

The Strenuous Life

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*Teddy Roosevelt fought in the Spanish-American War of 1898 and became a leading advocate of American **imperialism**. He delivered this speech a couple of months after the Senate had ratified the treaty with Spain that established the Philippines as a colony of the United States.*

(2)

In speaking to you, I wish to preach the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of effort, of labor and strife. I wish to preach the form of success that comes not to the man who desires easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger or hardship. To such a man comes the splendid ultimate triumph.

(3)

We of this generation have our tasks, and woe to us if we fail to perform them! We cannot be content to take no interest in what goes on beyond our borders until suddenly we find that we, the nation that has trained itself to a career of unwarlike and isolated ease is to fall before other nations which have not lost the manly and adventurous qualities. If we are to be a really great people, we must strive in good faith to play a great part in the world. We cannot avoid meeting great issues. In 1898 we could not help being brought face to face with the problem of war with Spain. All we could decide was whether we should shrink like cowards from the war, or enter into it as a brave people; and once in, whether failure or success should crown our banners.

What's going on?

(4)

So it is now. We have a given problem to solve. We cannot avoid the responsibilities that confront us in Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. All we can decide is whether we shall meet them in a way that will reflect well on our nation. To refuse to deal with them at all merely amounts to dealing with them badly. We cannot sit huddled within our own borders and declare ourselves a group who cares nothing for what happens beyond. Such a policy would defeat its own end. As nations grow to have wider and wider interests, and are brought into closer and closer contact, if we are to hold our own in the struggle for naval and commercial supremacy, we must build up our power beyond our own borders. We must build the isthmian (Panama) canal,

and we must grasp the advantage that will enable us to have our say in deciding the destiny of the oceans of the East and the West.

What’s going on?

How does this relate to what you have read already?

(5)

From the standpoint of international honor the argument is even stronger. The guns that thundered off Manila and Santiago left us echoes of glory, but they also left us a legacy of duty. The army and the navy are the sword and the shield that this nation must carry if she is to do her duty among the nations of the earth. Our proper conduct toward the tropic islands we have wrested from Spain is our duty at the moment. In the West Indies and the Philippines alike we are confronted by most difficult problems. It is cowardly to shrink from solving them in the proper way. Personally, I am far too firm a believer in the greatness of my country and the power of my countrymen to admit for one moment that we shall ever be driven to the dishonorable alternative.

(6)

The problems are different for the different islands. Puerto Rico is not large enough to stand alone. We must govern it wisely and well, primarily in the interest of its own people. Cuba is, in my judgment, entitled ultimately to settle for itself whether it shall be an independent state or an essential part of the mightiest of republics. But until order and liberty are secured, we must remain on the island to protect all, showing proper respect to the men who have fought for Cuban liberty.

(7)

The Philippines offer a yet graver problem. Their population includes half-caste and native Christians, warlike Moslems, and wild pagans. Many of their people are utterly unfit for self-government, and show no signs of becoming fit. Others may in time become fit but at present can only take part in self-government under a wise supervision. I have scant patience with those who fear

to undertake the task of governing the Philippines, with **anti-imperialists** who make a pretense of humanitarianism to hide and cover their timidity, and who carry on about “liberty” and the “consent of the governed,” in order to excuse themselves for their unwillingness to play the part of men.

What’s going on?

How does this relate to what you have read already?

(8)

The twentieth century looms before us, along with the fate of many nations. If we shrink from the hard contests where men must risk their lives and risk all they hold dear, then the bolder and stronger peoples will win for themselves the domination of the world. Let us shrink from no strife, moral or physical, within or without the nation, provided we are certain that the strife is justified. It is only through strife, through hard and dangerous endeavor, that we shall ultimately win the goal of true national greatness.

Adapted from Roosevelt, T. (1900). *The strenuous life: Essays and addresses*. New York, NY: Century.

What’s going on?

How does this relate to what you have read already?

What is the overall message of the passage?

What questions do you have?