we need we should have fewer of the debates that we do not need. Most controversies show, not so much a difference of opinion, as a different understanding of certain words that stand for complex ideas or phenomena not accurately differentiated from other and related phenomena. Few words are specialists our vocabulary, as we have the happiness to have it, is mostly made up of words-of-all-work, many of which obey the scriptural command to bear one another's burdens. As disputants have not the habit of explaining the sense in which they understand and use the pivotal words of the logomachy it results, naturally, in an indisposition to accept view that are not known to be held.

Are the United States and the Philippine Islands at "war"? Were we recently at "war" with China? How much of valuable time and voluble discussion we might have been spared, in Congress and out, if all who intended to engage in it had begun by explaining what they meant by "war." It may mean the mere fighting of considerable bodies of men, or it may mean that, plus, a formal declaration of one or both belligerents of an intention to fight. "War" may exist, indeed, without any fighting—when the fighting has not begun or has ceased. When the McKinley Administration insisted that we were not at war with China, that made it true, in one sense, that we were not in another sense it remained true that we were.

The words "victory" and "defeat" are inexact. An army may be victorious in one sense while defeated in another. For a generation men have been in warm dispute as to whether Chickamauga was a defeat of the Union arms, and the end of the debate, "bequeathed from sire to son," is not in sight. It is exceedingly simple; if the purpose of the battle was possession of Chattanooga, Chickamauga was not a Union defeat; if possession of the field was the object sought, it was. In point of fact both purposes were in mind.

Who was in "command" of the American fleet off Santiago?—if one may without offense inquire. That depends on what is meant by the word "command." It is not an exactly definable word. No man can altogether "command" a fleet or army. Authority is limited, partial, variable. We have no word for this kind of authority, as distinguished from official "command."

All know what is a citizen, all know what is a subject. But in the words "citizen" and "subject" are all the relations of the individual to the State—relations of allegiance—adequately and accurately expressed? Must a man who is not a citizen be a subject? By those who believe it wrong and inexpedient to hold the Filipinos to an American who favors retention of the islands the Filipino is not a citizen, he is a subject. Americans who favor retention of the islands are obviously reluctant to admit that, yet, equally obviously, are hard pushed for an argument in denial. Hence many and bitter controversies and great expenditure of lingual energy without approach to a profitable understanding.

All for lack of a new word to express a new political relation. Who will still the tempest by inventing one? We are paying a pretty penny for the poverty of our vocabulary. Had we the Frenchman's marvelous knack at language we should long ago have composed this quarrel by so felicitous an addition to the political vocabulary that the Filipino himself would be proud to bear it.