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Administration's Philippine Policy Voiced in Congress

Ambrose Bierce Writes of the Masterly Oration of Beveridge in Advocacy of Making the Archipelago a Part of the United States

The fight is on. Today Senator Beveridge of Indiana set the trumpet to his lips and uttered the war-cry of expansion to its ultimate note. He had a great audience: not only was every senator in his seat, but all were attentive. Nobody wrote letters and the port pages had a rest. The galleries were full to the brim, and even the press gang forgot to assume that air of languid indifference that serves to distinguish the Washington newspaper correspondent from all other creations. One might almost have said that the gentlemen of the press were alive.

It was Senator Beveridge's maiden speech. He is young and (I assure you, Madam), very good-looking. A certain interest attaches to him from the fact that he is the hero of a mysterious disappearance; and even in these days, when everybody is a hero of some kind, that counts. Senator Beveridge once sailed away in a gallant ship, and for a weary space was lost to sight in the red Orient, while his countrymen, particularly those in Indiana, whispered with white lips all manner of awful conjectures. It turned out that at some Oriental port his ship had been quarantined for bubonic plague. I believe he did not have it himself, but you see how it can confer a certain distinction on a man without actually decorating him.

Mr. Beveridge's speech was made in support of his own resolution declaring that "the Philippine islands are territory belonging to the United States," and that "it is the intention of the United States to retain them as such and to establish and maintain such governmental control throughout the archipelago as the situation may demand."

Upon this theme he made a notable argument to a sympathetic audience—in the galleries. It is not my intention to report that speech, but he made a few points rather better worth attention than most of those with which we are all familiar by repetition.

For example:

"This island empire is the last land left in all the oceans. If it should prove a mistake to abandon it, the blunder once made would be irretrievable. If it proves a mistake to hold it, the error can be corrected when we will; every other progressive nation stands ready to relieve us."

I don't know if that is new, but it is neat, and if one does not think too much about it, entirely convincing. If it has a fault it is that it will be as cogent after our occupation of the islands has lasted a thousand years as it is today. It can be always invoked to justify retention—perhaps that is its chief strength.

As to the climate of the Philippines, Mr. Beveridge is quite sure it is comfortable and salubrious, and as he has been there and tried it in its several moods and tenses, his testimony is entitled to consideration as is his estimate of the surprising fertility of the soil and the possibilities of agricultural and commercial development. These things are now commonly conceded; there is no longer much debate as to the profit of retaining our conquest. Mr. Beveridge's antagonists prefer to argue the matter as a question of morality. In fact Senator Hoar, who followed with an opposition speech, lifted the matter to so high a plane of ethics that he could himself hardly breathe its attenuated atmosphere.

I dare say that is the right view to take of it. I am sure it must be wrong for nations to be wicked. But in the larger politics of this worst of all possible worlds it does seem as if ethical considerations had not more weight and influence to which their beauty entitles them.

According to the principles so dear to the hearts of the worthy gentlemen who lift protesting hands when the rights of weak nations are invaded by strong ones, not a people on earth to-day has a right to interfere. All have dispossessed some other people.

As the nations having the most advanced civilization are stronger than the others, and as their civilization follows them into the dark corners of the earth which they penetrate uninvited there is seen to be a certain rough truth in the saying that "might makes right" –that is, if civilization and enlightenment are themselves right and desirable. I am not saying that they are, but I gather from Mr. Beveridge's speech that he thinks them so. And I should not be surprised to learn that Messrs. Hoar, Bryan and Atkinson are of that way of thinking. If so, it would be interesting to hear them explain how civilization is to be enlarged in the future.

Heretofore it has usually walked over the Decalogue; perhaps they have a vision of the time to be when the good missionary will be able to "spread the light" without assistance from the soldier and the trader. Possibly they rely, not even altogether upon the Bible, but upon the silk hat. Certainly wherever the silk hat is worn there we have the highest and ripest civilization; and whenever it penetrates a region where it was previously unknown, religion, art, justice and education follow and set up their benign reign. Will it please the gentlemen if we order home our troops from the Philippines and present the Tagalogs with silk hats?