

A Note from the Editor

As most readers of this magazine are well aware, this past December American unity nearly suffered another blow when Puerto Ricans were encouraged to vote for statehood. That they rejected statehood, despite the warm endorsement of official Washington, D.C., is to our good fortune. But as several of the articles in this issue explain, it was another close call.

That we even have a Puerto Rico question is one of the regrettable legacies of the Spanish-American War of 1898. War with Spain was popular at the time, and was portrayed to the public as a crusade to liberate Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines from the oppression of feudal Spanish colonialism. A few colorful heroes emerged (including Teddy Roosevelt and Admiral Dewey), and both commercial and naval expansionists were pleased [Philippine naval bases brought the U.S. three thousand miles closer to the China Market]. As U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain John Hay remarked after the war, "It has been a splendid little war; begun with the highest motives, carried on with magnificent intelligence and spirit, favored by that fortune which loves the brave."

Wiser heads warned that the U. S. was making a mistake by engaging in imperialist ventures. Such expansion violated the spirit of liberty that was fundamental to the founding of the Republic. Others saw the American character as something unique that could be threatened once we took in others from incompatible cultures. As far back as 1844, Emerson opposed Texas annexation, fearing the attempt to ingest its population would fatally compromise the integrity of the American people. He predicted that "the United States will conquer Mexico, but it will be as the man who swallows the arsenic, which brings him down in turn. Mexico will poison us." Over a half century later, William Graham Sumner observed in his celebrated Yale speech, "The Conquest of the United States by Spain," that the Spanish-Americans "are hostile to our ideas. Our religion, language, institutions, and manners offend them. They like their own ways...It follows, then, that it is un wisdom to take into a State like this [the U.S.A.] any foreign element which is not congenial to it. Any such element will act as a solvent upon it."¹

If the United States is once again to be a real nation, and not a congeries of alienated peoples competing for advantage, then the Puerto Ricans must be encouraged to go their own way. Independence respects their distinctiveness...and ours.

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¹ c.f. *On Liberty, Society, And Politics: The Essential Essays of William Graham Sumner*, edited by Robert C. Bannister (Indianapolis, IN: The Liberty Fund, 1-800-955-8335; also available through www.amazon.com).