



Republic or Empire John L. Spalding (1899)

In April 1899, the Chicago chapter of the Anti-Imperialist League, a nationwide organization, held a public meeting to protest the United States' having annexed the Philippines after the Spanish-American War. By the time of the Chicago protest, US troops in the Philippines were waging war against a Filipino independence movement. One of the speakers at the protest meeting was John Spalding, a white Kentuckian who was then serving as bishop of the Catholic diocese headquartered at Peoria, Illinois. Selections from his speech appear below. Other speakers at the Chicago meeting included Jane Addams, the famed social worker, and Sigmund Zeisler, a lawyer who had defended the Haymarket anarchists. A measure of Spalding's own prominence is that a few years after giving this speech, he was appointed by US president Theodore Roosevelt to sit on a pioneering labor arbitration commission.

We are at present in the midst of a crisis in which lack of thought and deliberation may lead us far from the ideals which, as Americans, we have most cherished and [may] expose us to evils of which we scarcely dream. We stand at the parting of the ways. It is not yet too late to turn from the way which leads through war and conquest to imperialism, to standing armies, to alliances with foreign powers, and finally to the disruption of the union itself. It is not too late, because it is still possible, probable even, that the American people will reconsider the whole question of the complications in which our victories over Spain have involved us, and, calling to mind the fact that they did not enter into this war for the purpose of becoming an empire but for the purpose of helping others to throw off the yoke of a tyrannical imperialism, [they] will see that to be blinded and led away by success is to be weak and foolish—or rather, since here the highest interests of humanity are at stake, is to be wicked and criminal. If this may not be, then the American people have degenerated; they have lost their hold upon the historical causes and the political habits which led to the founding of our institutions and to the marvelous growth and prosperity of our country.

[...W]e shall not believe that the gaining of a few naval battles over a weak and unprepared foe has power to throw us into such enthusiasm or such madness as to turn us permanently from the principles and policies to which we owe our national existence, our life and liberty; or that destiny, the divinity of fatalists and materialists, can weaken our faith in the God of justice, righteousness, and love, who scorns and thrusts far away those who, having the giants' strength, use it to oppress or destroy the weak and ignorant.

We have never looked upon ourselves as predestined to subdue the earth, to compel other nations, with sword and shell, to accept our rule. We have always believed in human rights, in freedom and opportunity, in education and religion, and we have invited all men to come and enjoy these blessings in this half of the world which God has given us; but we have never dreamed that they were articles to be exported and thrust down unwilling throats at the point of the bayonet. We have sympathized with all oppressed peoples—with Ireland, Greece, Armenia, Cuba. To emancipate the slave, we gladly sacrificed the lives of hundreds of thousands of our soldiers. And now the American soldier, who should never shoulder a gun except in a righteous cause, is sent 10,000 miles across the ocean to shoot men whose real crime is that they wish to be

free—wish to govern themselves. To say that they are unfit for freedom is to put forth the plea of the tyrant in all ages and everywhere. The enemies of liberty have never lacked for pretexts to justify their wrongs; but, in truth, at the root of all wars of conquest there lies lust for blood or for gold. [...]

Our capital^a is fast becoming the most inhuman, the most iniquitous, tyrant the world has ever known. Its tyranny is a blight and curse to those who exercise it, as well as to the multitude who are its victims. Commercial and manufacturing competition is becoming a struggle for existence fiercer than that which makes nature red in tooth and claw. Whereas the tendency of true civilization and religion is to convert the struggle for life into cooperation for life, into work of all for all [so] that all may have those inner goods which make men wise, holy, beautiful, and strong—whereas this is the tendency of right civilization, our greed, our superstitious belief in money as the only true god and savior of man, hurries us on with increasing speed into all the venalities, dishonesties, and corruptions, into all the tricks and trusts, by which the people are disheartened and impoverished. [...] How far we have drifted from that race of farmers who threw off the yoke of England and built the noble state; who believed that honor was better than money, freedom than luxury and display. Their plain democratic republic is no longer good enough for us. We [have] become imperial. We must have mighty armies and navies, which shall encircle the earth to bring into subjection weak and unprotected savages and barbarians. Why? For glory? No. That is a standpoint we have left behind. For humanity? Wholesale murder is not humanity. Why? For money, more money, money without end. [...]

If it is our destiny to become an empire, it is not our destiny to endure as a republic. Empire and imperialism are associated with kingly and arbitrary rule, with militarism and conquest. Was not the Roman empire built on the ruins of the republic? Was it not made possible by the general loss of virtue and patriotism, by the luxury and corruption which the stolen wealth of a hundred cities had spread through Rome? [...] Our wisest statesmen have always been opposed to militarism as a menace to our liberties. We want nothing more than the nucleus of an army, nothing which shall serve as a means of conquest at home or abroad; and, for my own part, I think a powerful navy a danger rather than a protection. So long as we are content to devote ourselves to the tasks which God has set us, we can have nothing to fear, even from a coalition of the powers of Europe, were such a thing possible. [...]

On many sides, there is evidence of moral decadence. Religion is losing its hold on the masses, respect for those who fill positions of authority is diminishing, the rights of property are becoming less sacred, the marriage tie is loosening, greed is increasing, capital becoming more unscrupulous. The virtues of thrift, moderation, and forethought are less considered. We neither draw wisdom and inspiration from the past nor look to the future, but live like thoughtless children in the present. The distrust of the people of the men they elect to office is at once discouraging and injurious to public morality. Human life is taken on slight provocation, and outrages which blacken our fair name are committed by mobs which seem to have lost all sense of humanity. [...] If we but have the courage to look steadfastly and to see things as they are, we

^a By "our capital," Spalding appears to mean the nation's capitalists, not the nation's capital city. Note how he uses the word "capital" in that same sense near the beginning of the final paragraph of the selection: "greed is increasing, capital becoming more unscrupulous."

shall easily see that our true work lies here and not thousands of miles away. We are the foremost bearers of the most precious treasure of the races. In the success of the experiment which we are making, the hopes of all noble and generous souls for a higher life of mankind are centered. If we fail, the world fails; if we succeed, we shall do more for the good of all men than if we conquered all the islands and continents. Our mission is to show that popular government on a vast scale is compatible with the best culture, the purest religion, the highest justice, and that it can permanently endure. In comparison with this, what would be a thousand groups of Philippines? What the most brilliant career of imperial pomp and glory?

Source: J. R. Spalding, “Republic or Empire,” in *The Chicago Liberty Meeting Held at Central Music Hall, April 30, 1899* (Chicago: Central Anti-Imperialist League, 1899), 40-47, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t5m91361n>. Public domain.

In the source cited above, the table of contents incorrectly assigns Spalding the initials “J. R.” instead of “J. L.” That the speaker was in fact J. L. Spalding, bishop of Peoria, is confirmed by contemporary news coverage: “Meeting to Decry War,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 30, 1899, 4; “Speech of Bishop Spalding,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 1, 1899, 2; “Chicago’s Protest,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, May 1, 1899, 1. Digital scans are available from ProQuest Historical Newspapers for the *Chicago Tribune*, and from Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers for the *Boston Daily Advertiser*.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Two subject-verb agreement errors and a misspelling corrected. The hyphen omitted from *co-operation* for the sake of modernization. An opening quotation mark omitted where it lacked a closing quotation mark. Other punctuation emended for readability. The use of lowercase when referring to the political entities *the union* (the United States), *the Roman empire*, and *the [Roman] republic* reproduces the usage of the source publication.

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



© 2025 by John-Charles Duffy. Except as otherwise noted, this work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial–ShareAlike 4.0 International License, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

All rights are reserved for the flag-shaped “Empire and American Religion” logo; if you alter this work, you may not reproduce the logo. Use of the Creative Commons license icon is subject to the Creative Commons Trademark Policy.