

LETTERS FROM THE BATTLEFRONT AND THE HOME FRONT

Debating War in the Philippines

Although the Spanish-American War (1898) lasted for only ten weeks before Spain sued for peace, the conflict, which was fought across the Caribbean and the Pacific, provoked bitter debates over the United States' role in world affairs that continue to this day. Not since the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848 had a military entanglement with a foreign power so divided the nation. Even after the war's end, controversies raged between pro- and anti-imperialist political camps. Populist William Jennings Bryan and writer Mark Twain were at the forefront of the anti-imperialists. President William McKinley, the Hearst newspapers, and ex-New York City police commissioner Theodore Roosevelt led the pro-imperialist charge.

With respect to the tiny island colonies of Puerto Rico and Guam, postwar annexation was relatively swift and posed comparatively few immediate problems for the United States. In the cases of Cuba and the Philippines, however, the peace was complex and difficult. Of the two, the Philippines proved the more confusing and painful. For pro-imperialists like Senator Albert Beveridge, the Philippine Islands were the key to a future global empire. Beveridge argued that "the power that rules the Pacific . . . is the power that rules the world. And, with the Philippines, that power is and will forever be the American Republic." The problem was how to establish control over the diverse archipelago.

The collapse of Spanish power had led independence fighters to form a Philippine republic that was not ready to be a "dividend-paying fleet," as Beveridge described the islands, for U.S. power in the Pacific. Led by its president, Emilio Aguinaldo, and supported by a growing educated middle class that had come together in the fight with Spain, the Philippine republic declared war on the invaders in 1899. Thus began the Philippine-American War, which would continue until 1902. By the time the U.S. military fully subdued the Philippines in 1913, more than four thousand U.S. soldiers had died, two Philippine presidents had been hanged by the U.S. Army, and conservative estimates suggest that at least fifty thousand Filipinos—the majority of them civilians—had been killed.

The McKinley administration engaged in an aggressive campaign of press censorship but failed to stop letters sent home by soldiers in the field. The letters were collected by sympathizers of the American Anti-Imperialist League, of which Mark Twain was a prominent member. In 1899 the anti-imperialists published them in a pamphlet that became a political flash point for angry debates over the United States' increasingly

Philip S. Foner and Richard C. Winchester, *The Anti-Imperialist Reader: A Documentary History of Anti-Imperialism in the United States*, vol. 1, *From the Mexican War to the Election of 1900* (New York: Holmes & Maier, 1984), 316–27.

interventionist role in international affairs. Following are some examples of these letters and two responses to them. The documents capture some of the pressing questions that emerged concerning the Philippine-American War.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What were the soldiers' primary arguments for why the United States should not have been in the Philippines?
2. In what ways do these soldiers' accounts suggest respect for the Filipinos, and in what ways do they show disrespect?
3. What was Catherine Meredith's primary argument against considering the validity of the letters?

SOLDIERS' LETTERS BEING MATERIALS FOR THE HISTORY OF A WAR OF CRIMINAL AGGRESSION

Private Fred B. Hinchman, Company A, United States Engineers, writes from Manila, February 22d:

"At 1:30 o'clock the general gave me a memorandum with regard to sending out a Tennessee battalion to the line. He tersely put it that 'they were looking for a fight.' At the Puente Colgante (suspension bridge) I met one of our company, who told me that the Fourteenth and Washingtons were driving all before them, and taking no prisoners. This is now our rule of procedure for cause. After delivering my message I had not walked a block when I heard shots down the street. Hurrying forward, I found a group of our men taking pot-shots across the river, into a bamboo thicket, at about 1,200 yards. I longed to join them, but had my reply to take back, and that, of course, was the first thing to attend to. I reached the office at 3 P.M., just in time to see a platoon of the Washingtons, with about fifty prisoners, who had been taken before they learned how not to take them."

Arthur H. Vickers, Sergeant in the First Nebraska Regiment:

"I am not afraid, and am always ready to do my duty, but I would like some one to tell me what we are fighting for."

Guy Williams of the Iowa Regiment:

"The soldiers made short work of the whole thing. They looted every house, and found almost everything, from a pair of wooden shoes up to a piano, and they carried everything off or destroyed it. Talk of the natives plundering the towns: I don't think they are in it with the Fiftieth Iowa."

General Reeve, lately Colonel of the Thirteenth Minnesota Regiment:

"I deprecate this war, this slaughter of our own boys and of the Filipinos, because it seems to me that we are doing something that is contrary to our

principles in the past. Certainly we are doing something that we should have shrunk from not so very long ago." . . .

Charles Bremer, of Minneapolis, Kansas, describing the fight at Caloocan:

"Company I had taken a few prisoners, and stopped. The colonel ordered them up in to line time after time, and finally sent Captain Bishop back to start them. There occurred the hardest sight I ever saw. They had four prisoners, and didn't know what to do with them. They asked Captain Bishop what to do, and he said: 'You know the orders,' and four natives fell dead." . . .

Martin P. Olson, of the Fourteenth Regulars:

"We can lick them, but it will take us a long time, because there are about 150,000 of the dagos back in the hills, and as soon as one of them gets killed or wounded there is a man to take his place at once; and we have but a few men in the first place, but we are expecting about 8,000 more soldiers every day, and I hope they will soon get here, or we will all be tired out and sick. . . . This is an awful bad climate and there have been from two to four funerals every day. The boys have chronic diarrhea and dysentery, and it just knocks the poor boys out. You musn't feel uneasy about me, because I don't think there is a Spanish bullet made to kill me; it is disease that I am most afraid of." . . .

Ellis G. Davis, Company A, 20th Kansas:

"They will never surrender until their whole race is exterminated. They are fighting for a good cause, and the Americans should be the last of all nations to transgress upon such rights. Their independence is dearer to them than life, as ours was in years gone by, and is today. They should have their independence, and would have had it if those who make the laws in America had not been so slow in deciding the Philippine question. Of course, we have to fight now to protect the honor of our country but there is not a man who enlisted to fight these people, and should the United States annex these islands, none but the most bloodthirsty will claim himself a hero. This is not a lack of patriotism, but my honest belief." . . .

Tom Crandall, of the Nebraska Regiment:

"The boys are getting sick of fighting these heathens, and all say we volunteered to fight Spain, not heathens. Their patriotism is wearing off. We all want to come home very bad. If I ever get out of this army I will never get into another. They will be fighting four hundred years, and then never whip these people, for there are not enough of us to follow them up. . . . The people of the United States ought to raise a howl and have us sent home."

Captain Elliott, of the Kansas Regiment, February 27th:

"Talk about war being 'hell,' this war beats the hottest estimate ever made of that locality. Caloocan was supposed to contain seventeen thousand inhabitants. The Twentieth Kansas swept through it, and now Caloocan contains not one

living native. Of the buildings, the battered walls of the great church and dismal prison alone remain. The village of Maypaja, where our first fight occurred on the night of the fourth, had five thousand people in it at that day,—now not one stone remains upon top of another. You can only faintly imagine this terrible scene of desolation. War is worse than hell.”

Leonard F. Adams, of Ozark, in the Washington Regiment:

“I don’t know how many men, women, and children the Tennessee boys did kill. They would not take any prisoners. One company of the Tennessee boys was sent into headquarters with thirty prisoners, and got there with about a hundred chickens and no prisoners.” . . .

Theodore Conley, of a Kansas Regiment:

“Talk about dead indians! Why, they are lying everywhere. The trenches are full of them. . . . More harrowing still: think of the brave men from this country, men who were willing to sacrifice their lives for the freedom of Cuba, dying in battle and from disease, in a war waged for the purpose of conquering a people who are fighting as the Cubans fought against Spanish tyranny and misrule. There is not a feature of the whole miserable business that a patriotic American citizen, one who loves to read of the brave deeds of the American colonists in the splendid struggle for American independence, can look upon with complacency, much less with pride. This war is reversing history. It places the American people and the government of the United States in the position occupied by Great Britain in 1776. It is an utterly causeless and defenceless war, and it should be abandoned by this government without delay. The longer it is continued, the greater crime it becomes—a crime against human liberty as well as against Christianity and civilization. . . . Those not killed in the trenches were killed when they tried to come out. . . . No wonder they can’t shoot, with that light thrown on them; shells bursting and infantry pouring in lead all the time. Honest to God, I feel sorry for them.”

F. A. Blake, of California, in charge of the Red Cross:

“I never saw such execution in my life, and hope never to see such sights as met me on all sides as our little corps passed over the field, dressing wounded. Legs and arms nearly demolished; total decapitation; horrible wounds in chests and abdomens, showing the determination of our soldiers to kill every native in sight. The Filipinos did stand their ground heroically, contesting every inch, but proved themselves unable to stand the deadly fire of our well-trained and eager boys in blue. I counted seventy-nine dead natives in one small field, and learn that on the other side of the river their bodies were stacked up for breastworks.” . . .

Anthony Michea, of the Third Artillery:

“We bombarded a place called Malabon, and then we went in and killed every native we met, men, women, and children. It was a dreadful sight, the killing of the poor creatures. The natives captured some of the Americans and literally hacked them to pieces, so we got orders to spare no one.”

Lieut. Henry Page, of the Regular Army:

"After a stay of about eight months among these people, during which time no opportunity has been lost to study their qualities, I find myself still unable to express a decided opinion about the matter, but I can unreservedly affirm that the more evidence collected the greater my respect for the native and his capacities. . . . The recent battle of February 5th was somewhat of a revelation to Americans. They expected the motley horde to run at the firing of the first gun. It was my good fortune to be placed—about ten hours afterward—near the spot where this first gun was fired. I found the Americans still held in check. Our artillery then began to assail the enemy's position, and it was only by the stoutest kind of fighting that the Tennessee and Nebraska Regiments were able to drive them out. The Filipinos' retreat, however, was more creditable than their stand. Perfect order prevailed. One of their companies would hold our advance until the company in their rear could retire and reload, when in turn this company would stand until the former had retired and reloaded. A frequent exclamation along our lines was: 'Haven't these little fellows got grit?' They had more than grit—they had organization. . . . In each town a church, a convent or priest's home, a 'tribunal,' which is courthouse, jail, and record office all in one, and a school, constitute the public buildings. The schools were neat, substantial buildings, which testified that the Spanish made an honest effort to educate the masses. The Filipino is very anxious to learn, and the new government of Aguinaldo used every effort to start afresh these schools. The number of natives who speak Spanish as well as their native tongue, and who also know how to read and write, is remarkable. No school teacher has been appointed in San Jose, and the school buildings are held by the American officers. In spite of this discouragement there is a private school flourishing in a native hut."

Charles R. Wyland, Company C, Washington Volunteers, March 27:

"This war is something terrible. You see sights you could hardly believe, and a life is hardly worth a thought. I have seen a shell from our artillery strike a bunch of Filipinos, and then they would go scattering through the air, legs, arms, heads, all disconnected. And such sights actually make our boys laugh and yell, 'That shot was a peach.' A white man seems to forget that he is human. . . . Hasty intrenchments were thrown up to protect our troops from this fire, the bodies of many slain Filipinos being used as a foundation for this purpose, intrenching tools being scarce. Other bodies were thrown into the deep cuts across the road, and with a little top dressing of dirt made a good road again for the Hotchkiss gun serving with the left wing to advance to a position commanding the bridge, where the regiment was to force a crossing in the morning. Many other bodies were thrown into the trenches and covered with dirt, while others, scattered about in the woods and fields over which the battle-line swept, still remain unburied."

Albert Brockway, Company M, Twentieth Kansas:

"We must all bear our portion of the shame and disgrace which this great political war has forced upon us. Unless speedily remedied it will be, or at least should be, the death-knell of the administration. To those who intend to make

the army their profession, and have more regard for personal interests and glory (?) than for the country's welfare it is a grand opportunity. I wonder how reports are given in the United States of matters here! The press censorship will not allow our papers to publish accounts of deaths, etc., hence we, on one end of the line, scarcely know how the others are getting along." . . .

A. A. Barnes, Battery G, Third United States Artillery:

"The town of Titatia was surrendered to us a few days ago, and two companies occupy the same. Last night one of our boys was found shot and his stomach cut open. Immediately orders were received from General Wheaton to burn the town and kill every native in sight, which was done to a finish. About one thousand men, women, and children were reported killed. I am probably growing hard-hearted, for I am in my glory when I can sight my gun on some dark-skin and pull the trigger. Let me advise you a little, and should a call for volunteers be made for this place, do not be so patriotic as to come here. Tell all my inquiring friends that I am doing everything I can for Old Glory and for America I love so well." . . .

Rev. C. F. Dole writes:

"I have a letter from a father in another State whose son is a soldier at Manila: "The longer I stay here, and the more I see and think of the matter, the more fully convinced I am that the American nation was and is making a blunder. I do not believe the United States is equal to the task of conquering this people, or even governing them afterwards. . . . I don't think I would miss the truth if I said more noncombatants have been killed than actual native soldiers. I don't believe the people in the United States understand the question or the condition of things here or the inhuman warfare now being carried on. Talk about Spanish cruelty: they are not in with the Yank. Even the Spanish are shocked. Of course I don't expect to have war without death and destruction, but I do expect that when an enemy gets down on his knees and begs for his life that he won't be shot in cold blood. But it is a fact that the order was not to take a prisoner, and I have seen enough to almost make me ashamed to call myself an American.'"

Raymond Ellis, late corporal in the Seventeenth United States Infantry, makes some unusual charges in a letter to his father. He was in the Santiago campaign, and after returning to the States was sent to the hospital at the Columbus (O.) barracks. He had hardly recovered from his illness, and had but three months to serve of his enlistment, when the regiment was ordered to Manila. Corporal Ellis asked permission to remain, as his time was almost up. This was refused, and he arrived at Manila just before his time expired. On the date of expiration he says he asked for a discharge and transportation home. The commanding officer wanted him to re-enlist, and on his failure to do so, refused transportation home, and he had to work his way on a transport which has recently arrived in San Francisco. . . .

Harvey Stark, of the Hospital Corps:

"I am a pronounced anti-expansionist, and the boys are all anxious to come home. Out of twenty-five thousand troops on the island, I do not think that a regiment of them would care to re-enlist, providing their time was out." . . .

TO THE EDITOR OF *CITY AND STATE*

Your correspondent, Catherine K. Meredith, who, I fear, is as ready to believe idle tales in favor of the Administration as she thinks you are to believe tales against it, will do well to write to the Secretary of the Anti-Imperialist League, 44 Kilby Street, Boston, for the pamphlet, "Soldiers' Letters," if she is a seeker after truth.

This contains more than fifty extracts from officers' and privates' letters, written at the seat of war, most of them bearing their writers' names, and containing most definite and circumstantial statements of "massacres" and the murder of prisoners by order of officers.

...

These letters carry with them every evidence of authenticity, and the painful proof that they were in many cases written by men whose sense of duty and loyalty to the country does not blind them to the vileness of the work in which they are involved, and of which they would gladly be rid.

In the light which they throw upon the brutalities which our criminal aggression necessarily carries with it, Secretary Long's¹ late assurance that the Government is deeply concerned in carrying "the blessings of our civilization" and a "generous happy life" to the Filipinos, reads like trenchant irony.

W. HENRY WINSLOW.
City and State, June 8, 1899

TO THE EDITOR OF *CITY AND STATE*

Being, as I hope, "a seeker after truth," I have followed the advice of Mr. W. Henry Winslow, in your journal of June 8th, sent to Boston for the pamphlet published by the Anti-Imperialist League, and carefully read "Soldiers' Letters." The "more than fifty extracts from officers' and privates' letters" mentioned by Mr. Winslow dwindle to forty-three by actual count, and of these only fifteen allude to the so-called "massacres." The majority of the letters are written by homesick and discontented soldiers, from whom the best army is never absolutely free.

Harvey Stark writes: "I am a pronounced anti-expansionist, and the boys are all anxious to come home." Colonel Stotzenberg: "I am tired of fighting, and I am tired of seeing my men killed." And more letters to the same effect.

So far from these letters carrying with them every evidence of authenticity, as claimed by Mr. Winslow, just the reverse effect is produced, it seems to me, and for these reasons: The names of the "reputable newspapers" from whom the letters have been obtained are not given; the writers are unidentified and their statements unsupported; they are at variance with other letters from officers of the regular army in the Philippines, some of which I have read.

1. **Secretary Long:** John Davis Long, Secretary of the Navy (1897-1902).

I still hold, Mr. Winslow to the contrary notwithstanding, that these "idle tales" are not worthy of belief when contradicted by the definite statements of Secretary Long (who, it would seem, ought to be believed in Boston, even by anti-expansionists) and by the members of the United States Philippine Commission.

But, granting all the letters to be genuine and worthy of credit, what does their united testimony amount to? Forty-three letters in all, many of them of mere childish discontent, from an army of 75,000 men! Just about the proportion at home between the anti-expansionists and the expansionists. . . .

CATHERINE K. MEREDITH
City and State, June 29, 1899

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ABRAHAM CAHAN

A Bintel Brief

Years before Ann Landers, Dear Abby, Ask Amy, and other contemporary advice columns, there was "A Bintel Brief." In 1906 the Jewish Daily Forward, a Yiddish-language newspaper addressing the more than half a million Jewish immigrants in New York City, began running an advice column under a title that translates as "a bundle of letters." The column spoke to Jews from Russia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the Middle East, all with different traditions and dialects as well as various skills and opportunities, struggling with one another as well as with their new circumstances in overcrowded urban neighborhoods. These immigrants and their neighborhoods were among the subjects favored by reform journalist Jacob Riis, whose images of poverty so influenced Americans' vision of U.S. cities. (See the Visual Portfolio "Urban Industrial America" on pages 94–101.)

The editor of the Jewish Daily Forward was Abraham Cahan (1860–1951), who also wrote several novels about immigrant life. Cahan contributed some of the letters for the column as well as the responses. "A Bintel Brief" gave advice on all kinds of personal problems. These excerpts from the column's early years offer fascinating glimpses into Jewish immigrant life at the turn of the century and speak of issues central to the experiences of most immigrants.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What were the major tensions of immigrant life as revealed in the letters?
2. What conflicts do you detect between different types of immigrant Jews, and what conflicts do you see between Jews and the host society?
How do these conflicts differ?