

The African-American Community in the Age of Imperialism

Objectives:

Students will: Analyze attitudes of the African-American community toward the Spanish-American War and the acquisition of the Philippines.

Compare the views of the African-American community with those of U.S. leaders.

Assess the editorial style and tone of turn-of-the-century black newspapers.

Handouts:

“Black Americans and the Spanish-American War” (p. 1)

“The Black Press and American Imperialism” (pp. 2-6)

In the Classroom:

1. Forming Small Groups—Divide the class into five groups and distribute “Black Americans and the Spanish-American War.” Review the instructions with the class. Emphasize that the activity is designed to illustrate both the range of African-American views and their evolution from 1898 to 1900. Assign each group one of the five sets of selections in “The Black Press and American Imperialism” and distribute the appropriate sections of the handout to the groups. Have each group choose a student to serve as the group spokesperson.

2. Analyzing the Black Press—After the groups have studied their selections, call on the group spokespersons to summarize views within the African-American community during each of the five periods under consideration. How did black views change over time? What developments prompted the changes?

3. Race in Today’s Military—Note that the military has often been seen as an avenue of opportunity for African-Americans. At the same time, black soldiers have long faced discrimination and racism in the armed services. Ask students how they perceive the role of the military with respect to racial issues. Do they feel that the military has helped break down racial barriers? Should affirmative action be pursued more vigorously in the military to expand the ranks of black officers? Point out that, beginning with the Vietnam War, blacks have suffered a disproportionately higher rate of casualties in defense of our country. Should America’s defense policy be changed to narrow the racial disparity?

Black Americans and the Spanish-American War

Introduction: Like white Americans, African-Americans expressed a wide variety of opinions on the topics raised by the Spanish-American War (1898). While blacks and whites often held similar views, some issues of the era struck closer to home in the African-American community. Blacks, for example, placed greater significance on the role of black soldiers in the conflict. They were also more aware of the presence of racist attitudes during this time.

Your Assignment: In this activity, your group has been assigned a selection of excerpts that appeared in black-owned newspapers around the time of the Spanish-American War. As you will see, your group's selection focuses on a specific subject and time period.

Part I

Your group should first analyze the opinions expressed in your selection. For each excerpt, your group should discuss the following questions.

1. What are the main values underlying the writer's position?
2. What policy or course of action is the writer recommending?
3. How are the concerns of the African-American community reflected in the excerpt?

Part II

After your group has reviewed and discussed each of the excerpts, you should write a summary of the views presented. Your goal is to express the general views of the African-American community on the subject your group has studied. Your group should be prepared to share your summary with the class.

Summary of selection:

The Black Press and American Imperialism

Selection 1—The approaching war with Spain

A. “Let Uncle Sam keep hands off of other countries till he has learned to govern his own. Human life at home is at a low ebb now and should be protected before reaching out to protect others.” (*Kansas City American Citizen*, January 14, 1898)

B. “The destruction of the *Maine* was a crime against this nation not yet fully realized.... Spain has wickedly sinned against Christian civilization and must atone for its offending. Two hundred and twenty-five white Americans and thirty-three Afro-Americans have been wantonly murdered. The colored men of America have immense interests at stake. As a citizen and patriot, let him make common cause with the people and again prove himself an element of strength and power in vindicating the honor and claims of his country in the hour of the nation’s peril.” (*Cleveland Gazette*, February 19, 1898)

C. “The southern statesmen who plead for Cuba could learn a valuable lesson by looking around their own bloodcurdling confines of butchery.... There is about as much respect for the Constitution of the United States in the southern states as there is for the Bible in Hades. The atrocious killing of Baker and his baby at the breast of its mother took place for no other reason than the fact that the President of the United States appointed him postmaster of an office where over half the inhabitants of the town were colored. The Post Office was set afire and then as Postmaster Baker attempted to come out of the burning building he was shot dead; then his wife and two of his daughters received dangerous wounds. All this was the work of highly civilized white South Carolina American citizens.” (*Kansas City American Citizen*, February 24, 1898)

D. “The thousands of patriotic Americans of Caucasian blood who are willing to go to war will be supplemented by thousands of colored men who will vie with them in patriotism and bravery on the field of battle. If he is given but a fair show, the colored volunteer will put up as bold and solid a front and capture as many flags and men as a given number of his white compatriots will dare do.” (*Washington Bee*, February 26, 1898)

E. “[The coming war] is a blessing in disguise for the Negro. He will if for no other reason be possessed of arms, which in the South, in face of threatened mob violence, he is not allowed to have. He will become trained and disciplined. He will get honor. He will have the opportunity of proving to the world his real bravery, worth, and manhood.” (*Indianapolis Freeman*, April 23, 1898)

The Black Press and American Imperialism

Selection 2—The status of black soldiers

A. “Heretofore all colored men who enlisted in the army of the United States have been hustled off to a colored regiment. The government should be made to understand that if the great United States could not recognize the Negro as an American citizen and soldier, qualified to stand shoulder to shoulder with any white man, that the black [soldier] was not over particular to stop Spanish bullets. Now is the time to make Uncle Sam toe the mark and show his colors.” (*Parsons Weekly Blade*, March 23, 1898)

B. “President McKinley has an excellent opportunity of doing what no other President has ever done. He has the opportunity of distinguishing and endearing himself in the hearts of the American negro. There are several distinguished major-generals and other military officers to be appointed. The negro is to do his share of fighting in the coming conflict. The negroes don’t intend to be dirt workers and scullions in the fight. Let black generals command black troops and Spain will be thrashed in a week.” (*Washington Bee*, March 30, 1898)

C. “It is now proposed to place in charge of these troops [two black battalions from Virginia] white officers and to form a regiment with a white colonel. The cry should be “No officers, no fight!” It is the duty of the national government and especially of the state officials to form a regiment in this state and promote Major J.B. Johnson [a black officer in the militia] to the position of colonel. Colored men must contend for their rights now, or they will lose them hereafter.” (*Richmond Planet*, April 30, 1898)

D. “A message just received from the war department states that they will not accept the colored Captain of our colored company. We answered back that we positively refused to go under a white captain. We are glad that our people made this stand because if they need us or at least wanted our service they would permit us to have colored officers.” (*Iowa State Bystander*, June 17, 1898)

E. “The Negroes of Los Angeles are losing no time in proving their bravery and patriotism. They are enlisting every day. There has been a colored company formed. All honor and pride to the Negroes showing a kind disposition to return good for evil, showing his respect for the soldiers, both black and white who fought for his freedom; his willingness to help free his brother in black over in Cuba.” (*Indianapolis Freeman*, May 7, 1898)

F. “The lynching mill has started up again after a short suspense and is grinding out one, two and three victims per day. Louisiana, to keep in the lead of her competitors in this bloody damnable work, took occasion to burn a Negro at the stake. Texas strung up two or three; Maryland, one; Missouri, two; Arkansas, one. This is a splendid home record for a great nation engaged in a war with another nation, because cruelty is laid at the door of the other fellow—good record sure. Now, while Uncle Sam can find time to shoot Spaniards for their cruelty to Cubans, he ought to take a little of the time and make a thorough search among the persecuted part of the Americans about his own door mat.” (*Parsons Weekly Blade*, June 11, 1898)

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Selection 3—The status of Cuba and Puerto Rico

A. “It is hoped that Cuba will not be annexed to the United States. Under Spanish rule the Negro is treated, to a great extent, as a man, although Spanish laws may be severe and oppressive. The moment an attempt is made to establish American prejudice on the island of Cuba, that moment there will be trouble. The negro Cuban will not tolerate it, neither will he submit to American prejudice and her discriminating customs. There is a great deal of difference between the Cuban and American Negro. The former is brave, bold and intelligent, while the latter is intelligent but submissive.” (*Washington Bee*, August 27, 1898)

B. “Of all men the negro should favor territorial expansion. The retention of Uncle Sam’s newly-acquired possessions furnishes a brighter outlook for the negro climatically, industrially and socially than any other class of American citizens.” (*Coffeyville American*, October 29, 1898)

C. “No wonder the Cubans and Filipinos look with fear and distrust upon American occupation and control. The way we treat our own citizens in North Carolina and other southern states is positive proof that their doubts are well founded.” (*Washington Bee*, November 15, 1898)

D. “President McKinley’s special commissioner to Cuba and Puerto Rico has made the startling discovery that the Cubans are not capable of self-government. It is to be regretted that he was not sent on his errand sooner, that he did not make his report to Congress before that honorable body declared war for the freedom and independence of Cuba. There is not much surprise over this discovery. This opinion has been gaining ground and it will be but a short time before the complications in the Cuban situation will disappear. Annexation will accomplish this end.” (*Indianapolis Record*, January 14, 1899)

The Black Press and American Imperialism

Selection 4—Annexing the Philippines

A. “The Philippine Islands will offer an excellent opportunity for Negro colonization, not colonization for the purpose of getting out of this country, but for the same purpose that the white man colonizes, for the purpose of making money. Most of the islands are unexplored and undeveloped, and here is where a grand opportunity presents itself to the negro. A colony of enterprising American negroes could make money there, and the chances are the stars and stripes would afford him more protection there than it does here at home.” (*Coffeyville American*, May 28, 1898)

B. “The Philippines are not very desirable for acquisition. The turbulent citizens, natives, half-breeds and Spaniards will in all probability always be restless and discontented with any form of government, no matter how modern or enlightened. These people will never be able to understand the institutions of this country and hence will not appreciate them. They will be as ready to strike a benefactor as they would a foe, causing our country to put into practice methods which to the world would appear inhumane, but which in reality would be necessary for restraint or the suppression of revolting tendencies. The *Maine* has been amply avenged, and our country cannot righten all the wrongs on earth.” (*Indianapolis Freeman*, July 30, 1898)

C. “Why should we squabble about the Philippines? Why should we try to evade our responsibilities? Shall we surrender these people to the mercy of the men against whom they have made war in our interest? We would say no a thousand times; the United States should free them from the oppressive rule that has held them for three centuries and again our commercial interest in the Far East needs protection. How can we accomplish that end better than keeping these islands? It would open new markets for us, why cast aside such an opportunity that lies within our grasp to do our duty?” (*Iowa State Bystander*, August 5, 1898)

D. “Because Spain tried to whip some of her children, Uncle Sam steps in and takes the children under his arm for protection; and then steps a little further on and takes another part of the Spanish family and their land to pay for the trouble of taking another set, and then steps around the other side of the world and gobbles up another small kingdom for trading stock. All this highway robbery is done in the name of humanity and is done by a nation that shows by its actions at home that the principles of humanity are an unknown factor when the treatment of the American negro is taken into consideration.” (*Parsons Weekly Blade*, December 10, 1898)

E. “To hear the southern anti-expansionists talk about the unwisdom of accepting the Philippines without the consent of the governed, one would think that they were the most ardent and honest supporters of republican government, wherein every citizen whether white or black is accorded the full and free exercise of the right of suffrage. Of all the people who claim to be Americans, the southern autocrat is the last person who should talk of the consent of the governed. American negroes are treated as aliens and are denied that consideration which these southern hypocrites declare belong to the Philippines. This opposition to expansion on the part of the South is in sad and ludicrous contrast with the expansion of slave territory upon which they insisted even to the dismemberment of the Union.” (*Washington Bee*, December 17, 1898)

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Selection 5—Filipino nationalism

A. “On sober second thought there appears to be a grain of wisdom in the Philippino’s [sic] refusal to come under the sheltering wing of a country which has repeatedly demonstrated its inability to protect the lives and property of its own citizens within a stone’s throw of the seat of government. Are those tender-hearted expansionists really actuated by the desire to save the Filipinos from self-destruction or is it the worldly greed for gain? When one of the great Christian countries finds a strip of land it desires to possess, it is quickly seized with a commendable desire to spread the benign influence of civilization over the natives; and what a remarkably small number of natives are left after the process of civilizing has been completed!” (*Indianapolis Recorder*, January 28, 1899)

B. “...the spirit of heroism, of patriotism in the interest of independence, which is manifested [by Filipino nationalists] goes to show that all races under favorable or unfavorable conditions will make a desperate effort for freedom and independence. While we are with this country in its contest for supremacy of the doctrines of humanity, we cannot but admire the bravery of people who, escaping from the tyranny of one nation, looks with doubt upon the friendship of a new protectorate. Moreover, there is some analogy between the struggle which is now going on among the colored people for constitutional liberty and that of a similar race in the orient [the Filipinos] and hence a bond of sympathy naturally springs up. We are for the flag pure and unstained.” (*Washington Bee*, March 11, 1899)

C. “That manifesto issued by the Filipino [insurgent] government sounds of the right stuff and has caused no end of uneasiness among Americans. The backbone displayed by these ‘ignorant, uncivilized’ barbarians as termed by the Americans, is what the Negro of the United States needs. Take pattern, ye black sons of America!” (*Salt Lake City Broad Ax*, March 11, 1899)

D. “The Americans are determined to make the Filipinos accept civilization at the point of the bayonet. The officers in command of the American forces are old Indian fighters, who owe their success to the close adherence to the theory that ‘a dead Indian is the best Indian.’ They will employ the same methods in dealing with the Filipinos.” (*Indianapolis Recorder*, March 18, 1899)