

The Provinciality of American Empire: ‘Liberal Exceptionalism’ and U.S. Colonial Rule, 1898–1912

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One of the central themes of American historiography is that there is no American empire.

—William Appleman Williams (1955)¹

If people want to say we’re an imperial power, fine.

—William Kristol (2003)²

INTRODUCTION

The exceptionalism thesis is well known. It purports that the United States—because of its anti-colonial tradition, democratic values, and liberal institutions—is not and has never been an empire. Scholarship critical of exceptionalist thought has demonstrated how this self-fashioning works. In denying empire, the United States exhibits an “imperial amnesia” about its past while “displacing” its imperial present.³ But recent events have served to complicate both traditional exceptionalism and the claims of its critics.

On the one hand, the popular press, scholars, and some policy-makers have confessed that, indeed, the United States is and has been an empire.

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¹ Williams 1955: 379.

² Quoted in Dorrien 2004.

³ Kaplan 1993; Jacobson 1999. On exceptionalism in American historiography see Tyrrell 1991, and Kammen 1993.

The phrase “American empire” appeared in 1,000 news stories over a single six-month period in 2003. That same year, the *Atlantic Monthly* observed that it had become “cliché” to state that the United States possesses an “empire.”⁴ In 2000, Richard Haas of the State Department urged Americans to “re-conceive their global role from one of a traditional nation-state to an imperial power.”⁵ Two years later, a senior-level advisor to the U.S. President stated: “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.”⁶ This proliferation of empire talk would suggest that the denial and displacement by which exceptionalist thought presumably operates may be abating. Even America’s imperial amnesia shows signs of recovery. As admissions of empire have surfaced, so too has new attention to America’s prior imperial experiences. “Ever since the annexation of Texas and invasion of the Philippines,” declares Niall Ferguson, “the U.S. has systematically pursued an imperial policy.”⁷ Apparently, the United States is no longer an empire that dare not speak its name.

On the other hand, even as the word “empire” has gained entry to the popular lexicon, a certain strand of exceptionalist thought has been simultaneously re-inscribed. This strand of exceptionalism might be called “liberal exceptionalism.” It admits that the United States has been an empire, but insists that the empire has been unique. While European empires were tyrannical and exploitative, American empire has been beneficent and selfless. “America’s imperial goals and *modus operandi*,” claims Ikenberry, “are much more limited and benign than were those of age-old emperors.”⁸ While European empires suppressed liberty, rights, and democracy, America’s empire has been aimed at spreading them. “American imperialists usually moved much more quickly than their European counterparts to transfer power to democratically elected local rulers—as they are attempting to do in Iraq.”⁹ If traditional exceptionalism represses the word “empire,” liberal exceptionalism proclaims a distinctly American imperialism—a unique “liberal empire” and “liberal imperialism” that manifests America’s special virtues.¹⁰

As a new variant of older discourse, liberal exceptionalism warrants novel interrogation. This essay takes one step in that direction. The goal is not to reiterate that the United States is an empire. Because liberal exceptionalism already announces empire, such a strategy would not be novel. Instead, I enlist the tools of comparative-historical sociology to track the discourse, policies, and practices of America’s empire in the early twentieth century. This was

⁴ Kaplan 2003.

⁵ Quoted in Bacevich 2002: 219.

⁶ As reported in Suskind 2004: 44.

⁷ Quoted in Dowd 2003: 27; see also Ferguson 2004 and Raustiala 2003.

⁸ Ikenberry 2002: 59.

⁹ Boot 2003: 363.

¹⁰ Boot 2002; Ferguson 2004.

a formative period. It was when the United States first became a formal colonial empire by acquiring the unincorporated territories of Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and Samoa. And it was a time when liberal exceptionalist discourse had early articulation. Proponents spoke readily of an “American empire” but insisted that the empire would be uniquely benevolent. The United States would rule foreign peoples while using its colonial power to uplift them towards the light of democratic self-government. The Philippines was the model par excellence. “The Philippines are ours not to exploit,” insisted President McKinley, “but to civilize, to develop, to civilize, to educate, to train in the science of self-government.” This so-called “mission” of “democratic tutelage” is what would distinguish American empire from the “tyrannical” empires of European powers.¹¹

As the early twentieth century stands as historical precedent for more recent espousals of liberal exceptionalism, colonialism in the Philippines served as liberal exceptionalism’s manifestation—a key example of America’s imperial virtues that continues to be conjured today.¹² But this then begs a series of questions. To what extent, if at all, did American rule on colonial ground match the rhetoric? Was “democratic tutelage” in the Philippines a palpable policy—reflecting America’s distinct values, virtues, and democratic character—or was it just a ruse? Furthermore, what happened in America’s other colonies? Even if American rule in the Philippines bore the stamp of liberal exceptionalism, did America’s colonial regimes in Puerto Rico, Guam, and Samoa also? The present essay addresses these questions. The answers in turn shed new critical light on America’s self-fashioned imperial identity.

A comparison of colonial regimes across the empire occupies the first part of essay. As will be seen, democratic tutelage was indeed the form that colonial policy took in the Philippines. Furthermore, adding partial validity to exceptionalist thought, the very same “mission” was pursued in Puerto Rico. In these two colonies, therefore, liberal imperialism found solid ground. Still, as will be seen in the second part of the essay, liberal imperialism was not in fact the rule of colonial rule in other parts of the empire. In Guam and Samoa, America’s colonial regimes looked profoundly akin to and in part emulated forms of European colonial rule. In itself, this will serve to critique exceptionalist thought, but it will also raise the question of *why* there was such variation across the colonies. This is addressed in the last part of the essay. As we will see, even though liberal exceptionalism took colonial form in Puerto Rico and the Philippines, it did not originate in America’s putatively distinct political values or special national character. The tutelage policy rather

¹¹ McKinley quoted in Wheeler-Bennett 1929: 506; Moses 105: 18.

¹² Writers today, in fact, continue refer to America’s democratizing project in the Philippines (Boot 2003: 363). George W. Bush referred to it himself in a 2003 speech to warrant America’s occupation of Iraq (see Judis 2004: 50).

emerged from specific features of and developments in the colonies themselves. This will show the “provinciality” of America’s empire: if American rule appeared exceptional at all, it was not because of America’s exceptional character but the distinct characteristics of those whom empire aimed to rule.

FORGING LIBERAL EXCEPTIONALISM

It is useful to begin by sketching the discourse of empire and exceptionalism that emerged on the home front in the wake of the Spanish-American war. In part this discourse surfaced because American empire itself had taken a novel turn by acquiring the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and Samoa. While the United States had long expanded outside its traditional borders, these acquisitions marked a notable shift. Unlike previous territories (including even Hawaii), they were declared “unincorporated” in a series of cases known as the “insular cases” ruled by the Supreme Court. This meant that the new territories had the possibility for, but not the promise of, eventual statehood in the Union; the U.S. Constitution did not extend to them in whole.¹³ Thus, as contemporaries noted, the new acquisitions marked “an entirely new phase in the expansion of the United States.” “By the acquisitions made during this period, the United States has definitely entered the class of nations holding and governing over-sea colonial possessions.”¹⁴

Such was the context within which talk of the United States as an “empire” proliferated. Justice Marshall used the term “American Empire” without negative connotation in his rulings on the insular cases—to which the press took notice.¹⁵ A spate of popular books also emerged with titles like “Our Island Empire.” One such book referred to the United States as an “Imperial State” ruling over a “Federal Empire.”¹⁶ Articles in popular magazines joined the chorus. As one writer observed, “‘Colonial’ and ‘Imperial’ are among the terms extensively used, in recent years, in referring to the relations newly assumed by the United States.”¹⁷ In 1906 the *New York Times* pondered not whether the United States was an “empire” (for its articles often spoke of it) but whether it would ever fall.¹⁸ Decades later it had not: in 1930 the *Saturday Evening Post* carried a two-part article, “The American Empire,” offering a “concise compendium of the American empire.”¹⁹

Attendant with this talk came a two-fold movement. On one hand, some suggested that the new American empire was not unlike European empires. The scholar Franklin Giddings was one among many who equated the British

¹³ On the cases see Burnett et al. 2001.

¹⁴ Willoughby 1905: 7–8.

¹⁵ Quoted in “Status of Porto Rico,” *The New York Times*, 9 Jan. 1901: 7.

¹⁶ Morris 1899; Snow 1902; Pierce 1903: 43.

¹⁷ Pierce 1903: 43.

¹⁸ “The Never-Setting Sun,” *New York Times*, 6 Aug. 1906: 9.

¹⁹ Hard 1930: 12.

Empire with America's new empire.²⁰ In fact, policy-makers and colonial officials scoured papers and books on the European imperial experience, seeking maps for how to conduct colonial governance.²¹ On the other hand, even as these inter-imperial equations were made, proponents of American empire also crafted a distinctly "American" identity. Scholars, statesmen, and officials admitted empire and looked to the British Empire for guidance, but they nonetheless proposed that the United States was better suited than Europeans for taking up the imperial mantle.

The writings of Bernard Moses (who served in the Philippines) and Woodrow Wilson (whom colonial officials often cited) are exemplary. Both contended that the new empire was a necessary historical development. Moses argued that, given nascent forces of globalization, *all* empires were necessary. The world would see more and more imperialism, and so it was "utopian" to suggest that the "lesser races" could go without intervention by the "superior races."²² Wilson asserted that in the "new world order . . . no nation can live any longer to itself"—"the East is to be opened and transformed, whether we will it or no; the standards of the West are to be imposed upon it."²³ But while Moses and Wilson saw imperialism as inevitable, they also carved a distinct niche for the United States. After reviewing the history of British colonialism in Asia and Africa, Moses claimed that it had been "reckless and tyrannical." Due to England's monarchical tradition, it had failed to live up to the promise of developing the "lesser races." The United States was special in contrast. Because of its unique democratic history, Americans were endowed with a liberal character unmatched by any other. Thus, only the United States would be able to construct a "wise and beneficent [sic] governmental authority over a rude people" and offer its imperial subjects an "impulse and guidance toward the attainment of a higher form of life and larger liberty."²⁴ Wilson likewise asserted that though imperialism around the world was inevitable, the United States was to play a special role. Because democracy was an essential part of America's being, a "thing of principle and custom and [our] nature," America was to play "a leading part" in the global process of imperialism. It alone had the "peculiar duty to moderate the process [of imperialism] in the interests of liberty; to impart to the peoples thus driven out upon the road of change . . . our principles of self-help . . . order and self-control; impart to them . . . the habit of law."²⁵

Exceptionalism therefore emerged in the early twentieth century not in the sense that imperialists denied empire but rather in that they fashioned their

²⁰ Giddings 1900: 287. See also Pierce 1903: 43.

²¹ Amoroso 2003: 118; Schumacher 2002: 40; and Kramer 2003.

²² Moses 1905: 5.

²³ Wilson 1901: 292.

²⁴ Moses 1905: 7.

²⁵ Wilson 1901: 289, 295–98.

empire distinct. The United States would be an empire, but unlike other empires it would use its power benevolently, taking up the task of transforming, uplifting, and democratizing foreign peoples. "If America has any mission outside of her continental limits," concluded Moses, "it is not to preserve among less developed peoples such institutions and customs as make for bondage and social stagnation, but to put in their place the ideas that have made for freedom, and the laws by which this nation has been enabled to preserve its freedom."²⁶

But what exactly happened in the province of empire's rule? In order to better apprehend liberal exceptionalism, we might fare well to look at colonialism on the ground.

EXCEPTIONALISM IN THE PHILIPPINES

As Kramer (2003) and Adas (1998) have noted, American rule in the Philippines was the critical site to which exceptionalist discourse referred. This is fitting. A look at the American regime in the Philippines reveals that it was indeed aimed at pursuing the "mission" that Moses and Wilson saw as distinctly American. Elihu Root's 1899 report as secretary of war sketched the overarching idea. "[I]t is our unquestioned duty to make the interests of the people over whom we assert sovereignty the first and controlling consideration in all legislation and administration which concerns them, and to give them, to the greatest possible extent, individual freedom, self-government in accordance with their capacity, just and equal laws, and opportunity for education, for profitable industry, and for development in civilization."²⁷ President McKinley's first instructions to the Philippine Commission—inaugurating civil rule in the archipelago—expressed the same idea. McKinley urged the Commission to institute policies that would aid in the Filipinos' political "development" according to the "traditions" and political ideas "from which we have benefited."²⁸

On colonial ground, authorities put these guidelines to work. They insisted that theirs would be a tutelary government whereby the colonized would receive an "education" in the ways of American-styled political ideas, institutions, and values under America's "strong and guiding hand."²⁹ In part this involved building a public school system that would offer civics classes for the "ignorant" and "credulous" masses.³⁰ Schoolbooks preached about everything from the Bill of Rights to voting.³¹ Another part of the project was not education for the "masses" but a "practical political education" for the more

²⁶ Moses 1905: 18.

²⁷ USWD 1899: 24.

²⁸ Forbes 1928: II, 443.

²⁹ USWD 1899: 24; USPC 1900: I, 83–85.

³⁰ Taft 1908: 24.

³¹ Jernegan 1910; see also Margold 1995.

powerful strata of society. The governor declared that the Filipino elite needed “as much education in practical civil liberty as their more ignorant fellow-countrymen in reading, writing, and arithmetic.”³² “Practical political education” would fill the presumed gap, giving the elite the civilizing influences that, supposedly, Spanish rule had not provided.

The colonial state itself was to serve the educating process. At the local level, authorities first constructed elective offices and various other posts filled by Filipinos.³³ They also constructed a civil service to give native bureaucrats “a political education which will show them the possibility of the honest administration of government.”³⁴ Then, in 1907, the Commission established a national legislative assembly manned by elected Filipino officials. This was to allow Filipino legislators to “receive instruction in the principles and methods of government . . . in the practical school of experience” and learn such “lessons” as the “American method of a strong executive separate from the assembly.”³⁵ First Governor William Taft saw the Philippine Assembly as a “school of politics” for “educating the Filipinos in the science and practice of popular representative government.”³⁶ Elections with an initially restricted but later expanded suffrage were to aid the curriculum. Authorities established electoral rules and ballot systems—advanced by Progressive-era reformers at home—to induce and ensure “purity” in elections. As American officials bragged, “those features that the experience of the United States has shown to be most conducive to the purity of the ballot and the honesty of elections have been embodied in the election law for the Philippine Islands.”³⁷

The very form of colonial governance in the Philippines therefore carried a project aimed at transformation. Filipinos, by being granted some amount of governmental participation, would get the proper training and experience in American-styled government so that they might, one day, rule themselves. American authorities retained ultimate control—offering “object lessons” in the ways of good government—but throughout tutelage would target “Hispano-Malayo” forms of authority and “uproot or modify all impediments to democratic institutions.”³⁸ Ultimately, the colonized would be transformed into American types—even if they were not to be transformed into “Americans” proper.

In light of this tutelage regime, it is not surprising that contemporaries heralded it as exemplary of a uniquely benign imperialism. Officials and observers alike bragged that tutelage in the Philippines was “the greatest political experiment the world has ever seen”—something “unprecedented” in the world’s

³² Taft 1908: 24; Taft to Root, 18 Aug. 1900 (ERP, folder T).

³³ Cullinane 1971.

³⁴ Taft to Hoyt, 8 Sept. 1900 (CE, I, 1.16).

³⁵ USPC 1900: 92–93.

³⁶ Taft 1908: 42.

³⁷ Act 1582 (RG 350, 10265-18). For more see Reyes 1930: 274.

³⁸ Forbes 1928: I, 98.

history.³⁹ Cameron Forbes, one of the first colonial officials, later claimed that while European colonialisms had been driven by “the profit motive,” American rule in the Philippines had been guided by different lights. “In the instructions of President McKinley [to the first colonial officials] . . . a high note of altruism is maintained. They are enjoined to remember that the government is designed solely for the welfare of the Philippine people.” Forbes even claimed that when European rulers later engaged in civilizing missions, they simply “followed the example set by the United States.”⁴⁰ In the 1930s, historian Pratt added: “Probably no group of men in history ever took so seriously the task of administering colonies in the interest of their inhabitants as the best of the American officials . . . [who] worked to bring the Filipinos to a higher level of health, prosperity, education, and political capacity.” “The Philippines,” he concluded, “constitute Exhibit A among projects of benevolent imperialism.”⁴¹

TOWARD A CRITIQUE

This is not to say that these exceptionalist claims have gone unperturbed. Since the 1970s at least, scholarship has reexamined American rule in the Philippines to critique it. Some have highlighted the violence attendant with the Philippine-American war, and some the interests of American capital. Others have stressed the colonial state’s racialized practices.⁴² Others still have argued that America’s health and sanitation projects—heralded as key examples of America’s benevolent developmentalism—were not as benign as they might first appear. Iletto (1988) suggests that such projects, rather than devoid of power’s exercise, were but insidious forms of disciplinary power in their own right. These arguments are indeed important for recognizing the multifaceted dimensions of colonial power belied in narrow exceptionalist lenses, but they face one limit: they do not directly confront key features of the American regime that enable exceptionalism’s proponents to register their claims. After all, the American regime *was* tutelary; American authorities indeed granted a comparably wide amount of native participation in local governments, elections, and the national assembly. Even British observers took notice, however incredulously. Mrs. Campbell Dauncey, wife of a British diplomat in the archipelago, wrote in her diary: “The [American] Ideal is this you see, that every people in the world should have self-government and equal rights. This means . . . that they consider these Malay half-breeds to be capable . . . of understanding the motives, and profiting by the institutions which it has taken the highest white races two or three thousand years to evolve. [. . .] When I come to think of it, America with this funny little

³⁹ *Manila Times*, 15 Oct. 1907: 4; Williams 1913: 321.

⁴⁰ Forbes 1928: II, 391–92, 394–95.

⁴¹ Pratt 1934: 277–78.

⁴² Salman 1991; Rafael 1993.

possession of hers is like a mother with her first child, who . . . tries to bring it up on some fad of her own because it is so much more precious and more wonderful than any other child any one else ever had.”⁴³

Without challenging the fact that the American officials indeed constructed a tutelage regime, the general line of exceptionalist reasoning has been arguably left intact. To register the idea that America’s distinct “mission” is and has been to “export democracy” to the world, for example, recent scholarship repeatedly refers to the fact that the Americans’ constructed a “modern government, from parties and elections to centralized governing institutions with a division of power.”⁴⁴ In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book on America’s relationship with the Philippines, Karnow asserts: “Compared to the Europeans, the Americans were far more liberal politically . . . [they] encouraged elections soon after their arrival, so that the Filipinos had a national legislature, the first in Asia, as early as 1907. [. . .] This was a time when the British, despite their own democratic creed, were detaining Indian dissidents without trial and the French, for all their dedication to the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, were summarily executing Vietnamese nationalists.”⁴⁵ More recently, Boot refers to tutelage in the Philippines to make his exceptionalist claim: “compared with the grasping old imperialism of the past, America’s ‘liberal imperialism’ pursues far different, and more ambitious, goals. It aims to instill democracy in lands that have known tyranny.”⁴⁶ And while Philippine historians have attacked Boot on several grounds, they do not refute his factual fodder. One critic concedes to Boot: “As for the claims [of Boot] that Filipinos fared much better under U.S. imperialism than their counterparts-elsewhere did under European colonialism, and that the Philippines was the first Asian state to establish a national legislature (1907), all are true.”⁴⁷

A different approach, as yet untaken in existing critiques, might fare better to put the Philippines in the wider context of the American empire. What happened, for example, in the other “unincorporated territories” of Puerto Rico, Guam, and Samoa? Did colonial regimes there also bear the stamp of liberal exceptionalism?

THE COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

The question of the forms of rule in other “unincorporated territories” is critical to our task. One of the underlying assumptions of liberal exceptionalism is that America’s unique values, virtues, and character are necessarily manifested on colonial ground. Wilson claimed that what Filipinos would acquire from American tutelage is “the aid of *our* character.”⁴⁸ More recently, May’s

⁴³ Dauncey 1906: 34–35.

⁴⁴ Smith 1994: 45.

⁴⁵ Karnow 1989: 13.

⁴⁶ Boot 2003: 361.

⁴⁷ Bankoff 2002: 180.

⁴⁸ Wilson 1901: 298 (my emphasis).

seminal study asserts that the tutelage project was distinct in comparison with European colonialisms because of the American officials' unique "American past."⁴⁹ Such reasoning, therefore, would be obliged to predict that the United States would have enacted a similar tutelage project in *all* of its colonies. If the presumably unique tutelage project in the Philippines was determined by America's unique values, then those values should have also shaped colonial projects elsewhere. As Carruthers (2003) observes of exceptionalist thought: "If the U.S. was uniquely virtuous . . . then it stood to reason that American modes of imperial governance must be reflective of that virtuosity, both in the uplifting ends to which U.S. interventions aspired, and the lightness of touch with which American agents pursued them."⁵⁰

Yet, a comparative analysis reveals a critical variation across America's empire. On the one hand, if we turn to Puerto Rico, we do find evidence of exceptionalism's claims. In fact, colonial policies in Puerto Rico were nearly identical to those in the Philippines. When Elihu Root stated "it is our unquestioned duty to give them . . . the greatest possible extent, individual freedom, self-government . . . and development in civilization," he referred to Puerto Rico and the Philippines alike.⁵¹ And colonial state-building followed the same pattern as in the Philippines. Military rulers from 1898 to 1900 first set up local elections and offices. Then, in 1900, the Foraker Act solidified a tutelage form, putting ultimate power in the hands of appointed Americans while calling nonetheless for extended participation by Puerto Ricans. On the ground, American authorities enacted a large-scale public school system and continued with elected local offices. Thereafter they inaugurated a national legislative assembly. Regularized elections were held throughout, and officials' repeatedly spoke of political education and benevolent transformation.⁵² Ostensibly American occupation would induce "real progress towards a transformation of this Island and its people into truly American types."⁵³

Guam and Samoa, however, saw a very different form of rule. In neither colony did authorities endeavor to cast the colonized in metropolitan molds; talk of tutelage was markedly absent. Something of this is evident in the relative lack of public school systems. As late as 1920 there was only one state-funded school in Samoa and, while Guam saw a few more, neither saw the kind of educational program carried out in the Philippines or Puerto Rico.⁵⁴ In the Philippines, state expenditures for public schooling amounted to 41 percent of total spending. In Samoa funds devoted to education were next to nil and

⁴⁹ May 1980: 17.

⁵⁰ Carruthers 2003: 10.

⁵¹ USWD 1899: 24.

⁵² Go 2000; GPR 1903: 81; Clark 1973. On schools see Negrón de Montilla 1975.

⁵³ G. W. Davis to G. Bird, 3 May 1899 (AGPR FF/GC/PP Caja 181); Willoughby 1905: 11–15.

⁵⁴ CTIP 1928: 7; GS 1927: 81.

in Guam they took up a sparse 17 percent.⁵⁵ The curriculum was likewise minimal. While schoolchildren in Puerto Rico and the Philippines were given civics classes, students in Guam only learned “habits of cleanliness” and, at most, English. “It is not the intention,” wrote the governor, “to carry the instruction of the mass much beyond that.”⁵⁶ The criticism of one traveler hit the nail on the head: “We have gone quite mad over education in the Philippines, and not quite mad enough over Guam.”⁵⁷

The forms of colonial governance are also indicative. Both Guam and Samoa were put into the hands of the Navy Department. In turn, commanders of the naval base assumed the role of colonial governor responsible for devising policies, programs, and all legislation. In Samoa, the result was a form of indirect rule first laid down by Governor Tilley and kept in existence for several decades. Tilley divided the islands into administrative districts corresponding to what he took to be the “ancient” sociopolitical divisions and appointed hereditary native chiefs to administer them. The goal was not to uproot local forms of authority but keep them intact, preserving rather than transforming Samoan “customs.” Tilley’s model? Tilley took inspiration from British rule in Fiji, thereby eschewing American traditions, territorial governments at home, or even Native-American reservations.⁵⁸

Governors in Guam structured their colonial regime similarly. Guam did not have hereditary chiefs, but under Spanish rule it had had native district officials known as *gobnadorcillos* (or “little governors”). American authorities did not then try to transform the system. Instead, they maintained it by reappointing the *gobnadorcillos* as “commissioners.” Thus, in stark contrast to the Philippines or Puerto Rico, local leaders were not chosen through American-styled elections. There was no talk of “practical political education”; the state was not fashioned as a “school of politics.” As one historian notes, “political conditions hardly changed at all” from Spanish to American rule.⁵⁹ If anything, the movement was in reverse. During Spanish rule, the position of *gobnadorcillo* had been elective (albeit through a very restrictive suffrage), but American officials abolished these elections entirely.⁶⁰ Contrary to Moses’ claim that America’s “mission” was not to “preserve social stagnation” but rather to uplift and transform, American authorities in Guam and Samoa aimed for preservation.

In fact, successive colonial rulers in Guam and Samoa maintained control autocratically—a “personal rule” that concentrated legislative, executive, and

⁵⁵ Darden 1951: 30 on Samoa; Monroe 1925: 567 on the Philippines; GG 1904: 21–24 on Guam.

⁵⁶ GG 1905: 14.

⁵⁷ French 1905: 379.

⁵⁸ USN 1901: 85–86.

⁵⁹ Rogers 1995: 128.

⁶⁰ Cox 1917: 78; GG 1903: 2.

judicial functions in the American governor.⁶¹ No effort was made to instill the “principles” of American governance such as the separation of powers, much less the ideas of America’s beloved democracy. The difference was not lost on astute contemporary observers. While Pratt heralded American rule in the Philippines as “exhibit A” of “benevolent imperialism,” he also noted that “elsewhere there is less to be proud of and more to deplore.” It is “true that naval governors [in Samoa and Guam] have permitted native life to go on with no great amount of interference,” but this “is a negative kind of beneficence, not the strenuous bearing of the burden sung by Kipling.”⁶²

The first limit of exceptionalist claims is hereby disclosed. Guam and Samoa were not visited by unique regimes aimed at imparting American-styled free government. Instead they faced comparably banal exercises in unexceptional colonialism. And colonial states were not manifestations of America’s unique values—they resounded with rather than deviated from European forms elsewhere. If the United States had a special “character”—as Woodrow Wilson claimed—its ruling practices in Guam and Samoa betrayed it.

THE LOCAL ORIGINS OF GLOBAL EMPIRE

But if colonial policy was not uniform, and if it therefore cannot be said to reflect an American national character, what explains the variation? Here I show that, rather than America’s values or virtues, two different sets of factors were important. The first was the drive for legitimacy, a principle of colonial state-building everywhere. The second included preexisting conditions in the colonies that, in turn, shaped authorities’ perceptions of the needs, interests, and desires of the colonized. Working in conjunction, these factors made for variation across America’s empire. By closely investigating their operations, we will ultimately disclose another of liberal exceptionalism’s limits. We will see how empire’s exceptional forms were—in a word—provincial.⁶³

Colonial State-Building and the Drive for Legitimacy

Traditional scholarship treats colonial states as mechanisms of coercion that maintained their “dominance without hegemony.”⁶⁴ But various studies on colonialisms around the world have revealed that, in fact, colonial rulers did not always resort to guns, bullets, and swords. While colonial regimes surely resorted to brute force, they did not always have the resources to do so, nor

⁶¹ Keesing 1934: 132.

⁶² Pratt 1934: 277–78.

⁶³ Studies of colonialism in the Philippines have not specified tutelage’s origins, arguably because their studies are not comparative. My explanation emerges from original research but it has also been informed by Paredes’ (1990) work on the founding of Philippine parties. Thompson (2002) offers useful insights on Congressional legislation towards the colonies but not governing strategies on the ground.

⁶⁴ Guha 1997.

did they prefer to. Working on the cheap and on the spot, their preferred aim was to cultivate collaborators and cooperation, win consent and create compliance. Accordingly, rulers often tried to represent rule as meeting the interests of the colonized, using signs and symbols to articulate the local demands and desires as their own. And they often granted material and political concessions to win hearts and minds or at least shore up compliance. In this sense, rulers strove to legitimate their occupation.⁶⁵

American authorities were no exception to this. Their internal correspondence reveals concerns over the legitimacy of their rule and how local inhabitants perceived it. This is most evident in the Philippines, not least since resistance to American sovereignty from armed revolutionaries had been strong. Indeed, the first commissioners insisted that American rule, rather than relying upon coercion alone, would fare better to demonstrate benevolence. To quell resistance, the regime had “to create a situation where those in favor of peace can safely say so, and can argue with their brethren in the field not only that our intentions are good but, by pointing to accomplished facts, show the advantage of accepting our authority.”⁶⁶ Jacob Schurman, head of the first Philippine Commission, thus suggested that replacing the existing military government with civil government “would do more than any other single occurrence to reconcile the Filipinos to American sovereignty.”⁶⁷ Yet policy-makers not only claimed that winning hearts and minds would help to quell resistance and *establish* American rule, they likewise insisted that it would also help to *sustain* it in the long run. “Americans and Filipinos will have to trust each other,” Schurman cabled State Secretary John Hay in Washington, “. . .while the Filipino stops at nothing nor thinks of death when influenced by hatred resentment or revenge, he is much moved by sympathy and generosity of powerful superior, whose power he has felt. Believe magnanimity our safest, cheapest, and best policy with Filipinos.”⁶⁸

If resistance in the Philippines renders such concerns unsurprising, witness the worries of authorities in the territories where armed revolution was absent. In Samoa, the Assistant Secretary of the Navy Charles Allen (who later governed Puerto Rico) instructed the first commandant in charge of local policy: “While your position as commandant will invest you with authority over the islands embraced within the limits of the state, you will at all times exercise care to conciliate and cultivate friendly relations with the natives. A simple, straightforward method of administration, *such as to win and hold the confidence of the people*, is expected of you.” This clause was repeated in the orders to every subsequent governor of the islands.⁶⁹ Similarly,

⁶⁵ Engels and Marx 1994: 3; Thomas 1994; Vincent 1988: 149; Ranger 1983.

⁶⁶ Williams 1913: 60–61.

⁶⁷ USPC 1900: 90.

⁶⁸ Schurman to Hay, 3 June 1899 (MP ser. 1, r.7).

⁶⁹ GS 1913: 10; Darden 1951: xiii.

in Guam, President McKinley's instructions to the first appointed governor read: "it will be the duty of the military commander to announce and proclaim in the most public manner that we come, not as invaders or conquerors, but as friends. [. . .] [I]t should be the earnest and paramount aim of the naval administration to win the confidence, respect and affection of the inhabitants of the Island of Guam."⁷⁰ Policy-makers and authorities in Puerto Rico were likewise concerned about winning hearts and minds. The first military rulers were instructed by Washington to be "tactful and conciliatory" when dealing with the people.⁷¹ Later, Leo Rowe, head of the Puerto Rican code commission, insisted that cooperation and persuasion was necessary for sustaining long-term occupation. "Civil authority is unable to command the same obedience, or to exercise the same highly organized supervision which characterizes military rule." Successful civilian rule entailed "the co-operation of the native element, not only when in harmony with the executive but as a permanent, obligatory feature of the system." The colonial regime must therefore "use persuasion where the army may use command."⁷²

Recognizing this overarching imperative of legitimacy is the first step towards explaining U.S. colonialism's diverse forms. The logic of legitimation was two-fold. First, the fledgling colonial regimes had to determine the needs, desires, and interests of the inhabitants. If authorities hoped to "persuade" the colonized, this necessitated understanding what exactly what would best persuade them. If authorities aimed to secure "cooperation," "confidence," and "trust," this demanded ascertaining what the colonized would cooperate with and what exactly they would trust. Second, and most critically, authorities had to incorporate what they learned into their ruling practices. They had to signify their rule as meeting local demands and incorporate at least some of those demands into their policies and programs. To achieve a successful occupation without the use of force, colonial rulers had to construct accommodating states—ruling regimes that would partially shape themselves to perceived local molds. In all of the colonies, the Americans' legitimating efforts followed this logic. The critical difference had to do with local conditions in the colonies as the American rulers perceived them, and therefore what local interests and demands they incorporated into their ruling forms.

Perceived Local Demands in Guam and Samoa

Consider conditions in Samoa. First, Samoa had not been previously ruled by European colonial powers. While missionaries and traders were present, and while British, U.S., and German agents had made arrangements with local

⁷⁰ Quoted in Beers 1944: 18–19.

⁷¹ Telegram to Guy Henry, 11 Mar. 1899 (MP 6–1).

⁷² Rowe 1904: 143–44.

leaders to establish military outposts (while intervening into local politics), Samoa had not been ruled directly by a foreign power in the same manner that Spain had ruled Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico—that is, with elaborate colonial administrations.⁷³ Even Germany's relationship with Samoa, beginning with the "friendship treaty" in 1874, was largely "informal" and "quasi-colonial."⁷⁴ Second, Samoa was less dependent upon the world-economy than other territories. While vast agricultural lands of Puerto Rico and the Philippines had been devoted to export production for centuries before U.S. rule, the copra trade in Samoa was comparably undeveloped and participation in the wage economy was not necessary for local survival.⁷⁵

These features of Samoa were important. Conjoined with preexisting Western discourses on Oceanic peoples (such as those provided by the writer Robert Louis Stevenson), they contributed to a perception among American officials that the islands and their people were locked in an "undeveloped" state of existence in which Samoans were comparably content and happy—so much so that American officials often idealized and romanticized their existence.⁷⁶ In his early reports from Samoa, American consulate Henry Ide suggested that the climate and perceived lack of external influences had left the inhabitants in a near prelapsarian condition of existence whereby Samoans lived in perfect harmony with their natural surroundings. "They have abundant fertile land to supply their wants and those of their posterity for all time." The Samoans likewise appeared peaceful and docile. Ide suggested that while intermittent conflicts among the people had previously erupted, Samoans were very much unlike "our Indian territory filled with murder and violence." "Absolute peace has prevailed for nearly three years." Ide's conclusion was that the inhabitants were "picturesque, kindly, polite, and hospitable."⁷⁷ Subsequent American authorities in Samoa articulated similar views. Officials claimed that the Samoans' natural environment made it such that "[the Samoans'] wants are few . . . nature is prodigal of her favors."⁷⁸ The Samoans, wrote Governor Schroeder, "are as a rule good natured and generous. . . . It is doubtless a natural law that there can be development without hardship, and nature here is so kind that the natives practically

⁷³ Chappell 2000: 225–27; Ellison 1938: 83–106; Gray 1960: 27–91; Kennedy 1974: 1–97; Rigby 1988.

⁷⁴ Steinmetz 2002: 140.

⁷⁵ See for American interests, Rigby 1988: 229–33. See also Ellison 1938: 29–81, and Watson 1918 for more on Samoan economic history.

⁷⁶ My claim is not that preexisting conditions in Samoa alone determined the American officials' views. They rather converged with already-circulating ideas about Pacific islanders. For a complex discussion of how similar processes played out in the German empire, see Steinmetz (2002; 2003). I discuss the interplay of preexisting historical conditions, racialized meanings, and policy formation in Samoa and Guam in further detail elsewhere (Go 2004).

⁷⁷ Ide 1897: 263, 169, 171–72.

⁷⁸ GS 1913: 23.

never have to face hardships. They move along through life, as did many generations of their forefathers, without the necessity of any great amount of work or of privation.”⁷⁹ Therefore, the average Samoan “is happiest when in his natural state.”⁸⁰

These classifications were not simply discursive matters. In conjunction with the legitimating imperative, they had practical implications for colonial governance. As the people were classified as already happy and contented, as their “wants” were relatively few and simple, colonial rule would fare best to ensure and perpetuate this condition, if only to ensure its own legitimacy and perpetuate a happy occupation.⁸¹ On the one hand, preservationist policies were partly a matter of expedience. For example, when governor Tilley tried to first secure consent to American sovereignty from Manua chiefs, he noted hesitance on their part. The Tui Manua [ruling chief of Manua] welcomed Tilley “but at the same time giving me plainly to understand that he did not wish any interference with his ‘kingdom’ by any outside power.” Tilley further learned that the chiefs “feared that I would take away their lands and other property.” In response, Tilley declared: “There is no intention to disturb your quiet, peaceful living, or interfere with your property or affairs. We do not want your lands or anything that you have unless we buy them with your consent.” After this declaration, the chiefs finally accepted the new arrangement.⁸² On the other hand, if leaving local conditions intact was expedient for winning initial consent, it was also desirable for the long-term given the inhabitants’ putatively contented state. In fact, Tilley’s premise for his preservationist government was that the people were already “in a most happy and peaceful state. [. . .] No changes in the local government of the island will be necessary.”⁸³ He later added: “The natives of Tutuila are a gentle, kindly, simple-minded race and are easily governed. [. . .] I considered that the best way to govern these people was to let them, as far as possible, govern themselves, by continuing their good and time-honored customs and gradually abolishing the bad ones. [. . .] My aim was to modify this system so as to adapt it to requirements of civilized government, without at the same time interfering with the deeply rooted customs of the people or wounding their susceptibilities in any way. To achieve this I followed the plan which has proved so successful in Fiji of appointing native chiefs as local magistrates or governors in each district.”⁸⁴

⁷⁹ USN 1904a: 7.

⁸⁰ CTIP 1928: 52.

⁸¹ See Steinmetz (2002) for a discussion of how German authorities in German Samoa had similar perceptions that led to similar colonial policies. See also Thomas (1994) for British classifications and governance in Fiji.

⁸² USN 1900: 100, 105.

⁸³ *Ibid.*: 100.

⁸⁴ USN 1901: 86. Tilley’s model of governance, borrowed from Fiji, remained the basic model for all successive rulers in subsequent years (Darden 1951: xiii).

The colonial regime in Samoa hereby wound up emulating banal forms of European rule. Securing consent and maintaining rule meant keeping the natives happy, but as the natives were perceived to be happy already, successful rule meant not transforming their way of life but keeping it intact. “Native” ways had to be preserved to in turn preserve the integrity of rule. “No effort was made to make any radical changes in the long established customs,” Tilley reported, because “the natives, naturally docile and easily ruled, are happy and contented.”⁸⁵

This preservationist strategy continued unabated over the next decades, for the premise remained the same. When Christian missionaries later insisted that the regime build public schools, the authorities responded by claiming that public education would do little else than contaminate the Samoans’ putatively pristine state and in turn threaten the stability of rule. If the regime were to institute an educational program, explained Governor Bryan, the Samoans “will be less and less happy all the time, and I am not in favor of Americanizing them.”⁸⁶ An investigative committee of U.S. Congressmen later decided that the preservationist policy was preferred because “In the stage in which we found them, they were a happy, contented, virtuous people, without all these advantages of civilization. Civilization has brought them disease, dissatisfaction, and other things.”⁸⁷

A similar process unfolded in Guam. As in Samoa, officials in Guam were concerned about legitimacy. The first officials were instructed by Washington to “win the confidence, respect and affection of the inhabitants.” Furthermore, preexisting local conditions in Guam were not entirely different from those in Samoa. Despite the fact that Guam had been ruled by Spain, Spanish rule had not served to fully commercialize the islands. Export products were comparably few and marginal to subsistence production, the island was largely self-sufficient, and islanders lived off land and sea. Politically, colonial rule had relied on a handful of elite representatives from the landowning class known as the *mana’kilo*. This class had not previously made demands for major political reforms or independence. With only intermittent complaints about taxation, the island had seen decades of calm.⁸⁸ These conditions contributed to American perceptions homologous to those in Samoa—viz., the Chamorros were perfectly content in their existing state and surroundings, worthy of romanticization. “There was very little crime,” noted one governor as he reflected upon conditions as he found them “...[and] little violation of the law.”⁸⁹ The Chamorros were a “peaceful, good-natured, law-abiding

⁸⁵ Tilley 1901: 1601.

⁸⁶ CTIP 1928: 42.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*: 16.

⁸⁸ On these socioeconomic and political conditions, see Carano and Sanchez 1964: 125–58; Rogers 1995: 74–105; and Thompson 1941: 83–92.

⁸⁹ Schroeder 1922: 242.

people”—the small class of local intermediaries, “have never shown the slightest resistance or opposition.”⁹⁰ Furthermore, given the Chamorros’ self-sufficiency, observers classified them as untainted by civilization’s corruptions, free from modernizing desires or pressing needs. “If wealth consists in the ability to gratify one’s wants,” wrote Governor Safford, “the people of Guam may be called rich.” Governor Born added: “the islander lives his life in peace and contentment, and is, apparently, far happier than the average dweller in many a more advanced country.”⁹¹

As in Samoa, preservationist policies followed. Because the “children” of Guam were deemed content, a successful occupation necessitated that they should best be left to play on their own without rearing them into maturity. Indeed, authorities rejected public education because “it would be of doubtful advantage to attempt to educate them in subjects likely to induce feelings of restlessness and dissatisfaction with their simple lives.”⁹² Similarly, when devising the political system, policy-makers concluded that a “political education” program would not be appropriate—for there was no apparent demand for it. As the first governor explained, appointing native commissioners was sufficient “thanks to the docile temperament of a gentle people, their respect for law and order and their confidence in the integrity of the officers [commissioners] appointed to care for them and their welfare.”⁹³ The implicit theory was that, since the natives did not feel that anything was broken, there was no need to fix anything. Any attempts to alter or “develop” their world would do little else than disturb their putatively prelapsarian state, thereby posing disruptions to the regime’s otherwise smoothly operating system.

It is true that the imperatives of naval rule may have increased fears among authorities of potential disruptions to the ruling machinery. As Governor Dyer explained to Washington, “The naval base, as an organization, cannot escape, or live far apart, from the other, and the efficiency of the first depends entirely on the welfare of the second. It is therefore incumbent on us for our self-protection and efficiency to give the natives such care as they are unable to get for themselves.” Still, preservationist policies were not inherent to the imperatives of rule; they rather followed from the conjuncture of those imperatives, preexisting local conditions, and American classifications of those conditions. The ruling regime deemed that the Chamorros’ “welfare” was necessary for naval rule, but as it also claimed that their welfare depended upon stasis, so too would the colonial regime do well to keep up the status quo. As one early official wrote in his memoirs: “When I first arrived, it seemed to me that I had

⁹⁰ USN 1904b: 131, 171.

⁹¹ Safford 1903: 507; Born 1911: 642.

⁹² GG 1905: 10.

⁹³ GG 1904a: 8.

discovered Arcadia, and when I received a letter from a friend asking whether I believed it would be possible to ‘civilize the natives,’ I felt like exclaiming, ‘God forbid!’”⁹⁴ Another reported: “Their [the Chamorros] wants are few and they lead lives of Arcadian simplicity and freedom from ambition or desire for change or progress.”⁹⁵ Thus, given these perceived conditions, authorities in Guam and Samoa alike determined that a successful occupation meant maintaining “freedom” from “progress” rather than inducing a tutelary transformation.

The Determinants of Tutelage

We can now reach a better understanding of tutelage in Puerto Rico and the Philippines. On the one hand, the same principles of legitimation were operative. As in Guam and Samoa, American authorities in Puerto Rico and the Philippines insisted that they had to legitimate their rule and recognized that doing so first meant ascertaining local needs and wants. “To secure the confidence and affection of the Filipinos,” the Schurman Commission wrote to Washington, “it is necessary not only to study their interests, but to consult their wishes, to sympathize with their ideals and prejudices even.”⁹⁶ In Puerto Rico, the Carroll commission held hearings and collected countless documents; their subsequent report to Washington contained a section entitled: “What Porto Rico Expects from the United States.”⁹⁷ On the other hand, preexisting conditions in Puerto Rico and the Philippines were very different from the other territories. These conditions in turn shaped the Americans’ perceptions of native “interests,” expectations and demands. This difference ultimately prompted the colonial regimes to take a turn towards tutelary rule.

Compared with Guam and Samoa, both Puerto Rico and the Philippines had been more deeply penetrated by export production for the world market long before American occupation. Land in Puerto Rico had been increasingly taken over by coffee and sugar production in the nineteenth century; in the Philippines land had been increasingly devoted to a wide variety of export crops at the same time.⁹⁸ This made for a distinct history of class-formation: the construction of a powerful and wealthy class of landowners, merchants, and professionals who enjoyed the markets’ monetary fruits. These groups then used their wealth to cultivate local power and a cosmopolitan outlook. Elite families sent their sons to schools of higher learning in Manila and San Juan or to Europe for study and travel. Students returned filled with ideologies of the Spanish enlightenment, political tracts from France, and various works of literature from the European world. In the Philippines, these elites were known

⁹⁴ Safford 1903: 508.

⁹⁵ USN 1904a: 99–100.

⁹⁶ USPC 1900: 90.

⁹⁷ Carroll 1899: 7.

⁹⁸ Dietz (1986) provides a good overview of Puerto Rican socioeconomic history. For the Philippines, seminal work includes McCoy and Jesus (1982).

as the *ilustrados* (literally, “enlightened ones”); in Puerto Rico they fashioned themselves as the “leading class.” Participation in global and local institutions—from Masonic lodges to scientific associations to political movements—secured their Westernized intellectual orientation.⁹⁹

This background is important for it had contributed to political movements framing their demands in modern liberal discourses of self-rule, liberty, and individual rights. In Puerto Rico, one such movement came in the late 1870s, when wealthy landowning families led a rebellion in the district of Lares for independence from Spain. The rebellion was soon repressed, but in its wake came the “autonomist” or *autonomía* movement. This movement, led by professionals, landowners, intellectuals, and urban middle-classes, demanded that Puerto Rico be incorporated into the Spanish federal system as an equal self-governing province. It likewise called for expanded educational systems, freedom of the press and speech, protection of individual rights, “personal liberty and security of the home,” and universal suffrage—among many other related demands.¹⁰⁰ Parallel movements emerged in the Philippines. Resistance emerged in the 1880s when *ilustrados* demanded political reforms from Madrid and sought equal citizenship with Spaniards. In the 1890s, these demands continued, but some *ilustrados* joined a cross-class movement for national independence. The movement culminated in the 1896 revolution and the establishment of the Philippine Republic based in the town of Malolos. The Malolos constitution drew from the Cuban constitution, France’s rights of man, and ideas of the Spanish Enlightenment. It declared a “free and independent Republic” whereby “sovereignty resides exclusively in the people”; provided for separation of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches; dictated the “freedom and equality of all religions”; and presented an extended list of individual rights.¹⁰¹

American authorities were not unaware of these preexisting demands. To be sure, the Schurman Commission in the Philippines, having announced that its first task was to discern the “wishes” and “ideals” of the people, devoted much of its time to learning about them. It held hearings and conducted interviews in Manila with “eminent Filipinos.” Commissioners also collected information from their commanders in the field, and dug into documents from the Philippine Republic, the revolution, and “pacific organizations of other Filipinos.”¹⁰² Even before this commission’s work, the Hong Kong Consulate General had

⁹⁹ On the Puerto Rican elite and their background see Neumann (1896) and Quintero Rivera (1981; 1988). For the Philippines see Cullinane (2005), Rafael (1995), and the essays in McCoy (1993).

¹⁰⁰ “Plan de Ponce para la Organización del Partido Liberal de la Provincia” (14 Nov. 1886), in Bothwell Gonzalez 1979: 166–71. On the political movements see Cubano-Iguina 1995; Lidin 1981; and Negrón-Portillo 1972; 1981.

¹⁰¹ For excellent discussions of the constitution and its influences, see Majul 1967.

¹⁰² USPC 1900: I, 83.

met with exiled leaders of the Philippine revolution. Likewise, investigative commissions in Puerto Rico held hearings with prominent elites, while military commanders had previously engaged in discussions with Puerto Rico's "leading classes."¹⁰³ Thus, as American authorities began devising their colonial policy, they did what their counterparts did in Guam and Samoa: they tried to incorporate perceived local demands and desires into their discourse, policies, and ruling forms.

Consider the first public proclamations issued by American authorities in the Philippines. One of them was McKinley's "Proclamation to the Philippine People" issued in late December 1898. This was McKinley's "benevolent assimilation" proclamation; the earliest public issuance articulating tutelary ideals. Existing scholarship has referred to the proclamation as evidence for America's uniquely benign goals, but the references elide an important fact: the proclamation came six months after Washington had already received reports on the Philippines from R. Wildman, the U.S. consulate general in Hong Kong. Wildman had met with exiled revolutionary leaders. His subsequent report—titled "The Policy and Hopes of the Insurgent Government of the Philippine Islands"—was telling. It first contended that the Filipinos "cannot be dealt with as though they were North American Indians willing to be removed from one reservation to another at the whim of their masters." The Filipinos were far too westernized: insurgent leaders like Aguinaldo, Agoncillo, and Sandiko "are all men who would all be leaders in their separate departments in any country"; their supporters were wealthy and educated families who "would hold their own bankers and lawyers everywhere." Wildman then noted that the insurgents wanted "annexation to the United States first, and for independence secondly." And they were not driven by primitive instincts but "are fighting for freedom from the Spanish rule and rely upon the well known sense of justice that controls all the actions of our Government as to their future."¹⁰⁴

Wildman's perceptions were markedly different from those of Samoans or Chamorros. Note, then, the content of McKinley's proclamation: It portrayed Spanish rule as tyrannical and American rule as benign, referring to concepts like freedom and justice: "we come, not as invaders or conquerors, but as friends . . . the earnest wish and paramount aim of the military administration to win the confidence, respect, and affection of the inhabitants of the Philippines by assuring them in every possible way that full measure of individual rights and liberties which is the heritage of free peoples, and by proving to them that the mission of the United States is one of benevolent assimilation, substituting the mild sway of justice and right for arbitrary rule."¹⁰⁵ It is as if McKinley's discourse had been directly shaped by Wildman's report. Indeed,

¹⁰³ Carroll 1899: 7.

¹⁰⁴ Wildman to U.S. State Department, 18 July 1898 (USCG #19).

¹⁰⁵ In Forbes 1928: II, 438.

previous proclamations—before Wildman’s report—did not contain tutelary rhetoric. They simply announced American sovereignty and demanded compliance from the population.¹⁰⁶

A similar process can be seen in Puerto Rico. One of the most important initial proclamations came from General Nelson Miles when he landed in Guanica on the southern shore in July 1898. The proclamation asserted that the American military had come to the island “in defense of Liberty, Justice, and Humanity,” bearing “the banner of freedom” and bringing “the fostering arm of a free people.” “The chief object of the American military forces will be to overthrow the armed authority of Spain and to give to the people of this beautiful Island the greatest degree of liberty consistent with this military occupation. We have not come to bring war against a people which has been oppressed for centuries but . . . to bring protection . . . to promote your prosperity and bestow upon you the guarantees and blessings of the liberal institutions of our Government.”¹⁰⁷ The proclamation therefore carried the tutelage tone. But, as Miles admitted, it was precisely motivated. Miles had previously received reports that there was “considerable disaffection among the people in the southern part of the island [with Spanish rule]” and that the Puerto Ricans had been asking Madrid for political reforms and more participation in government. Miles recorded that, in light of this information, “I deemed it advisable, if possible, to encourage this feeling, and also to impress the people of the island with the good intentions of the American forces.” Miles’ proclamation was the result of this attempt.¹⁰⁸

These early proclamations aimed to incorporate the demands of the colonized into their fold in order to first establish sovereignty, but the incorporation of local demands also guided recommendations for colonial policy in the longer run. Consider the recommendations by the Carroll commission in Puerto Rico. From its investigations, the commission unearthed various complaints from islanders about Spanish rule. Spanish rule had been too centralized, preventing Puerto Ricans from holding high positions; it had impeded Puerto Rican autonomy for far too long; there had been a dearth of funds for public education; and the colonial state’s economic policies had benefited Spanish bureaucrats and residents alone. The commission further learned about the autonomy movement that had long been registering these complaints. The dominant Puerto Rican political parties had demanded full incorporation into the Spanish regional system, which meant equal rights, an extended suffrage, and increased

¹⁰⁶ For example, the phrase “benevolent assimilation” was reproduced again in a proclamation by General Otis of 4 January 1899, but an earlier proclamation by Otis (14 Aug. 1898) did not contain the tutelage rhetoric. It only declared the establishment of military rule (Forbes 1928: II, 429–30, 437–38).

¹⁰⁷ USWD 1902: 19–20.

¹⁰⁸ Miles 1911: 299, 301. See also for the American’ cognizance of Puerto Rican demands for democracy, Wilson to Gilmore, 30 July 1898 (USNA RG 108, v.189: 190).

levels of participation in the colonial government. “They condemn unsparingly the old methods [of Spanish rule],” Carroll summarized, “and say that they want to begin the era of their new relations with better institutions, under sounder and juster [sic] principles, and with improved methods.”¹⁰⁹ Finally, the commission discovered that the local population welcomed American intervention but hoped that it would eventually lead to statehood in the American union (as Puerto Rican leaders’ own speeches from the time stated clearly).¹¹⁰ Carroll’s recommendation for colonial government followed directly from these discoveries. Carroll suggested that colonial policies should be devoting to building public schools and regenerating agricultural industries (which had been suffering due to an economic crisis). He further contended that the colonial government should give the Puerto Rican elite political participation and offer the opportunity for eventual statehood.¹¹¹ This kind of government would serve a dual purpose. For one, it would offer an education in self-government. “They will learn the art of governing the only possible way—by having its responsibilities laid upon them.” For another, and by the same token, it would establish and maintain legitimacy by meeting the Puerto Rican elites’ own desires. “We do not need to promise statehood to them, [but] we certainly ought not to forbid them to aspire to statehood. It is an honorable aspiration and would put them on their best behavior.”¹¹²

Other recommendations for colonial government in Puerto Rico were similar. General George Davis’ recommendation, for instance, followed Carroll’s. Davis too noted that the Puerto Ricans wanted eventual incorporation into the United States that, according to Davis, “it would seem they have a right ultimately to expect.” Davis then sketched a governmental form that would provide local government offices and a national legislative assembly manned by elected Puerto Ricans, with American authorities controlling matters from the apex.¹¹³ In part, Davis came to this idea from looking at incorporated territories at home. But he rejected the territorial governments as the sole model. Instead, he was influenced by communications with political leaders like Muñoz Rivera, who had held the high post in the Autonomic Government during Spanish rule and who had suggested a similar type of government.¹¹⁴ In the end, Elihu Root incorporated all of these suggestions into his own recommendations, and the Foraker Act passed by Congress in 1900 solidified the plan.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ Carroll 1899: 56.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 55.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*: 63.

¹¹² *Ibid.*: 58.

¹¹³ Davis 1900: 75.

¹¹⁴ L. Muñoz Rivera to E. Root, 14 Aug. 1899 (USNA, RG 350, 168-17). Other recommendations were similar. The only exception was the recommendation of A. C. Sharpe, who concluded that only military rule could best serve both the Americans’ and the Puerto Rican’s needs (USMG 1899: I, 342).

¹¹⁵ Berbusse 1966: 151.

Was the tutelage policy in the Philippines borne of the same process? Return to the activities of the Schurman commission, whose recommendations on policy were determinant for later developments. As noted already, the commission had spent much time trying to ascertain local interests, meeting with prominent Filipinos in Manila and emissaries from the Malolos government, studying the constitution of the Philippine Republic, speeches of *ilustrado* leaders, and a host of other documents, all of which the commissioners deemed “of the most vital significance” for crafting colonial policy. From their investigations, the commissioners concluded that the majority of Filipinos wanted “the tutelage and protection of the United States” rather than independence.¹¹⁶ Consulting Manila-based ilustrados like Pardo de Tavera (who indeed stated a desire for American rule), the commissioners argued that the people wanted a more liberal form of colonial government than Spain had provided. The commissioners also concluded that the Filipinos who had rebelled against American sovereignty wanted the same thing. Referring to documents from the revolution, they concluded: “What the people want above every other thing, is a guarantee of those fundamental human rights which Americans hold to be the natural and inalienable birthright of the individual but which under Spanish domination in the Philippines were shamefully invaded and ruthlessly trampled upon.”¹¹⁷

The commissioner’s recommendations for U.S. colonial government were guided by these revelations. “If these abuses [from Spanish rule] are remedied,” they reported, “if a capable and honest government is instituted, if the Filipinos are permitted to the full extent of their ability to participate in it . . . if church is separated from state, if public revenues are used solely to defray the legitimate expense of government. . . . if, in a word, government is administered in the Philippines in the spirit in which it is administered in the United States, the people of that archipelago will, as already a few of them foresee, enjoy more benefits than they dreamed of when they took up arms against the corrupt and oppressive domination of Spain.”¹¹⁸ The commissioners’ final conclusion was that a liberal tutelage government was necessary. Such a government should give Filipinos a place in the colonial state; attend to public education, and point to the possibility of self-rule in the future (either in the form of statehood or national independence). More specifically, the commissioners recommended the very governmental form which colonial rule finally took—control by American authorities in the central branch but with native participation, an elective national legislative assembly, and elective local posts. Such a government would put the colonized upon “a course of development under American training [and] eventually reach the goal of complete local

¹¹⁶ USPC 1900: I, 83.

¹¹⁷ USPC 1900: I, 84.

¹¹⁸ USPC 1900: I, 82.

self-government” and eventual “contentment, prosperity, education, and political enlightenment.”¹¹⁹ But it would also be predicated upon local demands and interests. “It has been a leading motive with the commission in devising a form of government for the Philippines,” Schurman later reported, “to frame one which, to the utmost extent possible, shall satisfy the views and aspirations of the educated Filipinos.”¹²⁰ Finally, and by the very same token, a tutelage government would realize the Americans’ own interests in sustaining a successful occupation. As the commissioners wrote when registering their recommendations, “The United States can succeed in governing the Philippines only by understanding the character and circumstances of the people and realizing sympathetically their aspirations and ideals. A government to stand must be firmly rooted in the needs, interests, judgment and devotion of the people, and this support is secured by the adaptation of government to the character and possibilities of the governed—what they are, what they have it in them to become, what they want, and, not least, what they think they are entitled to have and enjoy.”¹²¹

Return, finally, to President McKinley’s instructions to the first civil commission. As with McKinley’s “benevolent assimilation” proclamation, existing studies have pointed to the instructions—which insisted that civil rule should offer political education along American political lines—as exemplary of America’s exceptional form of rule. Taft took them as among “the greatest state papers ever issued” and, as seen earlier, Cameron Forbes pointed to the instructions as exemplary of America’s exceptional approach to empire.¹²² But the instructions came only after initial reports on the Filipinos’ political desire for political autonomy and their discourse of rights, liberty, and freedom. And it came after the Schurman Commission’s report that had proposed the tutelage policy. In fact, McKinley’s instructions simply reproduced these earlier suggestions, all of which insisted that the legitimacy and sustenance of rule would be obtained if local demands for rights, autonomy, and eventual self-rule were incorporated into colonial form. McKinley himself alluded to this process of incorporation in his instructions. On one hand, the instructions dictated that the commission’s work should be guided by America’s political traditions and ideals, and that colonial rule should try to implant them. “There are certain great principles of government which have been made the basis of our governmental system. . . . of which

¹¹⁹ USPC 1900: I, 109, 120; Philippine Commission to Elihu Root, 21 Aug. 1900 (MP 31-3). In proposing the specific form of tutelary government, the commissioners in part drew from models of territorial government in the frontier (USPC 1900: I, 106), but this does not affirm the exceptionalism argument. In Guam and Samoa, territorial government at home was not the model, and as seen, the Schurman Commission turned to the territorial model only after concluding that the model would help meet local demands.

¹²⁰ Schurman 1902: 49.

¹²¹ USPC 1900: I, 82.

¹²² Taft to Root, 30 Nov. 1900 (ERP, Container 64, “Special Correspondence”).

[the Filipinos] have, unfortunately, been denied the experience possessed by us . . . there are also certain practical rules of government which we have found to be essential to the preservation of these great principles of liberty and law, and that these principles and these rules of government must be established and maintained in their islands for the sake of their liberty and happiness.” On the other hand, McKinley was fully cognizant that these principles, and the form of tutelary rule that was to follow from them, would be understood by and resonate strongly with the Filipino elite. “It is evident that *the most enlightened thought of the Philippine Islands fully appreciates the importance of these principles and rules*, and they will inevitably within a short time command universal assent. Upon every division and branch of the Government of the Philippines, therefore, must be imposed these inviolable rules.”¹²³ While McKinley’s instructions have been typically taken in extant historiography as evidence of America’s virtuous character, they here suggest a different point altogether: McKinley and subsequent authorities called for a liberal and hence “exceptional” colonial rule, but they did so only as they tried to secure colonial power by articulating the unique demands and desires of the colonized as their own.

THE PROVINCIALITY OF EMPIRE

The present essay joins a spate of scholarship questioning exceptionalism’s claims. But unlike existing scholarship, it has not questioned exceptionalism by therapeutically uttering empire’s name to recover an “imperial amnesia.”¹²⁴ Nor has it tried to claim that ostensibly benevolent projects like democratic tutelage amounted to meaningless rhetoric. My approach has been different. I have asked exactly *where* ‘exceptional’ imperial forms surfaced and *why* they did where they did. In doing so, I have found that American rulers did not impose themselves and their presumed values upon foreign societies to then produce colonial states reflecting those values. Instead, as they strove to cultivate consent and compliance like any colonial power, authorities worked the other way around. They made for regimes that ultimately went native, shaping themselves to local conditions and incorporating what they found there. In this sense America’s presumably exceptional empire was the product of historical and geographical accident. Take away the fact that the Puerto Rican and Filipino elite had already espoused discourses of self-determination, rights, and liberty and American occupation there might have looked more American rule in Samoa and Guam, hence like parts of the British Empire.

American rule in the so-called “Moro provinces” provides further affirmation of this claim. The most obvious explanation for why American rulers did not construct tutelage regimes in Guam and Samoa would point to the

¹²³ In Forbes 1928: II, 443 (my emphasis).

¹²⁴ Cf. Judis 2004.

imperatives of naval control. Naval commanders were put in charge of devising rule and, given that their primary concern was the maintenance of the naval base, they should have been less inclined to make ambitious attempts at “political education.” At the same time, because Puerto Rico and the Philippines were not established as naval bases, authorities there could very well devote their time to tutelary endeavors. The problem with this argument, however, is that naval bases were *not* established in the Muslim areas of the southern Philippines either, yet authorities there concocted a form of rule akin to that in Guam and Samoa—more about preservation than liberal transformation. As Abinales (2000) and others have shown, the same officials who enacted tutelage in the “civilized” parts of the archipelago judged that the Islamic provinces should be placed in a separate department to be administered locally through so-called “sultans.” This was a brand of indirect rule partly modeled after Native American governance at home but more directly after English and Dutch colonialism.¹²⁵ And fitting my overarching argument, perceived pre-existing conditions were not entirely different from those perceived in Guam and Samoa. Ruling “sultans” there had not articulated a discourse of rights or national sovereignty and early reports—from the very same authorities who also served in Puerto Rico—classified them as previously untouched by “civilizing influence.”¹²⁶ This further suggests that, naval imperatives or none, American authorities in all the colonies crafted their forms of rule to fit local conditions as they perceived them.¹²⁷

Furthermore, when one considers political institutions in Puerto Rico and the Philippines before U.S. rule, the presumably exceptional tutelage project does not appear radically transformative at all. In Puerto Rico, the autonomist movement had already seen some success before American arrival—Spain, in response to local demands and fearing rebellion, had granted various political concessions. In the 1890s, Madrid allowed for local elections with an extended suffrage, thereby enabling the autonomist political party to hold multiple offices. In 1898, it even established an elective parliament and a cabinet wherein autonomist party leaders held high posts. By the time of American

¹²⁵ Amoroso 2003: 139–41; Gowing 1977.

¹²⁶ Quoted in Abinales 2000: 19. Nor did a lack of administrative capacities determine the policies. While officials in the Philippine sometimes expressed worry over the lack of capable American personnel, these worries emerged after the tutelage project had already begun.

¹²⁷ Another possible explanation has to do American public opinion. The hypothesis here would be that Guam and Samoa received much less attention from the American public; while Puerto Rico and the Philippines received more. This might have prompted American policy-makers to make colonialism in the latter territories more legitimate. If we go by press reports, it is true that Guam and Samoa received comparably less attention than Puerto Rico and the Philippines. It is also true that the Philippine-American war raised public awareness of the Philippines. But Puerto Rico received much less attention than the Philippines. This would not explain why Puerto Rico and the Philippines saw such similar tutelary regimes. For more press attention given to the colonies, see Go (2005: 221–22). For more on the sticky issue of public opinion and American imperialism in general during this period, see May (1968: 17–43).

rule, then, Puerto Rican had already seen the beginnings of local elections, offices, and a national legislative assembly—the very indices of America’s putatively exceptional project.¹²⁸ The same goes for the Philippines. While Spain had not granted the archipelago a national assembly, it had allowed for municipal elections (however with a very restricted suffrage). And the government of the Philippine Republic had called for a future elective national assembly to legislate for the archipelago, and the Malolos Congress formed its first manifestation.¹²⁹ Notably, none of these kinds of institutions had existed in Guam or Samoa before American rule, which further suggests the overarching point: where liberal exceptionalism surfaced at all, this had less to do with America’s unique values, virtues, and traditions than with the specific character of the colonies wherein exceptional rule surfaced.

None of this is to sneak exceptionalism through the back door and imply that American authorities were uniquely benign for attempting to meet perceived local conditions and accommodate local demands.¹³⁰ As seen, a large part of their incorporating efforts was driven by the desire to establish and sustain their rule, hence to realize their own interests as colonial rulers. Nor was the tutelage project a gracious gesture in giving the colonized what they wanted. Authorities reckoned local discourses but did not respect them, instead insisting that they themselves knew best. “While they deal in high-sounding phrases concerning liberty and free government,” asserted Taft on the Filipinos, “they have no conception of what that means.”¹³¹ The very logic of tutelage therefore dictated a subtle project in power: tutelage aimed to partially concede to local demands as American authorities perceived them but then reshape them on the authorities’ own terms. In this sense American rule was like European colonialisms elsewhere—rulers aimed to incorporate local needs, desires, and demands while refashioning, redirecting, or otherwise disciplining them.¹³²

Dipesh Chakrabarty, one of the founders of subaltern studies, has offered a novel strategy for challenging traditional historiography. While traditional discourses work from linear and presumably universal narratives that privilege Europe as the center of “progress,” Chakrabarty suggests that historians might fare better by “provincializing Europe.”¹³³ As I read it, this strategy

¹²⁸ Burgos-Malave 1997.

¹²⁹ Majul 1967.

¹³⁰ Nor is it to claim that the Americans were “successful” in constructing an idealized American “democracy” in the Philippines or Puerto Rico. On the Philippines, see especially Anderson 1995.

¹³¹ Taft to Root, 18 Aug. 1900 (ERP, folder T).

¹³² Cooper 2005; Engels and Marks 1994; Scott 1995; Thomas 1994.

¹³³ Chakrabarty 2000. Chakrabarty’s discussion of “provincialization” has been part and parcel of a wider literature on “postcolonial theory.” But as a founder of Subaltern Studies, he is also important for shaping postcolonial theory itself, not least because Spivak’s postcolonial theory was in large part articulated in response to the Subaltern Studies project (Guha and Spivak 1988; Spivak 1988). Chakrabarty’s approach might also be said to be derived from Robinson’s (1972) “eccentric” theory of imperialism, but that theory aimed to explain the determinants of British

does not mean wishing traditional European narratives away but rather disclosing how those narratives—and ‘Europe’ itself—have always been shaped and reshaped in relation to peripheralized spaces and peoples. “Europe” was never a privileged center that was then extended to the imperial provinces, its very identity and narratives were constituted in the first place through complex interactions *with* and *in* empire’s “provinces.” My analysis suggests that this same strategy might be fruitfully extended to better understand American imperial exceptionalism. According to the exceptionalism narrative, the United States has been bestowed with a unique liberal democratic culture and virtuous character which is then embodied, reflected, and manifested in its imperial forms and practices overseas. The narrative is deep: even some critics of exceptionalism—and, for that matter, critics of American imperialism—do not challenge its foundations. These critics claim that American imperialism has *not* been benign and virtuous, if only because it was not benign and virtuous in the first place (rather exploitative, racist, and violent) or because true American “ideals” and the American “character” have been corrupted by imperialism.¹³⁴ These criticisms, as the diametric opposite of exceptionalist thought, therefore carry the problematic assumption of the former—viz., that empires extended abroad, whether successful in practice or not, first and foremost express the national character of the metropole. Understanding the provinciality of American empire offers a critical transcendence of *both* positions. Affirming Chakrabarty’s strategy, such an understanding reveals that the diverse character of the American empire in the early twentieth century was molded by the perceived particularities of the peoples and spaces it aimed to rule rather than by the national character at home (virtuous or not). America’s presumably exceptional policies, and hence the very narrative of liberal exceptionalism, were predicated upon those very provincial spaces that empire—both in its practice and discourse—renders inferior and marginal.

ABBREVIATIONS

AGPR:	Archivo General de Puerto Rico, San Juan, Puerto Rico
FF:	Fondo Fortaleza
GC:	Correspondencia General

expansion in the nineteenth century, not the subsequent variations across the British empire in colonial policies.

¹³⁴ William Appleman Williams’ *Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, for example, argues that American foreign policy has been guided by “three ideals”: (1) a “humanitarian impulse”; (2) “the principle of self-determination”; and (3) the idea that foreign societies should “improve their lives.” The “tragedy,” however, is that American foreign policy has failed to live up in practice: “America’s humanitarian urge to assist other peoples is undercut—even subverted—by the way it goes about helping them” (Williams 1972: 13, 15).

PP:	Partidos Politicos
CE:	Clarence R. Edwards Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society
CTIP:	United States Congress Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions
ERP:	Elihu Root Papers, Library of Congress
GG:	Governor of Guam
GPR:	Governor of Porto Rico
GS:	Governor of Samoa
MP:	Papers of William McKinley, Library of Congress
USCG:	United States Consulate General, Hong Kong. USNA Microfilm
USMG:	United States Major-General Commanding the Army
USN:	United States Navy Department
USNA:	United States National Archives, Washington, D.C.
BIA:	Bureau of Insular Affairs
RG:	Record Group #
USPC:	United States Philippine Commission
USWD:	United States Department of War

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