THE TELLER AMENDMENT: IDEALISM OR REALISM

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In the history of United States foreign policy, the Spanish American War has been called the "Great Abberation" because it launched the nation into a period of unprecedented overseas expansion. If, however, an aberrant departure by the United States in this period did take place, it was, as one historian suggested, the decision to approve the Teller Amendment disclaiming any intention to annex Cuba.[1] Historians by necessity have dealt with the implications of the Teller Amendment, but only sparingly.[2] Indeed, the most striking conclusion that can be reached about the historiography of the Teller Amendment is that it virtually has none. There are no articles or monographic studies devoted to it. Historians writing on the general theme of the Spanish American War or biographers of the principals involved only mention the amendment in passing. Even Elmer Ellis, in his biography of Henry M. Teller, devoted a scant three pages to the amendment. Yet Teller's proposal must not be treated so lightly. It is important because had it been absent, the United States may well have annexed Cuba as she did Puerto Rico and the Philippines.[3]

On April 11, 1898, President William McKinley requested Congressional authority to intervene militarily in Cuba. Only two months before, on February 15, the U.S.S. *Maine* blew up in Havana Harbor. Aroused by the destruction, the American public blamed Spain for the incident. In the face of mounting political and public pressure, McKinley concluded that he had no recourse but to seek power to intervene in Cuban affairs.[4] In the ensuing nine days, Congress engaged in lengthy and acrimonious debates on the extent and nature of the authority to be given the President. During this period of debate Senator Teller, Democrat from Colorado, made the proposal now known as the Teller Amendment.

Congress had to decide first, whether to grant the President the intervention power he had requested and second, to state its extent. For some time, Congress indicated its readiness to commit the United States to Cuban intervention. During the past decade resolutions calling for the recognition of

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[1] Richard H. Miller, (ed.), *American Imperialism in 1898: The Quest for National Fulfillment* (New York, 1970), 1-15.

[2] See the works of the following for passing references only, Thomas A. Bailey, Charles A. Beard, Samuel Flagg Bemis, A. L. P. Dennis, Foster Rhea Dulles, Ernest May, Julius W. Pratt, Richard W. Leopold and Walter LaFeber. Even those studying the Cuban problem barely mention Teller's amendment and even then only as an idealistic gesture. See for example, Leo J. Meyer, "Relations Between the United States and Cuba From 1895 to 1917, (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1928), 105.

[3] Elmer Ellis, *Henry Moore Teller: Defender of the West* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1941), 311-313.

[4] *Congressional Record*, 55th Cong., 2 sess., XXXI, 3704-3707. For a recent analysis of McKinley's speech see Paul S. Holbo, "Presidential Leadership in Foreign Affairs: William McKinley and the Turpie-Foraker Amendment," *American Historical Review*, LXXII (July, 1967), 1321-1335.

Cuban independence appeared in Congress. Friction between the United States and Spain over Cuban independence, coupled with reports of Spanish atrocities on the island, encouraged American interventionist feelings even more. McKinley hesitated to recognize the Cuban revolutionary government because "unattended by any other action," or European approval, Cuba's problems could not be solved. When the President reluctantly asked Congress for permission to intervene, the House quickly approved his request. The Senate, however, devoted far more attention to the President's bid for extended authority. The Populists, Silver Republicans, and Democrats wanted a resolution stating that the United States believed Cuba had the right to be independent. Moreover, many senators wanted to recognize the independence of the Cuban insurgent government and extend diplomatic relations with it in such a resolution. The combined strength of these three political factions influenced the final wording of the approval at the cost of irregular delay.[5]

During that spring, a few senators demanded that the island not be annexed in the event that the United States should intervene in Cuba.[6] However, many of their colleagues felt that Cuba would not be able to gain independence without American aid, whether the island was annexed or not. They also wanted to avoid the temptation of annexing Cuba at the expense of Cuban independence. Consequently, many who mistrusted the Administration's motives urged that a statement be inserted in the war resolution which would prevent the United States from retaining permanent possession of Cuba. This group included some anti-administration senators and others who believed that America had a mission to free oppressed people. For years this bloc had been insistent in its views. For example, Senator William Mason, Republican from Illinois, on March 29, 1898, rose in the Senate to state "We only demand that the yellow Spanish flag shall retire forever from the Island of Cuba."[7] Populist Senator William V. Allen, from Nebraska, consistently opposed annexation as well. Allen spoke in the Senate arguing "we do not want Cuba. We do not even desire to be her guardian."[8]

In the week following the President's war message, debate on American objectives in Cuba increased. In the House of Representatives, William Sulzer, a strong New York Populist sympathizer, called for the immediate recognition of Cuba by introducing a resolution to block any annexationist move.[9] Other legislators did not even want to be remotely involved with Cuba's problems. Senator William Stewart asked on April 11, "if we intervene and take possession of the country, what are we going to do with it?" He maintained that the seizure of the island would mean American responsibility for Cuba's occupation, payment of its debt, and creation of a local government. Senator Marion

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[5] Quoted in Henry Steele Commager, (ed.), *Documents of American History* (New York, 1963), II, 3. Holbo suggests that Congress was using the recognition issue as a means to gain control of foreign policy formulation, "Presidential Leadership in Foreign Affairs," 1322-1323; Margaret Leech, *In the Days of McKinley* (New York, 1959), 178-179; *Congressional Record*, 55th Cong., 2 sess., XXXI, 3706; David F. Healey. *The United States in Cuba, 1898-1902 Generals, Politicians, and the Search for Policy* (Madison, Wis., 1963), 20-22.

[6] *Congressional Record*, 55th Cong., 2 sess., 3164.

[7] *Ibid.*, 3295; Healey, *The United States in Cuba*, 133.

[8] *Congressional Record*, 55th Cong., 2 sess., 3413. Nevertheless, Senator Allen was not against a war with Spain. At one point he proclaimed "I am the jingo of jingoes.", *Ibid.*, 3413.

[9] House Resolution No. 220, *Congressional Record*, 55th Cong., 2 sess., 3670.

Butler, North Carolina's vociferous Populist, suspected that the Administration wanted to annex Cuba and he went on record: "I shall not vote for any policy which leaves it open . . . to enslave Cuba." While these debates continued, the House and Senate Foreign Relations Committees reported out resolutions granting the President his request.[10]

The Populists were the most vehement opponents of annexation in Congress. For years, Populist congressmen had nursed an abiding suspicion of the Administration's motives in rebuffing attempts to have Cuban rebels recognized as the legitimate governing force in the island. They suspected that the moneyed interests wanted to annex Cuba in order to tighten their control over Cuban sugar profits. They feared that the result would be the eventual enslavement of Cuba as an economic dependency of these interests. Recently historians have begun to question the thesis propounded by Julius W. Pratt in 1936 exonerating the business community of responsibility for the war. These economic determinists have, in effect, revived the old Populist charges that the moneyed interests seriously considered annexation as a profitable business venture. Because the role of business in causing the Spanish American War is shrouded in historiographic controversy, it would be presumptuous at this point to subscribe fully to either thesis. Obviously, further research remains to be done in defining the composition of the business classes and their political role.[11]

The Populists became especially concerned immediately prior to and shortly after the President's war message. With visions of plutocratic greed before them, a sizeable element in Congress, led by the vocal Populists, charged that there existed a plot afoot to make capital gain out of the Cuban intervention. Speaking for this group on March 24, Nebraska Senator John M. Thurston broached the subject: "There is . . . said to be a syndicate organization in this country representing the holders of Spanish bonds, who are urging that the intervention of the United States shall be for the purchase of the island or for the guaranteeing of the Spanish debt incurred . . ."[12] Senator William Stewart, a Nevada Republican, explained that "if we intervene in Cuba and take possession of the island, we cannot liberate it from the lien which the bondholders have put upon it. It is a mortgaged country . . ."[13] It should be noted that these Populists and their political allies made a distinction between intervention to free Cuba and intervention to annex Cuba. They objected to intervention only if it led to annexation. In this limited sense an element of idealism worked its influence.[14]

During the week of April 11, while Populist and anti-administration con-

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[10] *Ibid.;* Holbo, "Presidential Leadership in Foreign Affairs," 1327-1328.

[11] The most important of these recent studies is Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca, 1963), which argues that the United States went to war primarily for economic reasons. However, LaFeber did not fully connect Populist fears with business motives in his discussion of the war resolution, 379-407; Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898: The Acquisition of Hawaii and the Spanish Islands* (Baltimore, 1936), 233-257.

[12] *Congressional Record,* 55th Cong., 2 sess., 3164.

[13] *Ibid.;* Healey, *The United States in Cuba,* 25-27.

[14] John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt* (Minneapolis, 1931), 389; LaFeber, *The New Empire,* 290; Walter Millis, *The Martial Spirit: A Study of Our War with Spain* (Boston, 1931), 34, 57, 58, 124, 142; *Congressional Record,* 55th Cong., 2 sess., 3413.

gressmen debated the virtues of intervention with McKinley supporters, Senator Teller spoke out against annexation. This venerable champion of the Western Silverites presented an enigma in the question of Cuban intervention. Seemingly, his opposition to annexation in April, 1898, ran contrary to his well known expansionist views. When debate over Hawaiian annexation arose during the Cleveland Administration, he proved to be an earnest expansionist and even chided the Democratic Party in 1893 for abandoning its expansionist policy of earlier years. On that occasion he told his colleagues, "I am in favor of the annexation of those islands. I am in favor of the annexation of Cuba; I am in favor of the annexation of that great country lying to the north of us."[15] But, as his biographer pointed out, Teller carefully qualified that statement by adding that any territorial acquisitions must come on a voluntary basis. In 1895, referring to Cuba, he reaffirmed his hope of seeing the American flag flying "over that great island and over other islands."[16] Yet despite his professed expansionist sentiments and the advantages to the cause of silver inherent in a war over Cuba in 1898, Teller counseled moderation in dealing with Spain, even in the aftermath of the *Maine* sinking. Although he professed to oppose war, he nonetheless favored recognition of Cuban belligerency, and accordingly introduced a resolution recognizing the establishment of an independent Cuban government.[17]

Teller evidently came to nourish considerable sympathy for the Cuban insurgents. That feeling, joined with an abiding suspicion of the Administration and doubtlessly fortified by the ominous rumblings in the Congress, certainly weighed upon his mind when he rose to address the Senate on April 15. By this time also, Teller must have been as convinced as any of the urgency and desirability of intervention. He undoubtedly perceived that unless someone found a way to relieve such anxieties the wranglings in the Senate would continue and perhaps be fatal to the political interests not only of the Populists but of the Cuban revolutionaries. Even the danger existed that the interventionists would fail in their efforts without more unity in the Congress. Teller answered the problem by declaring "I want the Senate to say that we do not intend to take that island," and "make it clear to the world that it shall not be said by any European government . . . that we are doing it for the purpose of agrandizement for ourselves or the increasing of our territorial holdings."[18]

By putting the cause of intervention upon a high moral plane, Teller delivered a master stroke that at once rescued the national reputation, relieved the apprehensions of the opposition and stripped the Administration of its arguments against recognition of the rebel government. With the inclusion of his amendment, recognition of Cuba seemed implicit. The opposition could

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[15] Quoted in Ellis, *Henry Moore Teller*, 308.

[16] *Ibid.;* quoted in Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898*, 204.

[17] Ellis, *Henry Moore Teller*, 309. Ellis dismissed the widely accepted version of the Amendment's origin which Teller's acquaintance, Horatio Rubens, offered in his book, *Liberty, the Story of Cuba* (New York, 1932).

[18] *Congressional Record*, 55th Cong., 2 sess., 3899. Even Theodore Roosevelt did not want annexation. In a letter to Robert Bacon on April 8, 1898, he wrote that he was "very doubtful about annexing Cuba in any event . . ," quoted in Elting E. Morison (ed.), *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge, Mass., 1951), II, 814.

now allow the Administration to acknowledge limited Cuban freedom with the assurance that the United States would not preemptively assume control of the island's government. Consequently the Congress approved the Teller Amendment which stated the "United States hereby disclaims any disposition or intention to exercise sovereignty, jurisdiction or control over said island . . . and asserts its determination . . . to leave the government and control of the Island to its people."[19]

More than just idealism governed the votes of Congress on the Teller Amendment. The fact that it was passed by acclamation led most historians to stress idealism in interpreting this vote at the expense of any explanation based on practical considerations. This emphasis on idealism has clouded historical interpretations on the matter long enough. Upon closer investigation, it is possible to suggest that idealism was merely one of several factors influencing the vote. Historical experience suggests that Congress is not an altruistic and generous body by nature. Therefore, it would be more accurate to consider the Teller Amendment as an example of Congressional *realpolitik*.

One practical consideration before the Congress as the war hysteria mounted was the possibility of European intervention in any war between the United States and Spain, especially when the probability remained that Washington would acquire Cuba. Teller admitted as much during a congressional debate in 1902 dealing with his amendment. He explained that the "press of all Europe was filled with denunciations of us and declarations that we were pretending to be moved by a spirit of humanity, but that we were really moved by a spirit of greed." He further added, " I felt then that we were in some danger, but I believe we were in greater danger than I had ever supposed."[20]

Several senators hastened to confirm Teller's claim that fears of European reaction to American intervention in Cuba motivated him to submit his amendment. "I have always supposed it had some influence with the Senator from Colorado," said Wisconsin's Senator John Coit Sponner, who had been the Administration's floor leader in the Senate in 1898. Georgia Senator Augustus C. Bacon recalled that President McKinley himself had expressed to several legislators apprehension about the effect of American intervention on Europe. Bacon quoted the President as saying, "Remember Senators, if this war breaks out it may be a world's war."[21]

In fact, Europe in 1898 expressed misgivings about American intentions with regard to Cuba. England, France, the Papacy, and even the Austro-Hungarian Empire closely followed the deteriorating relations between the United States and Spain. As early as 1895, various European governments offered to mediate Spanish-American differences. Further, these powers made no effort to hide from the American public their concern. Although it is highly doubtful that Europe would have done more than just object had the

[19] Commager, *Documents of American History*, II, 5.
[20] *Congressional Record*, 57th Cong., 1 sess., 5804-5805.
[21] *Ibid.*, 5805 and for Bacon's testimony, 5805-5806.

United States laid claim to Cuba, foreign interest in the Cuban problem worried some senators.[22]

Besides European interest in Spanish-American problems, senatorial solicitude for the welfare of American sugar growers governed their behavior. There is little basis for attempting to argue that Europe had strong economic interests in Cuba. As a matter of fact, for most of the nineteenth century, the United States dominated Cuba's sugar export market and controlled a large portion of her sugar industry. Although America's stake in Cuban sugar was considerable and constantly expanding, mainland sugar beet producers opposed any suggestion of annexation because this would bring Cuban sugar within the tariff wall. If Cuba joined the United States, reasoned domestic producers, the island would prove stiff competition to the sugar beet farmers. Sugar beet interests, politically more powerful than the cane sugar producers in the United States, maintained a large lobby in Washington as well as in key state capitals during the critical period of 1895-1898.[23] In states such as Colorado, Louisiana, and Florida, sugar lobbyists were able to force politicians to consider seriously blocking Cuban annexation. However, it would be incorrect to assume that all politicians were controlled by sugar interests. Such a false assumption, for example, led many historians to consider Teller a tool of these producers.[24]

Undeniably, sugar interests in some states successfully won a great deal of influence in the Republican Party apparatus, as in Louisiana.[25] Throughout the 1890's, they strived to align the Republican Party in favor of protective tariffs. These efforts were crowned by some success in July, 1897, with the passage of the Dingley tariff, which imposed duties on foreign sugar sufficiently high to protect the price level of the domestic crop.[26] This victory encouraged sugar beet producers to prevent Cuban annexation, which would nullify the benefits of the Dingley Act.

Attempts to connect Teller's role in Cuban annexation politics with the

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[22] For a study of the whole problem of European concern over Spanish-American differences, see Orestes Ferrara, *The Last Spanish War: Revelations in Diplomacy* (New York, 1937). Ferrara even went so far as to suggest that Europe was prepared to form a united front at one point, to solve the impending Spanish-American conflict and preferably to Spain's advantage, 7-14, 92-126, 139-151. Other studies on Europe's reactions are A. E. Campbell, *Great Britain and the United States, 1895-1903* (London, 1960); Charles C. Campbell, Jr., *Anglo-American Understanding, 1898-1903* (Baltimore, 1957); L. B. Shippee, "Germany and the Spanish-American War," *American Historical Review,* III (July, 1925), 758-763. Senator Cushman Davis, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, expressed his concern over European interest in Cuban problems and their connection with American politics. In a text for an undated 1897 speech, Davis warned of European designs, "we may ourselves be the subject of these inflictions," Folder 39, Box 12, Cushman Papers, Minnesota State Historical Society. Cuban concern is reflected in Manuel Márquez Sterling, *Proceso histórico de la enmienda Platt, 1897-1934* (Havana, 1941) and in Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, *La lucha cubana por la republica contra la anexión y la enmienda Platt, 1899-1902* (Havana, 1952).

[23] Philip S. Foner, *A History of Cuba and Its Relations with the United States* (New York, 1963), II, 293-300 has a description of how the U.S. dominated Cuba's sugar industry. For other economic studies of this problem consult Richard D. Weigle, "The Sugar Interests and American Diplomacy in Hawaii and Cuba, 1893-1903" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1939) and J. Carlyle Sitterson, *Sugar Country: The Cane Sugar Industry in the South, 1753-1950* (Lexington, Ken., 1953), 342, 380-381.

[24] LaFeber, *The New Empire,* 370-379; William A. William, *The United States, Cuba, and Castro* (New York, 1962), note on 7.

[25] William Ivy Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest: Louisiana Politics, 1877-1900* (Baton Rouge, 1969), 247.

[26] Sitterson, *Sugar Country,* 340-341.

sugar beet interests of Colorado are not new. However, his role deserves further consideration in order to make clear how extensive was the influence of these sugar lobbyists. The traditional belief holds that Teller proposed his amendment in order to protect sugar beet producers. Ellis, however, refuted this interpretation with the observation that the Senator was not on good terms in 1898 with the then relatively insignificant sugar interests of his home state.[27] Vastly more powerful in Colorado was the silver industry, whose interests Teller had for years promoted as the champion of free silver.[28] It is therefore far more reasonable to assume that when Teller proposed his amendment he doubtlessly thought about the silverites, who had no manifest advantage to gain from annexation.

The silverites, mainly interested in gaining the support of the Populists for their monetary programs, subscribed to an amendment that was essentially a Populist plank. Silverites assumed that war with Spain would force the United States to issue silver money; consequently, they lent their support to interventionist proposals. One worried goldbug wrote: " It should be borne in mind that the silver men are entrenched in the Senate and are watching vigilantly for a chance to bring in the silver standard. It does not require much imagination to see that in this passion for war the silver group hope to find the opportunity they lost in 1898." Therefore, Teller can be viewed as a silver representative who linked both the silverites and the Populists together with his amendment.[29]

Many in Congress who had for years supported a position calling for the eventual annexation of Cuba, voted for the Teller Amendent.[30] Sufficient research has yet to be conducted to explain adequately why pro-annexationists really voted for the Teller Amendent. The conventional explanation holds that idealistic concern for Cuban freedom swept up these politicians in a moment of emotion to vote overwhelmingly for the war-making powers and the Teller Amendment. What little evidence exists, however, tends to support the idea that in 1898, public desire for war far exceeded in importance the urge to annex Cuba. This appears to have affected both the thinking of Administration supporters and opponents. None of McKinley's biographers, in discussing the request for war-making powers, discuss what impelled Congress to adopt Teller's Amendment other than to cite emotionalism and a touch of idealism.[31]

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[27] See William, *The United States, Cuba, and Castro, passim;* Ellis, *Henry Moore Teller,* 344.

[28] Hicks, *The Populist Revolt,* 351-354.

[29] J. Laurence Laughlin, "War and Money: Some Lessons of 1862," *Atlantic Monthly,* LXXXII (July, 1898), 53. Ellis, *Henry Moore Teller,* 311-315, 343. The London *Times* observed that "From the beginning the party . . . has hoped, and still hopes, that the war may bring the country to a silver standard," April 21, 1898, p. 5.

[30] For examples, Jacob H. Gallinger, of New Hampshire, Hernando de Soto Money, of Mississippi, and John M. Thurston, of Nebraska, among others, were in sympathy with Cuban annexation, Healey, *The United States in Cuba,* 180-190; LaFeber, *The New Empire,* 285-300, 327-333, 370-379.

[31] See for example, J. K. Winkler, *W. R. Hearst* (New York, 1928); J. E. Wisan, *The Cuban Crisis as Reflected in the New York Press, 1895-1898* (New York, 1934); M. M. Wilkerson, *Public Opinion and the Spanish-American War* (Baton Rouge, 1932); G. W. Auxier, "Middle Western Newspapers and the Spanish-American War, 1895-1898," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review,* XXVI (1940), 523-534; J. C. Appel, "The Unionization of Florida Cigarmakers and the Coming of the War with Spain," *Hispanic American Historical Review,* XXXVI (1956), 38-49. A story has it that Senator Lodge asked a Boston friend if he thought the Cuban issue should be settled at once. "If we don't it will be pretty hard to vote for the Republican Party," came the answer, quoted in John A. Garaty, *Henry Cabot Lodge: A Biography* (New York, 1953), 187.

Although political considerations in the vote deserve more attention, one is still left with the nagging problem of describing the degree of emotion as versus the degree of realism weighing on the minds of these Congressmen. Practical considerations dominated in the minds of these politicians as they voted; but what is difficult to reconcile are these motives with their feelings of altruism. In studying the vote on the Teller Amendment, perhaps the happy balance between the practical and the idealistic never will be struck. However, the pressures that influenced these men in April of 1898 can no longer be ignored.