Carl Schurz, *Platform of the American Anti-Imperialist League* (1899)

In 1898 the Spanish American War ended Spanish control of the Philippines, but U.S. military forces continued to fight against Filipino rebels seeking full independence. In response, a group of famous Americans, including Carl Schurz, Mark Twain, and journalist E.L. Godkin, organized the Anti-Imperialist League to advocate an end to U.S. involvement in that country. The League’s opposition was based on its interpretation of U.S. history.

We hold that the policy known as imperialism is hostile to liberty and tends toward militarism, an evil from which it has been our glory to be free. We regret that it has become necessary in the land of Washington and Lincoln to reaffirm that all men, of whatever race or color, are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We maintain that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. We insist that the subjugation of any people is "criminal aggression" and open disloyalty to the distinctive principles of our government.

We earnestly condemn the policy of the present national administration in the Philippines. It seeks to extinguish the spirit of 1776 in those islands. We deplore the sacrifice of our soldiers and sailors, whose bravery deserves admiration even in an unjust war. We denounce the slaughter of the Filipinos as a needless horror. We protest against the extension of American sovereignty by Spanish methods.

We demand the immediate cessation of the war against liberty, begun by Spain and continued by us. We urge that Congress be promptly convened to announce to the Filipinos our purpose to concede to them the independence for which they have so long fought and which of right is theirs.

The United States have always protested against the doctrine of international law which permits the subjugation of the weak by the strong. A self-governing state cannot accept sovereignty over an unwilling people. The United States cannot act upon the ancient heresy that might makes right.

Imperialists assume that with the destruction of self-government in the Philippines by American hands, all opposition here will cease. This is a grievous error. Much as we abhor the war of "criminal aggression" in the Philippines, greatly as we regret that the blood of the Filipinos is on American hands, we more deeply resent the betrayal of American institutions at home. The real firing line is not in the suburbs of Manila. The foe is of our own household. The attempt of 1861 was to divide the country. That of 1899 is to destroy its fundamental principles and noblest ideals.
Whether the ruthless slaughter of the Filipinos shall end next month or next year is but
an incident in a contest that must go on until the Declaration of Independence and the
Constitution of the United States are rescued from the hands of their betrayers. Those
who dispute about standards of value while the foundation of the republic is undermined
will be listened to as little as those who would wrangle about the small economies of the
household while the house is on fire. The training of a great people for a century, the
aspiration for liberty of a vast immigration are forces that will hurl aside those who in the
delirium of conquest seek to destroy the character of our institutions.

We deny that the obligation of all citizens to support their government in times of grave
national peril applies to the present situation. If an administration may with impunity
ignore the issues upon which it was chosen, deliberately create a condition of war
anywhere on the face of the globe, debase the civil service for spoils to promote the
adventure, organize a truth-suppressing censorship, and demand of all citizens a
suspension of judgement (sic) and their unanimous support while it chooses to continue
the fighting, representative government itself is imperiled.

We propose to contribute to the defeat of any person or party that stands for the forcible
subjugation of any people. We shall oppose for re-election all who in the White House or
in Congress betray American liberty in pursuit of un-American ends. We still hope that
both of our great political parties will support and defend the declaration of
independence in the closing campaign of the century.

We hold with Abraham Lincoln, that "no man is good enough to govern another man
without that other's consent. When the white man governs himself, that is self-
government, but when he governs himself and also governs another man, that is more
than self-government--that is despotism." "Our reliance is in the love of liberty which
God has planted in us. Our defense is in the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of
all men in all lands. Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves, and
under a just God cannot long retain it."

We cordially invite the co-operation of all men and women who remain loyal to the
declaration of independence and the constitution of the United States.

Document Analysis

1. What historical precedents does the platform cite?

2. What is the role of racial identification in the argument?

3. In this interpretation of events, how did U.S. action in the Philippines threaten
   Americans at home? What actions does the platform urge Americans to take in order
to protest U.S. actions in the Philippines?