



Interview with President McKinley

James F. Rusling

(Events described: 1899)

James F. Rusling was a white lawyer from New Jersey who also wrote travel literature and a memoir of his military service in the Civil War. As a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, then the largest Methodist denomination in the United States, he served on the committee that oversaw the denomination's missions. Excerpted here is an account Rusling published, in a weekly Methodist newspaper, of a meeting that he and other members of his committee had had four years earlier with fellow Methodist and US president William McKinley. Rusling claims to reproduce a story he heard McKinley tell about how McKinley decided that the United States should retain possession of the Philippines, a long-time Spanish colony, after the Spanish-American War. (Not included in these excerpts, Rusling also reports that McKinley professed fervent personal devotion to Methodism and asked the missionary committee to help vet Methodist applicants for army chaplaincies.)

It was my good fortune to be present at a memorable interview with President McKinley at the White House, Washington DC, on Tuesday, Nov. 21, 1899, and at the request of many friends I beg to give the facts as follows:

The General Missionary Committee of the Methodist Episcopal Church had met in Washington the previous week and was still in session there. The President had given us a handsome reception at the White House, assisted by his Cabinet and their wives and Admiral Dewey and his wife, and a committee was appointed to draft a resolution expressive of our thanks for his courtesy and [to] present the same to him. [...] We [...] repaired by appointment to the White House [...], where we were received by the President in his private office.

His desk was covered with books and papers, and evidently he had been busily engaged on his message or in official correspondence when we were ushered in. But he laid everything aside and, rising, stood at his desk while Dr. Upham^a addressed him with his usual felicity, stating the object of our visit and reading said resolution. The President replied briefly and then, as we were about to depart, added: [...]

“Hold a moment longer! Not quite yet, gentlemen! Before you go, I would like to say just a word about the Philippine business. I have been criticized a good deal about the Philippines but don’t deserve it. The truth is I didn’t want the Philippines, and when they came to us, as a gift from the gods, I did not know what to do with them. When the Spanish war broke out, Dewey was at Hongkong, and I ordered him to go to Manila and to capture or destroy the Spanish fleet; and he had to because, if defeated, he had no place to refit on that side of the globe, and if the Dons were victorious they would likely cross the Pacific and ravage our Oregon and California coasts. And so he had to destroy the Spanish fleet and did it! But that was as far as I thought then.

“When next I realized that the Philippines had dropped into our laps, I confess I did not know what to do with them. I sought counsel from all sides—Democrats as well as Republicans—but

^a Samuel F. Upham, a white Methodist minister and theology professor.

got little help. I thought first we would take only Manila; then Luzon; then other islands, perhaps, also. I walked the floor of the White House, night after night, until midnight; and I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night.

“And one night, late, it came to me this way—I don’t know how it was, but it came: (1) that we could not give them back to Spain—that would be cowardly and dishonorable; (2) that we could not turn them over to France or Germany, our commercial rivals in the Orient—that would be bad business and discreditable; (3) that we could not leave them to themselves—they were unfit for self-government, and they would soon have anarchy and misrule over there worse than Spain’s was; and (4) that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and, by God’s grace, do the very best we could by them as our fellowmen, for whom Christ also died. And then I went to bed, and went to sleep, and slept soundly; and the next morning, I sent for the chief engineer of the War Department (our mapmaker), and I told him to put the Philippines on the map of the United States”—pointing to a large map on the wall of his office—“and there they are, and there they will stay while I am President!”

He said all this with great earnestness and impressiveness, as if he wanted us to remember it forever, and as only a great statesman and ruler like George Washington or Abraham Lincoln would have said it. [...]

It goes without saying that I was deeply impressed by this interview and have often referred to it since, both publicly and privately. Some other things were spoken of, but these [...] were the chief things, and I have given much of the President’s language (*ipsissima verba* substantially), as I verily believe.

Source: James F. Rusling, “Interview with President McKinley,” *Christian Advocate*, January 22, 1903, 17-18 (137-138, volume pagination), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo.31924089864726>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. An additional paragraph break inserted for readability. A prepositional phrase relocated within a sentence to correct a dangling modifier. The source publication’s spelling *criticise* emended to match the source’s use of the American spellings *civilize* and *Christianize*. The antiquated spelling *Hongkong* retained from the source. Punctuation emended for modernization and readability, including omitting hyphenation within the terms *fellowmen* and *mapmaker*. In the source publication, the phrase *pointing to a large map on the wall of his office* is enclosed in square brackets, due to its being an interpolation by Rusling into McKinley’s speech; to avoid the impression that the bracketed phrase is an editorial insertion by Duffy, the phrase is placed here within em dashes outside the quotation marks that enclose McKinley’s speech. An instance of *that* has been converted from capital to lowercase for improved parallelism within a numbered list. The capitalization of US government offices (*President*, *Cabinet*) and of *Dons* (as a reference to Spaniards) replicates the source.

These edited excerpts from Rusling’s account are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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