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COMMONWEALTH OR EMPIRE

BY

A BYSTANDER

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COMMONWEALTH OR EMPIRE

WHATEVER may be for Americans the main issue in the Presidential campaign, for the world at large it is that between Imperialist Plutocracy, and the American Commonwealth. Shall the American Commonwealth remain what it is, follow its own destiny, and do what it can to fulfil the special hopes which humanity has founded on it, or shall it be turned into an imitation of European Imperialism and drawn, with the great military powers of Europe, into a career of conquest and domination, impairing at the same time its own democratic character, as all experience tells us that it must? Shall it be ruled by the spirit and in the interest of the American people, or in those of the Europeanized plutocracy which has its commercial centre in the financial offices of the East and its social centre in the drawing-rooms of New York? This is the main issue for humanity.

Puritan New England could not last, though it served as the foundation, and left strong traces on national character. America was bound to undergo the general influences of the world's progress and to be embraced by the world-unifying agencies of electricity and steam. The original elements had been largely diluted by foreign inflow, which, however, had been assimilated in a wonderful degree. Still, the American Republic was the home of democracy and the hope of labor. It promised to do something more than the Old World communities towards rectifying the injustice of nature and equalizing the human lot. The eyes of the masses everywhere were turned to it. To the enemies of equality and freedom everywhere it was an object of aversion and alarm. Loud was the shout of exultation

with which, at the moment of secession, aristocracy and plutocracy in Europe hailed its apparent fall. Freedom from Socialism, other than imported, proved the general soundness of the industrial republic.

There was reason at all events to hope that humanity would here be rid of two of its banes in the Old World, State Churches and standing armies. Where there was no danger of war there could be no occasion for a standing army beyond what might be necessary for the maintenance of order in a community receiving foreign elements little trained in their countries of origin to recognize any authority but force. The internal conflict caused by slavery was at an end. Nothing apparently was left to give birth to war. The war with Spain, that most ardent of patriots, John M. Forbes, held, as his biography tells us, to have been made for the purpose of keeping a political party in power. It seemed that peace might be preached to all peoples and governments more effectually than any conference could preach it by the spectacle of a mighty nation thriving beyond all other nations by honest industry and living on friendly terms with all its competitors, yet, as a power, respected by the whole world.

But the resources of the continent, marvellously developed, and financial speculation have bred a body of wealth having its centre in the East, headed by a fabulous multi-millionairism, entrenched in a multiplicity of great corporations and trusts, daily absorbing money and extending its influence, feeling more and more the general unity of its interests, and threatening, if its ascendancy is not moderated, to dominate the State. For some time the class was timid, shunned politics, rather shrank from sight, fearing that public jealousy might be aroused. Now it is past that stage and is beginning to turn its wealth into power. This it may do to an indefinite extent. It may buy legislatures,

judiciaries; municipalities, perhaps even Churches. A Senatorship we have seen it purchase without disguise. It may command the public journals and thus control public opinion. It may kill commercially anyone who opposes it. Even universities, fed by its bounty, may fall under its political influence. A limit can hardly be set to the extension of its power in an age in which the universal object of desire is money with the enjoyment which money provides.

No one who is right-minded can desire to array labour against capital or to interfere by violent measures of repression with fair gains, with the discharge by capital of its necessary functions in the conduct of industry, or with its just influence in the political sphere. But it would be an evil day on which supreme power should pass into the hands of accumulated money. Of the wealth, much has been made by the organization of industrial enterprises beneficial to the community at large, while some has been made in ways not so beneficial. Not a little has been nobly spent on public objects and institutions. But the best of multi-millionaires leaves heirs.

It is useless to rail at a class for following its natural bent. Multi-millionairism does no more. Its luxury and ostentation are as natural as they are conspicuous. A famous ball bespoke at once its profuse magnificence and its disregard of democratic sentiment. At heart it sighs for a court and for aristocracy. It is even introducing the powder-headed footman while he is going out of fashion in England. Its social centre is shifting more and more from the United States to monarchical and aristocratic England, where it can take hold on the mantle of high society, get more homage and subserviency for its wealth, hope perhaps in the end to win its way to the circle of royalty, and, if it becomes naturalized, to obtain a knighthood or even a peerage. It

barter the hands of its daughters and its millions for aristocratic connection. One of its leading members has just abandoned his native country for the country of his class, while he continues to draw a royal income from the industry of New York. Its growth on the body politic may be, as we are told it is, the operation of natural law. But so are growths on the physical body, against which, nevertheless, we guard.

That the plutocracy is at once conscious of the general identity of its interests, and feels that Imperialism is congenial to it, is shown by the unanimity with which it ranges itself under the Imperialist banner in this contest. Even with Silver magnates the bias of class, it appears, is stronger than that of Silver.

If you have an Empire, you will, under one form or another, have an Emperor. You cannot help committing a measure of autocratic power to the head of the executive, thereby changing his character and the character of the constitution. President McKinley is an autocrat in regard to the acquired possessions of the United States, if they are not covered by the constitution. The Queen, constitutional in Great Britain, is an Empress in India; though in this case the government of the Empire has been effectually separated from that of the constitutional country by delegation to a viceroy, with an entirely separate service.

A standing army is the necessary appendage of Empire, and it brings with it not only the means of armed repression in case of conflict between the holders of power and the people, but the military spirit of absolutism and professional caste, which is congenial to oligarchic and adverse to democratic sentiment; as Germany, dragooned by her military aristocracy, too well knows.

The army at home, though constitutionally under the command of the President, is practically under the con-

trol of the same democratic influences by which the executive generally is controlled. The army in the dependencies would be more absolutely at the President's command.

The change would soon extend to the spirit of the American people. The effect is already seen. Language on questions between right and force at variance, not only with the Declaration of Independence, but with anything that would have been heard fifty years ago, may now be read in the Imperialist press. It is true that there is throughout the world a tendency of sentiment in this direction; that evolution and the survival of the fittest have been everywhere propagating the gospel of force; while the gospel of human brotherhood, justice, and mercy, preached by Jesus and professed by Christian nations, has been losing influence even with Churches. Yet, apart from this general tendency, the immediate effect of Imperialism on American sentiment may be distinctly seen.

A relapse, not only from American but from civilized principle, has already taken place. In all defences of the sanguinary subjugation of the Filipinos it is assumed that the people were sold and bought with the land. Under the feudal system the serfs were sold and bought with the land, though in the case of the free tenants attornment was required. The general idea that the people, as a matter of course, passed with the land by cession or transfer long afterwards prevailed. But it has been discarded by modern civilization. When Savoy was transferred from Sardinia to France, a plébiscite was taken. In the case of the Ionian Islands the desire of the people to be transferred from Great Britain to Greece had been clearly expressed. The treaty for the transfer of St. Thomas from Denmark to the United States was made conditional on the assent of the inhabitants, to be taken by vote, as it actually was,

though the treaty afterwards went off on other grounds. Newly-created monarchies are now entitled not of the land but of the people; Louis Philippe was King, not of France but of the French; Napoleon III. was Emperor of the French; Wilhelm II. is not Emperor of Germany, but German Emperor. In the case of Alsace and Lorraine the transfer of land and people together was by the stern right of conquest in a war in which the people had taken part. This cannot be pleaded in the case of the Filipinos, who had been recognized by the Americans as allies in the war against Spain. The language which has been held on this subject by Imperialist speakers and journalists grates harshly on the ear of modern morality. Nor can anything be less relevant as precedents than the natural extension of the American people over the unpeopled spaces of their own continent, or the acquisition of Louisiana, with the tacit assent of its inhabitants, and provision for their incorporation into the Union, before the expedient of a plébiscite had become known.

Is it impossible that a democracy, without any formal change of its constitution, should pass under the yoke of wealth? History furnishes at least one notable instance of the kind. The Republic of Florence, without change of its political forms, was effectually enslaved by the wealth of the Medicis. Florence was small, it is true. But so was the wealth of the Medicis compared with the collective fortunes of the United States. Nor had the Medicis, at the time of their usurpation, a standing army, which American plutocracy will soon have, on a large scale, if Imperialism gains the day.

The tendency of Imperialism to an increase of the power of the executive at the expense of the representative is already seen in England, where the House of Commons has of late been manifestly losing power while the Ministry has manifestly been gaining it.

This is so evident that a writer of mark on female suffrage doubts whether it is worth the while of the women to strive for parliamentary representation when the authority of Parliament is so clearly on the wane. The tendency of war to exalt the executive at the expense of the representative will not be denied. The War of Secession made the President for the time almost a dictator, though Lincoln's character was a perfect security against usurpation.

War, and everything that excites the passion for war, favours political reaction by turning the thoughts of the people away from internal improvement and reform.

The British polity is founded on traditional attachment to a constitution handed down, with successive developments, from the Middle Ages. The American polity is founded on allegiance to principles such as are set forth in the Declaration of Independence. If allegiance to these great principles is renounced, as by the forcible assumption of dominion over other communities or races it must be, the moral foundations of the Republic will be shaken, and the sentiment which in American hearts has taken the place of European loyalty, will lose its sustaining power.

A subtle influence had already been at work to undermine the originality and independence of American character, aims, and institutions. The United States, after all, are colonies thrown off from an adult civilization. The general verdict of history is that greatness comes, not from colonies so thrown off, but from the wild-stock which has the germ of independent life in itself. The Greater Greece was much the lesser in anything but bulk. Little, except of a material kind, has hitherto come of the colonies thrown off from adult civilizations in later days, such as those of Spain, Portugal, Holland, or France. They have lacked the germ of original and independent life. The American colon-

ies of Great Britain were founded not merely by emigration, but by secession, religious or social, and were ultimately torn away from the mother country by a political convulsion. These things combined seemed to give them a life-germ of their own. A marked and even bitter antagonism was for some time the result. This, so far as the American plutocracy is concerned, has now given way to the force of social attraction. That the ancient antagonism should cease, that every trace of angry memories should be effaced, and that international bitterness should give place to perfect amity, is what right-minded men on both sides desire and do their best to bring about. But it is not desirable, either for America or for humanity, that American civilization should be re-absorbed into that of the Old Country, or that the original and independent life of America should be lost.

Participation with the British Empire in aggrandizement is held out as a new life to the American people. Principally by maritime war, Great Britain has acquired a miscellany of possessions, Imperial and colonial, scattered over the globe. For their protection she is compelled to keep up a fleet such as will make her mistress of all seas, thereby, perhaps involuntarily, threatening the maritime independence of other nations, which, to avoid passing under her naval yoke, think themselves obliged to vie with her in lavishing on the building of battleships the bread taken from the mouths of their people. The people of the United States have no interest in dominating over all the seas, nor any inducement to partake of the general envy and enmity which such domination inevitably breeds and which are already felt by Great Britain to be assuming a dangerous form.

Americans are tempted to embrace a policy of tribalism, under the form of a league of the Anglo-Saxon

race, which is to overshadow the world. A return to tribalism sounds like relapse into barbarism. Besides, the tribal unity in this case is largely fictitious. In the United Kingdom, three-fourths of Ireland, the Highlands of Scotland, almost the whole of Wales and the West of England are Celtic, not to mention a large scattering of Flemings, Huguenots, and other immigrants. In the United States there is a great mixture of races. There was a mixture in the original foundations, and there has been a vast inflow of motley immigration. The population of the United States is not tribal but human; human also ought to be its policy. That the English language is spoken and that English law and institutions have been largely adopted by the great community of the New World is matter of just pride for Englishmen. But we do not want the New World to be turned out of its course and made untrue to its destiny by an ethnological fancy plainly at variance with fact. Nor should it be forgotten that Great Britain carries with her not only her fifty millions of English-speaking people, but her three hundred millions and more of Hindoos and other races differing as widely as possible from the Anglo-Saxon type.

A league of States in different parts of the globe, bound together merely by origin or language, yet sworn to fight in each other's quarrels, whatever the cause and without regard to the merits of the case, would be a conspiracy against international morality and the independence of all nations such as would soon compel the world to take arms for its overthrow. Nobody would be cajoled by such phrases as "spreading civilization" or "imposing universal peace." The world does not want to have anything imposed on it by an Anglo-Saxon league or by a combination of any kind.

Commercial gain would be the real object, commercial cupidity would be the sustaining principle of the

league. But in their commercial policy the two nations at present are diametrically opposed to each other; Great Britain being for free trade, America being for protection. That Great Britain will ever renounce free trade, under which her wealth has multiplied, seems about as likely as that the Thames will reverse its course. Mutterings of reaction, political rather than economical in their source, and local rather than national, are heard from time to time; but they die away.

Americans are exhorted to embrace "the strenuous life." Is it not a strenuous life that has produced the United States with all their marvels of wealth, intelligence, and civilization? Is nothing strenuous but external aggression?

The American constitution is not suited for playing the British game. In England foreign policy remains in the same hands enough to preserve its continuity and the general identity of its aims. A Foreign Minister, retiring from office, still sits in Parliament and still has his voice in the councils of the State; while the Foreign Office is largely in the hands of permanent officers of the highest class. But an American Secretary of State, retiring from office, hardly ever takes his seat in Congress, so that the thread of an Imperialist policy would be abruptly broken off every four years, and there could hardly be community of design or continuous co-operation with the Foreign Office of Great Britain. Instead of unity of counsels, angry divergence might result. Nor does it seem likely that the democratic character of the American Republic could be so completely eliminated from its diplomacy as to make it an apt yoke-fellow for a monarchical and aristocratic country like Great Britain. The monarchical and aristocratic influence in Great Britain has been considerably strengthened, as it was sure to be, by Imperialism

and militarism, which commend themselves to reactionists on that account.

The reason given for this sudden tendency to alliance with British Imperialism is the interposition of Great Britain to prevent action on the part of the other European powers adverse to the United States in the case of the war with Spain. The fact has been denied by the other powers, nor has any proof of it been given. It may safely be said, however, that this, if a genuine, was not the sole cause. There were combined with it plutocratic affinity and sympathy, which found a fair occasion for their display under the guise of gratitude for the British intervention.

It is with the Tory party in England, the party of sympathy with Secession, that the United States are being drawn into alliance. Let it not be forgotten that there is in England a Liberal party, the constant friend of the United States, anti-Imperialist itself and the ally of American anti-Imperialists, at present depressed by the war fever, but likely, when national health returns, to recover its power. The language of the Democratic platform about Great Britain needs modification in this respect.

Politicians who propose to discard the advice of Washington and enter the councils of the great European powers appeal to the pride of the American people. Yet not to pride of the highest kind; for the transformation of the Commonwealth into the counterpart of a power of the Old World would be an imitation, and in imitation there is always something poor. Like an American heiress married into an aristocratic family, America in that circle would always be a new-comer. Independence, miscalled isolation, is not impotence. By virtue of it America has enjoyed moral influence and a hold on the popular sentiment everywhere. It is doubtful whether Mr. Chamberlain would have ventured on

the South African war had he not been assured at least of benevolent neutrality at Washington. If the Commonwealth yearns for a nobler part, a nobler part may be found, not in partnership with predatory powers, but rather in morally upholding against them human independence and the rights of the family of nations.

How could that charter of the independence of the hemisphere, the Monroe Doctrine, be sustained if the United States were interfering all over the world?

In the East the name of America must surely be better, and her influence over those races greater, if she stands aloof from European powers, to whose aggressive attitude this fearful uprising of Chinese nationality is immediately due.

Expansionists, the party of Empire call themselves. But no name could be less appropriate. Expansion means extension without breach of continuity, territorial or political, such as was the enlargement of the Union by the incorporation of new States. The annexation of an archipelago on the other side of the globe, inhabited by a race or races in all respects radically alien, is not expansion but dispersion. The new States need no army or fleet to hold them; nor, as territories before their admission to the Union, are they dependencies: they are probationary States.

Continental Union, formed with the free consent of Canada and of her mother country, would be expansion in the true sense of the term. It would bring into the Republic a long stretch of adjoining territory inhabited by people of the same blood and trained under similar institutions. It would complete the unity of the northern continent and shut the gate on war. The natural products of Canada's forests, mines, and water-power, as well as her special farm products, are needed by the United States, while Canada needs the manufactures which the United States, having an immense market,

produce on the largest scale and therefore at the cheapest rate. Nor is it very doubtful that had statesmanship reigned at Washington, Continental Union might have been brought about; though, as it is, the face of the Canadian producer is being forcibly turned away from his own continent to Europe. In the Republican platform of 1896 Continental Union was a plank. It has now been struck out. The immediate cause of the omission, no doubt, is the tacit alliance of the Republican party with the Conservative party, which is now dominant in England and is intensely opposed to Continental Union, hoping always in its heart to found in Canada a power differing in spirit and institutions from the democracy of the United States. But plutocracy also cannot help viewing with secret, perhaps half unconscious complacency, the outpost of monarchy and aristocracy with its little court and miniature peerage on this democratic hemisphere. This again is but a natural tendency, about which it would be folly to utter hard words but of which it is necessary to take note.

Pitt tried to found an order of hereditary nobility in Canada. The soil of the New World refused to nourish the exotic plant. But now a mode of introducing aristocracy and aristocratic sentiment into the New World has been found. British titles, including peerages, are conferred upon colonial politicians and capitalists. The Canadian Almanac comprises a miniature peerage, baronetage, and knightage. An American can obtain a title by transferring himself, like Sir William van Horne, to the other side of the line.

If ever there was a sight to touch the truly American heart, it was that of the burghers of the Transvaal going forth, from the grey-haired grandsire down to the child of sixteen, with the tearful blessing of the wife and mother, to defend, against overwhelming power, the independence of their little State and the homes-

which they had made for themselves in the wilderness. The struggle of the American yeomanry against the armies of George III. was repeated in a more striking form. To the truly American heart, as to the hearts of true Liberals in England, the sight appealed not in vain. But the hearts of the American plutocracy were against the Boer. So was the plutocratic press. A charity concert for the wounded, which was practically an anti-Boer demonstration, was attended, we were told, by all the best society of New York.

The British Empire will furnish America with no model for Imperial administration. British India is an Empire by itself, practically severed from Great Britain, though politically under the same crown. Its Viceroy is its real emperor. It has a civil service of its own, filled by competitive examination. Thus there is little danger on either side of political contagion or corruption. Political contagion was feared by Mill and others who opposed the transfer of India from the East India Company to the crown. But the severance has been maintained. The Queen is not allowed to assume the title of Empress in Great Britain, nor is her position or that of the Prime Minister towards the British people seriously affected by the connection. A President of the United States could hardly delegate his authority over dependencies to viceroys, nor could a separate civil service for American dependencies be easily formed. The American constitution, as it is at present, seems to repel external dominion. It might be amended for that purpose, but hardly without fundamental change.

Equally unavailable as a model are the self-governed colonies of Great Britain, wrongly included under the denomination of Empire, while they are practically independent States. The only real remnants of political dominion over them left to the mother country are the

appellate jurisdiction of the British Privy Council, and the power of the crown, as the fountain of honour, to bestow the titles which colonial politicians prize, and by which their conformity to Imperial policy is subtly secured. The Imperial Government has a constitutional power of vetoing colonial legislation, but this is almost a dead letter except in cases in which colonial legislation directly conflicts with Imperial laws or interests. The colonial constitutions are, in form, Imperial Acts of Parliament, but they have been really framed in the several colonies, and only at the instance of the colonies would they be changed. Canada has practically asserted even diplomatic independence, though under the wing of the British Foreign Office, in cases where her own interests are alone or specially concerned.

In the account of financial profit and loss between the Imperial country and the colonies the balance has been clearly shown, and is generally admitted, to be immensely against the mother country. It is doubtful whether the balance would be on the right side even in the case of the Indian Empire, when the expenses of defending the access to it were taken into account. It must be debited with a large share of the cost of the Crimean war, as well as with standing enmity to Russia and with the moral responsibility of upholding the execrable rule of the Turk. Money is made, perhaps, out of dependencies by great capitalists who handle their products, as well as by officials who earn salaries by the administration; but the nation at large gains nothing by the political dominion which it would not gain by independent trade.

To the toiling and suffering masses the profits of Empire are not great. The hideous expanse of squalid misery in and around Naples has not been lessened by the acquisition of dominion in Abyssinia, while the price of necessaries has been cruelly raised by the

squandering of the miserable earnings of these people in bloated armaments. We are presented with harrowing pictures of the lives and lodgings of the London poor. The corpse of a child lies by day upon the only bed of a family and at night is put upon their bread shelf. A physician, called in to a poor woman and coming too late, finds her dead body emaciated to the last degree and swarming with vermin. What comfort is it to these people that they are lords of three hundred millions of Hindoos, that they are crushing the independence of the South African Republics, and sending punitive expeditions to reduce the Afridis beneath their sway? What empire do they, or the toilers of the United States either, crave so much as liberty to earn by their toil all the bread they can and to eat the bread they earn? If the white man, American or British, wants a burden, he can find it at his own door.

The example of British Empire in India, however, may be profitably studied by those who think of launching out into a career of Empire in the belief that it is a "new life." They will see what is the effect on the character of the Imperial nation. No other foreign ruler of a conquered country has equalled or even approached the British rulers of India in the benevolence by which, for the last three-quarters of a century at least, they have been actuated towards the conquered. Yet Lord Elgin, an excellent man, says of the relations between the races in India, where he was then sojourning, and of which he was afterwards Governor-General:

"It is a terrible business, however, this living among inferior races. I have seldom from man or woman since I came to the East heard a sentence which was reconcilable with the hypothesis that Christianity had ever come into the world. Detestation, contempt, ferocity, vengeance, whether Chinamen or Indians be the object. There are some three or four hundred servants in

this house. When one first passes by their *salaaming* one feels a little awkward. But the feeling soon wears off, and one moves among them with perfect indifference, treating them, not as dogs, because in that case one would whistle to them and pat them, but as machines with which one can have no communion or sympathy. Of course those who can speak the language are somewhat more *en rapport* with the natives, but very slightly so, I take it. When the passions of fear and hatred are engrafted on this indifference, the result is frightful; an absolute callousness as to the sufferings of the objects of those passions, which must be witnessed to be understood and believed."

The atrocities committed by the dominant race in quelling the mutiny vied with the atrocities committed by the mutineers, and the feeling displayed was such as to fill Lord Elgin with horror.

"—— tells me that yesterday, at dinner, the fact that government had removed some commissioners who, not content with hanging all the rebels they could lay their hands on, had been insulting them by destroying their caste, telling them that after death they should be cast to the dogs to be devoured, etc., was mentioned. A reverend gentleman could not understand the conduct of government; could not see that there was any impropriety in torturing men's souls; seemed to think a good deal might be said in favour of bodily torture as well! These are your teachers, O Israel! Imagine what the pupils become under such leading!" A British soldier, otherwise not noted for inhumanity, sought permission to impale or burn alive; while the cries of delirious vindictiveness in England for more blood were horrible to hear.

It seems to be well attested that Filipinos are tortured to make them give up their hidden arms. On the other hand the Filipinos are accused of burying American

prisoners alive. Is this the promised reign of "law, liberty, and justice"? Will American character remain unaffected by this competition in cruelty with a half civilized race? It is hard to be at once a tyrant and a freeman: it is easy, as experience shows, to be at once a tyrant and a slave.

That domestic faction or political distempers of any kind can be healed by war or an aggressive foreign policy, is a fancy which seems once more to prevail, but which surely stands in little need either of ethical or historical confutation. The moral world would be strangely ordered if you could cure your own vices by making onslaughts on your neighbours. The spirit of violence in all its phases is inflamed, not allayed, by war. The war of 1812 is sometimes cited as having promoted the unity of the nation. Did it not in the sequel give birth to the furious outburst of party violence under its hero, Andrew Jackson?

Empire, if we trust history, would seem to be an illusion. What Empire could be more magnificent or apparently stronger than that of Spain, to whose decrepitude American hands have just given the final blow? The Spanish possessions in Europe, Asia, and America were immense: and they were held together by a perfectly centralized government and by that which, in this case especially, was a very powerful bond, complete unity of religion. Yet the Empire not only itself decayed, but sapped the life of the Imperial nation, whose people neglected domestic industry and internal improvement in their passion for domination abroad, and justly forfeited their own liberties in striving for lordship over other people. We now hear that Spain, having lost almost the last of her Imperial possessions, is showing signs of commercial and industrial revival. As the acquisition of Empire was the bane, loss of Empire seems likely to be the cure.