

Nothing to Excuse Our Intervention

President's Speech at the Meeting of the Massachusetts Reform Club, April 8, 1898.

By Moorfield Storey

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Gentlemen of the Reform Club:

This Club never met under circumstances more calculated to create the gravest anxiety in every patriotic man than tonight, and by patriotic man I do not mean him who measures his country's greatness by the extent of her territory, the size of her armies, the strength of her fleets, or even by the insolence with which she tramples upon her weaker neighbors, but him who knows that the true greatness of a nation, as of a man, depends upon its character, its sense of justice, its self-restraint, its magnanimity, in a word upon its possession of those qualities which distinguish George Washington from the prize-fighter,--the highest type of man from the highest type of beast. It is impossible to realize that at the end of nineteen Christian centuries our country, of whose civilization we have been wont to boast, has forsaken the policy of peace with all mankind which was adopted at the formation of the government and under which it has grown great, has turned its back upon its real leaders, upon the President so lately chosen by a great majority of the people, upon the Speaker of the House, upon the experienced veterans of the Senate, upon statesmen like George F. Edmunds and Edward G. Phelps, and has surrendered its conscience and its heart to irresponsible mercenaries like Hearst of the *New York Journal*, like the conductors of the *World*, and men like these who for one motive or another are madly shrieking for war.

War is the worst of human calamities. It rarely reaches the guilty, whose acts have brought it on. It never fails to destroy the innocent and to overwhelm with undeserved misfortune men, women and children in no way responsible for the evils which it is ostensibly waged to cure. In the language of our own great general, "War is hell." As Sidney Smith said, "In war God is forgotten." Why is it that of a sudden we stand face to face with so frightful a disaster as a war with Spain, involving not merely fearful loss of life and destruction of property, but the disturbance of orderly government, the demoralization of the people, the kindling of national hatred, the widespread corruption, in a word the return to barbarous standards which war brings in its train? Why must the United States turn back the tide of civilization?

There are many influences which make for war. Some represented in high Federal office think that war will improve business and increase the gains of the rich. I cannot refrain from quoting the reply which was made to one of these last week by a Middlesex Yankee of pure blood. He was a manufacturer of woolen goods, and a dealer in wool said

to him, "We want war. Just think how it will raise the price of wool, and how it will send your goods up." "Yes," was the answer, "but think how much more the dye stuff will cost. I can't afford to dye my goods in American blood. It comes too high." The man who will send others,--husbands, fathers, sons, brothers--to die, in order that his gains may be greater, must be counted with the wretches who visit the battlefield to plunder the slain. He is beneath the contempt of this Club. In the same class belong the politicians who welcome war in order that it may help their party and themselves to office, to whom men are counters who may be killed or wounded to keep them in place or power. Here also stand the journalists who think only of how they can increase their circulation, reckless of how others suffer if only their daily sales are greater. These men we need only recognize and pass on.

There is a single class who demand war and whom we are bound to treat with respect. I mean those who think that humanity demands our intervention in Cuba. These men,--philanthropists, ministers of God, kindly and conscientious people,--are inflamed by the reports of suffering in Cuba which they see in the daily newspapers, until they feel that war to end such conditions is a duty. Yet they will upon a moment's reflection themselves admit that war is not to be entered upon lightly, but only after every effort to prevent it has been tried in vain, and only when it is clear that the evils which the war will cure are greater than those which it will cause. Is a war with Spain necessary, and will it do good? These are the questions which the people must decide and which they should consider deliberately and calmly. To these I would invite your attention for a moment.

Let me first say a word to those who try to obscure the question of today by declamation about Alva, the Inquisition, and the Spanish cruelties of three or four centuries ago. These men speak as if Spain was an individual, who had lived a thousand years, and was today murdering Cubans as three hundred years ago he had slaughtered Dutchmen. If this view is sound, then we who sit around this table have burned witches, have held four millions of people in slavery, have within a year or two shot down Indian women and children, have within a month murdered a negro postmaster. It is not the Spain of Philip the Second that confronts us, but the Spaniards of today. We cannot punish Alva or the men who burned heretics. We are asked to kill men as little responsible for their crimes, as we are for the burning of Catholics by our English ancestors.

What then is the exact position? Close to our shores is the island of Cuba, which has belonged to Spain longer than English-speaking men have dwelt in America. Its population is wholly Spanish or of Spanish introduction. It has a population of some 1,600,000 people. Of these at the outside some thirty thousand are in armed insurrection. They have no government that we can recognize. Recognition is seeing what exists, and the government must exist, or we cannot see it. Every one admits that the insurgents have not got what by well-established law is necessary to constitute a government that can be recognized. There is only one government on the island and that the government of Spain. It controls all but a very small part of the population, and it is the only force which makes life and property reasonably safe, which stands between civilization and anarchy in Cuba.

A war has been going on there for three years in the attempt to crush the insurrection, and as a consequence of the destruction which war causes, as a consequence of measures taken in its prosecution, there has been and is much suffering. The insurgents began by destroying crops and laying waste the country, the government followed their example, and as a measure of war ordered a part of the country people into the towns. It is probable that what we see and hear of their sufferings is grossly exaggerated. This has been a campaign of lies waged by the Cubans in the United States through the newspapers. It is impossible to believe implicitly anything that we see in the newspapers about Cuba. But let us assume that the suffering exists.

Shall we help it by bombarding Havana or Mantanzas and depriving innocent people of their homes and their means of livelihood? If the Spaniards are willing to kill these *reconcentrados*, will they let them live in their rear while we in their front are attacking them? If they are starving, shall we feed them with bombs and bayonets? Will our supplies reach them more easily over the bodies of the Spanish troops? We can add vastly to the sufferings of Cuba. We can starve the Spaniards and Cubans alike perhaps. We can sink transports crowded with Spanish peasants. We can sacrifice thousands of our own young men and desolate thousands of our own homes. We can turn what is left of Cuba into a desert, but we shall not feed one starving Cuban. We can with our fleets and armies enormously increase the woes of Cuba, but by war we can never relieve them. Our diplomatic efforts have accomplished much. Weyler is recalled, the *reconcentrados* are returned to their homes, provision is made for their relief, free government is promised. Is this a time to abandon the Christian methods which have been so successful, and to revive the barbarous practices of war? It seems an impossible crime.

Thirty-three years ago tomorrow our last war ended, and we have not yet recovered from its effects. Our disordered currency, our system of taxation, our heavy debt, our enormous pension list, our corrupt politicians and political methods, and the strong party spirit which prevents men who agree from uniting in political action, are among the fruits of that struggle. Shall we bring upon ourselves fresh troubles of the same kind, and demoralize our whole political system, simply that we may add to the sum of human misery?

But if Cuba were surrendered to us without a blow; if the Spanish troops retired, and its officers abdicated, it we won a bloodless victory, what then? We should find ourselves at the threshold of countless troubles. We must replace the government which we destroy. We cannot leave the civilization of Cuba at the mercy of men like Gomez. We cannot stand responsible before the world for another Hayti, another Soulouque or Baez. If we step into the shoes of Spain, shall we find ourselves charged with the task of suppressing the insurrection against which Spain has battled so long? The insurgents do not want our government or any government established by our bayonets. They desire the power for which they have struggled so long. Are we sure that in a few years after as many of our young men have succumbed to disease and wounds as Spain has buried in Cuba, our methods of warfare will be more humane? Or if this seems improbable shall we establish in Cuba a carpet-bag government, like those upon which we look back with such pride? Remember that when our government was at its best, fresh from the influence of Lincoln

and with Sumner and his associates in the Senate, we could not give our Southern fellow-citizens, speaking our language and close at our doors, a reasonably honest government. Can we hope to succeed better with Cuba now? Shall we undertake to govern a people wholly unfitted by race and by education for self-government, when we cannot govern our own great cities?

If all these imaginings are vain, and our success is as rapid and bloodless as the most sanguine can hope, such a victory is more dangerous than defeat. In the intoxication of such a success, we should reach out for fresh territory, and to our present difficulties would be added an agitation for the annexation of new regions which, unfit to govern themselves, would be admitted to govern us. We should be fairly launched upon a policy of military aggression, of territorial expansion, of standing armies and growing navies, which is inconsistent with the continuance of our institutions. God grant that such calamities are not in store for us.

In my judgment there is nothing in the situation which excuses our intervention. Every consideration of patriotism and of humanity is against it. It will increase every evil in Cuba and in our own country of which we complain, while it will remedy none. If we are, as we pretend to be, a civilized and Christian people, let us insist that there be no war.

A nationally prominent lawyer, Moorfield Storey (1845-1929) spoke at the first anti-imperialist mass meeting in Boston in June of 1898, was a vice president of the New England Anti-Imperialist League, and from 1905 until its dissolution in 1921, was president of the national Anti-Imperialist League. In the 1920s, Storey was chairman of the Haiti-Santo Domingo Independence Society and served on the advisory committee of the American Fund for Public Service Committee on American Imperialism. He was also the first president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).