## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

1. Western Populist Ideology and Worldview 10

2. The Local Context: Nebraska, Colorado, and Washington, 1890–1897 39

3. The Money Power and the War of 1898 67

4. Hawaiian Annexation and the Beginning of the Debate over Empire 94

5. Patriotism and the Elections of 1898 118

6. Imperialism Comes to the Forefront 146

7. Setting the Stage for the Campaign 182

8. The Contest of 1900 and the Defeat of Reform 209

Conclusion 249

Notes 253

Bibliography 311

Index 325
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INTRODUCTION

Historians of the United States have long been fascinated by the convergence of certain events in the 1890s. The first years of the decade witnessed the development of a large-scale political movement organized by farmers and laborers that advocated wholesale changes to the economic and governmental systems. In the final years of the nineteenth century, the United States engaged in an ostensibly anticolonial war against Spain and a colonial war of its own in the Philippines. Historians have attempted to explain how one such event was related to another, but thus far they have failed to correctly describe the nature of the activists’ involvement in foreign policy debates and the influence of these wars on the prospects for domestic reform.

The use of an example may demonstrate what historians have missed up to this point. On January 26, 1899, California representative Curtis Castle delivered one of his last addresses in Congress. The Populist congressman was increasingly troubled by the aggressive rhetoric employed by his colleagues from across the aisle, and he decided he could not let it stand unchallenged. Hawaii had been annexed the previous summer, American soldiers occupied Cuba—and some suggested they would have to do so in perpetuity—and many were now focusing their attention across the Pacific at the Philippine archipelago. For Castle, this policy was utterly at variance with American principles. Like other anti-imperialists, he decried it as a violation of the principle of self-governance, a bedrock concept on which all other freedoms rested. But that was not the only reason he opposed the creation of an American empire. Conquest and colonies would distract from making necessary changes at home and serve as a boon for the wealthy few, he said. Only recently, Populists and their allies had “begun the glorious struggle,” Castle stated, “and I call upon you, my countrymen, to let no paltry bauble divert your energies or turn you from these radical reforms—this
greatest work of all the ages.” Common farmers and laborers in particular must resist the temptation of empire. Although “plutocracy beckons you to the feast,” he warned, those who held America’s wealth had “provided no seat for you at the banquet board. You are asked to furnish a great army to provide the feast, which will be used, after the banquet is over, to fasten upon your arms the gyes of industrial slavery.” The growth of empire had been responsible for the concentration of wealth in ancient Rome, Castle said, and this trend continued until the Roman elite finally overthrew the Republic. If his bellicose colleagues won the day now, “The wealth of imperial America, drawn from conquered lands, will be distributed as Rome’s wealth was. With colonial conquests America’s imperial plutocrats will grow richer and more insolent. With one sucker in the Philippines, one in Cuba, one in Porto [sic] Rico, and the remaining five in the United States, the wealth-absorbing octopus will grow apace.” Empire encouraged the agglomeration of wealth and power, which would lead inevitably to the death of American economic and political freedom.1

Castle was hardly alone in suggesting that America’s foreign wars would impact inequality at home. Populists such as Jerry Simpson of Kansas, John C. Bell of Colorado, and William V. Allen of Nebraska, along with former Republicans Richard Pettigrew of South Dakota and Charles Towne of Minnesota and Democrats James Hamilton Lewis of Washington and William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska, were among many from the western states who echoed this sentiment. Many of these western reformers had followed Bryan in 1896 and would do so again in 1900, when opposition to empire was one of the cornerstones of his campaign, but that contest remains even more obscure than the figures who fought it. Given Bryan’s popularity as a subject for historians, the mass of literature devoted to the study of Populism and the People’s Party, and the considerable number of studies of turn-of-the-century American foreign policy, one would expect the opposite. There are, however, specific factors that can explain the oversights or misinterpretations of previous scholars. Some sought to use history to provide a commentary on the politics and society of their own eras, and in the process, they exaggerated certain facts and left other details out altogether. Some scholars were merely limited by the assumptions of those who came before them. Regardless of the methods they employed, the true nature of the relationship between Populism and American empire has remained beyond the reach of historians.

Richard Hofstadter was one of the first to associate US entry into the War of 1898 with the reform movement. The rural Populists and Democrats were some of the loudest jingoes, Hofstadter points out, so surely it was the
people of the hinterland who were most desperate to pursue the unnecessary war with Spain. The United States was going through a “psychic crisis” in the 1890s; the Populists and associated rabble-rousers were simply a product of the frustrations unleashed during that decade. Although he certainly understood that only a small portion of the electorate ever joined the People’s Party, Hofstadter claims that many others shared the views held by the dissenting farmers and laborers. Additionally, many in the middle and upper classes had frustrations and ambitions of their own that they thought could be resolved through a foreign war, and some already believed that such a conflict could quiet the discontent at home. As a consequence, when Middle Americans lashed out against Spain, there was no substantial group left to oppose them. The Philippine archipelago was ceded to the United States as a consequence of the war, and afterward it became impossible to prevent a war for humanity from evolving into a war of conquest. Although Hofstadter identifies Populist regions as the center of “opposition to the fruits of war” after the conflict of 1898 subsided, in his depiction, the Populists held an essential place in the great psychic convulsion that created an American overseas empire.2

Other historians have focused instead on the economic causes of American imperialism, but they too attribute the drive for empire to the reformers. They credit the impulse primarily to businessmen and conservative politicians (at least by 1898), but the works of Walter LaFeber and William Appleman Williams include statements from Populists and other nonconformists about the importance of overseas markets. Williams and LaFeber hoped to prove the existence of an American foreign policy consensus, and the most direct way to demonstrate uniformity was to use the words of the dissenters. Their works demonstrated that many of those who favored silver currency were also ardent advocates of trade with Asia, and they likewise showed that members of nearly every sector of society called for increased foreign trade to offset the effects of “overproduction.” Williams in particular singled out agriculturalists and Populists and contended that they first spurred the “search for markets”—an initiative that would dominate the minds of America’s foreign policy leaders in the last years of the nineteenth century. For both Williams and LaFeber, any anti-imperialist sentiment expressed after the war with Spain was essentially meaningless, and they presumed it was done merely for political effect. Imperialism was the inevitable consequence of a culture that embraced capitalism, and the Populists were as guilty as anyone.3

More recent works have shifted the focus in important ways, but they too cast the advocates of reform as the instigators of the war with Spain. Ac-
cording to Kristin Hoganson, Bryan’s followers were especially keen to argue that greed had suppressed American manhood—a view they expressed on the campaign trail in 1896 and in the halls of Congress in 1898. She points out that invocations of manhood and critiques of wealth were deployed simultaneously to demand protection for the Cubans through an assertion of American power. In this way, the Populists and Democrats acted as war-mongering jingoes, and in her depiction, that was the extent of their role in the drama. Paul T. McCartney, who focuses on the influence of American exceptionalist ideology on the nation’s foreign policy discourse, also notes how the campaign rhetoric of 1896 crept into the debates that led up to war in 1898. Bryan’s followers grew tired of an insensitive and business-oriented administration and vented their frustration in those prewar debates. McCartney also notes that some Populists and Democrats opposed the retention of the Philippines, but the movement for economic equality had no real place of its own in his narrative. McCartney’s thorough emphasis on the diametrically opposed interpretations of exceptionalism left all anti-imperialists to be lumped together rather than dissected further. Neither Hoganson nor McCartney overtly blamed the Populists for the war, but their narratives certainly lent credence to the old arguments.

Scholars have clearly stated that members of the reform movement played a vital part in the development of America’s overseas empire, but their depiction of that role remains unclear and, in fact, may be misleading. The motives of the reform politicians are presented so differently in each study that it is impossible to see how the events unfolded through the eyes of Bryan or his allies. Worse yet, most works have ignored these individuals’ anti-imperialism, so the reformers have been identified as warmongers and jingoes without any acknowledgment of the complexity of their views. In reality, the vast majority of Populist Party leaders and their closest associates in the Democratic Party and the breakaway Silver Republican Party expressed views like those espoused by Curtis Castle. Members of these three parties at work in the nation’s capital openly opposed American possession of the Philippines, and together they made up one of the largest blocs in the Senate. Despite that fact, even historians of the anti-imperialist movement or US foreign policy have discounted their significance.

The history of the anti-imperialists is recorded in a literature of its own, but those who have researched the opposition to territorial expansion essentially ignore the Populists and Democrats altogether. Historians Robert Beisner, E. Berkeley Tompkins, Daniel B. Schirmer, and more recently Michael Cullinane have emphasized the Anti-Imperialist League, an organiza-
tion led by members of the upper echelons of northeastern society, including prominent social critics, industrialists, and aging politicians. Only a few of these works devote even a handful of paragraphs to the Populists, Bryanite Democrats, and radicals that some claim made up a substantial part of the movement. With a brief tip of the hat, each of these authors then shifts the attention back to the conservatives who headed the league. All works on the subject have essentially followed in the footsteps of Beisner, the first to devote a book-length study to these opponents of expansion. He emphatically states that the heart of the movement rested with a small clique of classical liberal mugwumps and a few regular Republicans who broke ranks with William McKinley on this issue alone. As he put it in a later article, Democrats (and he says nothing of anyone else) were “basically anti-imperialist in 1898 and 1900, but largely out of ritualistic partisanship.” His thesis has remained largely unchallenged. As a consequence, the literature on American anti-imperialism has little to say about those who questioned the nation’s economic order.

Recently, other scholars have shifted the focus from the domestic origins of imperialism to its impact on life in the United States. Several of these works suggest that American policies of conquest and colonialism significantly influenced culture, conceptions of race and citizenship, and even the scope of American governmentality. Yet none of these works attempts to explain the political effects of war and expansion. The two most important studies that did attempt to do so are now quite dated, and both thoroughly discount the importance of imperialism in the election of 1900. Thomas A. Bailey, in a ten-page article published in 1937, states categorically that the questions that followed the acquisition of the Philippines had a negligible impact on the election of 1900. There were, he said, too many other issues at stake, all of which seemed more pressing to average voters. Despite its age, his is still the most widely cited secondary source on the campaign. The second source is a book by Swedish historian Göran Rystad, who acknowledges that imperialism was a major component of the campaign but concludes that other factors decided the election. Both Bailey and Rystad claim that the truly decisive factors were “prosperity” and opposition to the moribund silver movement.

Despite the dearth of alternative works on the subject, it is clear that Bailey and Rystad based their claims on several potentially flawed suppositions. First, they essentially accepted an economic determinist view of Gilded Age politics, despite the lack of a strong correlation between economic factors and electoral results over the course of the 1890s. More vitally, they dis-
cussed the situation as though “the nation” consisted of a singular entity that was relatively homogeneous throughout. In fact, a look at the electoral map of 1896 reveals the tremendous regionalization of American politics at the end of the nineteenth century. Rystad devoted a substantial portion of his work to the state of Indiana, which he used as a stand-in for the whole of the United States. Bailey, too, rarely looked farther west than Chicago. Any study that focused on the Midwest or the East would have neglected the regions most opposed to the economic orthodoxy of McKinley and his conservative Republican followers. Such a study would detect the impact of McKinley’s imperialist policies only if there were widespread opposition to them; support or tolerance of such policies would be essentially undetectable. Most important, any historian with such a focus would miss the biggest political change that took place over the last few years of the decade: the collapse of the Populist movement in the West.

For anyone interested in studying change over time, the trans-Missouri West is the best region to examine. There, Populists, Democrats, and Silver Republicans had united in 1896 to challenge the status quo, and they still held sway in much of the region by 1900. McKinley’s supporters in the West had failed to defeat them through advocacy of the gold standard and business-as-usual politics in 1896, so the appeal of new issues might have been greatest among them. Finally, westerners such as William Jennings Bryan, Richard Pettigrew, Henry Teller, and others played pivotal roles in the debate over empire, but their contributions have thus far been neglected. The story of their fight and the ultimate collapse of the reform movement in its last stronghold has yet to be told.12

The purpose of this study, then, is to examine the precise relationship between the western reformers (the Populists, Democrats, and others in the region who sought to transform America’s system of political economy) and American foreign policy at the end of the 1890s. The inclusion of these reformers in the narrative of intervention in 1898 and the debate over empire thereafter provides a unique perspective that allows new insights into both the movement for change and the interrelations between domestic politics and international affairs. For instance, the foreign policy views of the western reformers differed markedly from those of the commonly portrayed easterners—jingoists and anti-imperialists alike. Core elements of the westerners’ worldview influenced their interpretation of the international situation in significant ways. Their analysis of global finance and capitalism strongly affected their views of colonialism, both in Cuba and in the Philippines. Their basic republican conceptions of America also shaped their critique of the do-
mestic causes and consequences of imperialism. But while the Populists and their allies railed against wars of greed, the emergence of new foreign policy issues provided western conservatives with material that they could employ to their advantage. By labeling their opponents “unpatriotic,” Republicans swept aside an economic debate they had been losing for most of the decade. What followed were considerable reverses for the western reformers. After notable losses in the 1898 off-year election, in 1900 the remaining Populists and Democrats were largely driven from power in the West.

Although the aim of this work is to describe the politics of the West broadly, it would be impossible to conduct a detailed study of such a large swath of the country. Generalizations always prove unfair to the exceptions, and any serious examination requires a close study of the issues, candidates, and contests in a local environment. In conducting this survey of the West, a small number of states were selected for close inspection. Several criteria were used to determine which states would best serve this purpose. First, the state should have experienced some sort of political change during the 1890s associated with the reform movement, of which the People’s Party was the most significant component. Second, each state selected should be unlike the others chosen—for example, only one Plains state. Third, the state should have had a large and stable population, relatively speaking. The three states that best fit these criteria are Colorado, Nebraska, and Washington. Each represents a different subregion of the West, each was powerfully affected by the political movements of the 1890s, and each had a reasonably large population (in comparison to other western states) from the beginning of the decade.

The first two chapters of the book provide the necessary ideological background and political context. Chapter 1 focuses on the ideology and worldview of members of the Populist Party. Although the party and the movement were not one and the same, the People’s Party best represents the movement of the 1890s. The chapter describes the basis of Populist thought, primarily by tracing the republican and liberal foundations of the Populist program. It also covers the oft-neglected “money power” conspiracy, as well as Populist conceptions of civic nationalism and proper manhood. These core concepts help explain Populist interpretations of both domestic politics and foreign affairs. Chapter 2 covers the political histories of Nebraska, Colorado, and Washington from roughly the beginning of the decade to 1897. Each state’s unique geography and history of development played a significant role in determining how individuals and parties reacted to monopolistic capitalism and tight credit. Despite the different niches Populists filled in each state,
throughout the West they succeeded in shifting the political discourse from a focus on cultural issues to an emphasis on political economy. In doing so, the Populists also altered the old parties in meaningful ways, eventually allowing for the creation of a coalition for reform. The preceding events provide the necessary context to better understand the impact of the War of 1898 and imperialism on local politics.

The next three chapters examine the contributions of western Populists and allied reformers in Congress in 1898 and the changes that occurred in the political situation in the West that year. Chapter 3 focuses on the beginning of the Fifty-Fifth Congress and westerners’ contributions to the debate over entry into the War of 1898. I argue that both the plight of the Cubans and the administration’s war-funding measure came to be seen through the reformers’ economic lens. Their suspicions about McKinley’s motives and policies foreshadowed the fight over empire that followed. Chapter 4 covers the debate over Hawaiian annexation and the development of a western reform critique of American imperialism. Populists especially viewed the acquisition and administration of distant territories and diverse peoples as a threat to the decentralized, self-governing republic they sought to restore. Chapter 5 focuses on the state elections of 1898. Republicans in many western states succeeded in shifting the political debate to the new issues arising out of the war, and in doing so, they were able to turn the tide against their rivals.

The last three chapters examine debates over empire and political economy as they played out between the reformers and conservatives in Congress and at the polls in 1899 and 1900. Chapter 6 discusses the situation in early 1899. War broke out between the Americans and Filipinos, western reformers in Congress voiced their opposition to colonialism, and even western state politics became tied up in the imperialism issue. Populists, Democrats, and apostate Republicans from the Great Plains to the Pacific coast united to stand against empire, and this was the moment when they voiced the most thorough expressions of their analysis. Political and economic freedom, they said, could not endure in an imperialistic nation. Chapter 7 covers some of the major issues that appeared in Congress and the media in 1900—a time when many national and global events were viewed in relation to America’s new policy. The administration gave western Populists and Democrats even more material to add to their critique. A controversial bill that defined the colonial status of the newly acquired territories and a seemingly unrelated federal military intervention in the Coeur d’Alenes were portents of things to come, the reformers said. The last chapter deals with the election of 1900,
the second consecutive presidential contest waged between William Jennings Bryan and William McKinley. As they had in 1898, Republicans in the West gained the upper hand, and they did so by emphasizing their support for the war in the Philippines and their opponents’ supposed acts of treason.

The conclusion uses the example of the Populists to illuminate how patriotism and nationalism have consistently been used to silence dissent in the United States. Critics of wartime policies in the United States have often been suppressed, whether through labels such as “un-American” or through actions of the state. The Populist example provides an additional reminder that Americans may need to reconsider either their foreign policy positions or their definitions of patriotism to encourage broader, more open policy debates.