The debaters’ consensus on an American mission extended to an understanding that the global spread of democracy was its central ingredient. While they disagreed about the appropriate means for spreading democracy, they also discussed what “democracy” would mean for the respective “other”—Cubans, Filipinos, Hawaiians, or Puerto Ricans—although the debate focused on the Philippines. Key to everyone’s understanding of democracy was the concept of freedom, or “liberty,” as it was more commonly referred to at the time.

The imperialists used several lines of arguments—sometimes simultaneously—and did so at various stages of the debate. In the immediate aftermath of the war and until the ratification of the peace treaty with Spain, which sealed the cession of the Philippines to the United States, imperialists exploited the theme of liberation from Spanish tyranny. This theme was already well established, because it had been used to justify U.S. intervention in Cuba. In this context, liberty was negatively defined—as the absence of Spanish oppression. Anti-imperialists objected to this simplified equation and charged their opponents with replacing Spain and continuing the denial of freedom in the Caribbean and in Asia.

While the contending viewpoints resulted from diverging interpretations of the “facts,” the absence of an unequivocal definition of the term also facilitated the discussion about freedom. As Isaiah Berlin has pointed out, “[l]ike happiness and goodness, like nature and reality, the meaning of [freedom] is so porous that there is little interpretation that it seems able to resist.” Berlin has developed a typology of liberties that is particularly suited to highlight the differences in the imperialism debate. He has distinguished between “negative” and “positive” freedom: negative freedom denotes the freedom of the individual from the constraining interference of any, even
debated, authorities, whereas positive freedom signifies the political freedom to rule oneself.\(^1\)

After the peace treaty, the imperialists emphasized negative liberty for the Filipinos, a “Bill of Rights” under American sovereignty, whereas the anti-imperialists emphasized the right of the Filipinos to rule themselves—a call for individual and national self-determination. To be sure, the imperialists did not have a deliberate desire to square their policies with democratic theory. Nevertheless, they exploited ambiguities in the broad concept of freedom to insist that they were guaranteeing Filipino liberty even when their program for the Philippines envisioned American sovereignty and the curtailment of indigenous political rights.

Even “imperialism,” the rule of subject populations, had to be squared with American ideals, an observation further illustrated by the fact that the opposition forced the advocates of overseas expansion to temper and “democratize” their rhetoric over time. Rhetorical concessions to positive liberty increased, ranging from the implementation of local to assurances of national self-government after a period of American “instruction.” By the election of 1900, imperialist promises of future Philippine independence were difficult to distinguish from anti-imperialist alternatives. The imperialists also added a social dimension to their catalog of democratic rights for the other. As if to compensate for the absence of other democratic rights, expansionists promised to improve the material lot of the Filipinos by “liberating” them from the constraints of poverty. Only a few imperialists were bold enough to suggest that the Declaration of Independence was irrelevant in the Philippine context and that the United States should rule the archipelago indefinitely.

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**Liberty as Liberation**

Liberation from Spanish oppression as the early “democratic” theme in imperialist discourse arose naturally out of the prewar debate about whether the United States should intervene in Spain’s brutal campaign to pacify its Cuban colony. Americans had weighed intervention in Cuba at least since the beginning of the colonial uprising in 1895. The claim that Americans were obliged to liberate the Cubans was so strong in this debate that it superseded emotional calls for revenge after the mysterious explosion of the U.S. battleship *Maine* in the Havana harbor in February 1898.\(^2\) Particularly, Democrats, Populists, and the yellow press used humanitarian arguments to move the seemingly reluctant Republican President William McKinley toward war. When Republican Senator Redfield Proctor spoke in favor of intervention