# Too Little, Too Late: The Fight for the Carolines, 1898

Few Americans are aware that our nation once had the opportunity of gaining strategically valuable base sites in the Western Pacific, the Caroline Islands. Following its defeat of the Spanish in 1898, the United States was given the option of annexing the Carolines, but despite the fervid pleas of naval officers and experts, President William McKinley, Secretary of State John Hay, and the American peace delegation to Paris balked and vacillated before finally deciding to pursue acquisition of the islands. Then the delegation followed through with too little vigor. The inexperience of the statesmen allowed an interloper—Germany—to enter into negotiations with Spain. Kaiser Wilhelm II actively sought the bases in the Carolines, realizing their intrinsic value to a navy. He succeeded, only to have Japan seize them in 1914. Today the value of these islands has not diminished. In fact, when considering the recent volatile situation in the Philippines, their worth has only increased over the years. If the United States had realized this 91 years ago, its position in the Western Pacific would have been improved.

By 1898 Germany was in full pursuit of possible colonies. The previous year it had seized the city of Kiats-Chou in China for a naval base, while the Reichstag passed a naval bill which called for a large increase in the size of the navy. The Kaiser felt that the conflict between the United States and Spain provided an excellent chance to acquire further territory in the Far East. Wilhelm II was on excellent terms with Spain due to his behind-the-scenes attempt to intercede on behalf of that country. In the fall of 1897, when tensions between America and Spain began to build, the Kaiser had recommended to his Foreign Office that Germany intercede with naval forces on behalf of the Spanish monarchy if a war occurred. The Kaiser did

not want to see the Pacific islands of Spain pass from the control of a monarchical government, albeit a weak one, to a democracy, and thus sought to obtain as many islands as possible at the expense of democratic America. He could not risk direct confrontation with the United States for economic reasons, for Germany's trade with America was exceeded only by that of Great Britain. Instead of direct intervention, Germany, and several other European nations, sent a naval force to Manila Bay as soon after Commodore George Dewey's victory as possible, in order to protect their interests in the Philippines. This force served a second, more important mission: to secure any territory not directly claimed or seized by the Americans.

Germany's original hopes and intentions for gaining territory in the Western Pacific were quite high. The German naval command wanted to obtain the Sulu Archipelago, the island of Mindanao in the Philippines, the Caroline Islands, and the entire Samoan Island group. Mindanao was of utmost importance because the Germans felt that in the Pacific "the control of the sea . . . rest[s] on the question of who rules the Philippines, directly or indirectly."[1] In addition, there was a belief that the Filipino insurgents fighting the Spanish not only welcomed German intervention, but desired that the Philippines be turned into a German protectorate.[2] All of these territorial plans were destroyed by the arrival of the German squadron at Manila Bay. Dewey (by then promoted to rear admiral) was low in both coal and ammunition, and the arrival of Germany's naval force—two first-rate cruisers and three second-rate cruisers—put him ill at ease that the Germans might have designs on the Philippines. The commander of the German naval force was none other than Vice Admiral Otto von Diederich, the same admiral who had attacked and seized Kiats-Chou in China the previous year.

Dewey preferred to handle the German problem independently, later saying he elected not to burden the State Department with further worries.[3] Even if

Dewey wanted to communicate with Washington, there was at least a seven-day delay in the relaying of messages, because the nearest cable station was located in Hong Kong. The result was that Dewey acted on his own in diplomatic affairs, without control from his superiors in Washington. Minor incidents involving naval protocol were blown out of pro- Portion by the opposing admirals and made worse when sensationalized by both German and American newspapers. On 7 July, Dewey sent his personal flag secretary, Lieutenant Thomas M. Brumby, to Admiral Diederich to Protest the latest in a series of incidents: a German ship entering Manila Bay had refused to hoist her colors, forcing an American gunboat to fire upon her. Diederich, in turn, sent his flag secretary, Lieutenant Hintze, to Dewey three days later to protest the American aggression towards his vessels. Dewey proceeded to lecture Hintze on naval procedures, ending his tirade by exclaiming, " . . . If Germany wants war, all right, we are ready!"[4] This outburst finally forced Washington to take action. On 15 July, Secretary of State William R. Day informed all foreign nations with warships at Manila Bay that their vessels would have to report to the blockade commander. Admiral Dewey, when desiring to enter or exit Manila Bay. This direction from the State Department seemed to ease the tension between Germany and the United States.

There were three major outcomes of this friction between Dewey and Diederich. First, the Germans were forced to partially withdraw their naval forces from Manila Bay, and to give up whatever dreams they held of being able to annex a large portion of the island group. Secondly, the relations between America and Germany took a decided turn for the worse. German newspaper articles during July 1898 claimed that "Admiral Dewey . . . is not competent . . . ," and that "Germany will do her best to obtain a footing in the islands."[5] Americans were angered at the insults to their newest national hero, and though unsure about what to do with the Philippine Islands, upset that Germany was already laying claim to them. Thirdly, and most

significantly, the Germans started to concentrate on obtaining islands other than those in the Philippines.

On 8 August 1898, Spain accepted the U. S. peace conditions, and hostilities between the two nations came to a close. By the terms of the armistice, U. S. troops would "occupy and hold the city, bay, and harbor of Manila, pending the conclusion of a treaty of peace which shall determine the control, disposition, and government of the Philippines."[6] Whether the United States wanted it or not, it had control, at least for the time being, of its first Western Pacific colony.

The perceived aggression of the Germans at Manila Bay caused some Americans to think twice about the widespread aversion to accessioning part, if not all, the Philippine Island group. In order to preserve its already tenuous relations with America, the German Foreign Office could no longer actively pursue a naval foothold in the Philippines.

Shortly after Dewey scored his triumph at Manila Bay, German Under Secretary of State Prince Bernhard von Biilow declared that "the Philippines must not be transferred wholly or in part to a foreign power without Germany's receiving commensurate compensation."[7] The Kaiser already controlled eastern New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago, so he sought to obtain the Carolines, strategically the most important of Spain's three remaining island groups (the other two being the Marianas and the Marshalls). The Carolines are composed of more than 1,000 islands, although only a handful contain harbors large enough to be used by naval forces. What made this island group so important was its position almost exactly halfway between Hawaii and Manila. Therefore, the Carolines were a prime location for U. S. coaling and cable stations. A report by Edmund Baylies, vice president of the Scrymser Pacific Cable Company, stressed the overwhelming necessity of having an island in the Caroline group for a cable

station if the United States ever hoped to lay transpacific cable between San Francisco and the Philippines. Also, there was a substantial American missionary system established and centered in the Caroline group dating back to the 1860s. The U. S. position was best defined by Reverend Francis M. Price, a leader of the Episcopalian missionary movement, in August of 1898: "If there is a spot in the Pacific to which America has a moral claim, it is the Carolines. . . . "[8]

The U. S. Navy was fully aware of the importance of the Caroline Islands. A naval war board had been formed in March 1898 by Secretary of the Navy John D. Long to provide advice on naval operations against the Spanish. Headed by Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt (until he left for active duty with the Army), the board's members included Rear Admiral Montgomery Sicard, Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, and Captain A. S. Crowninshield. Before the war board broke up in August of 1898, it outlined the minimum requirements the United States should obtain from among Spain's former empire. The group foresaw a chain of naval bases extending from the Atlantic, through an isthmian canal to Hawaii, the Carolines, the Philippines, and ending in China. This would not only serve the Navy best, but also further open the China market, a long-standing American goal.

Commander Royal B. Bradford, Chief of the Bureau of Equipment and the U. S. Navy representative at the Paris peace settlement, defined the Navy's needs in the Central and Western Pacific. Bradford's main responsibility as bureau chief was providing coal to Navy warships, so he was much in favor of gaining as many bases as possible in order to facilitate his job. It was Bradford's opinion that Guam and the Carolines were needed to provide for America's coaling and cable needs in the Central Pacific. Regardless of other valid reasons, Bradford warned, the Carolines should be taken because "in the hands of the enemy they would offer a serious menace to the line of communications between the Pacific coast [of America] and the

Philippines."[9]

Bradford also held expansionist views concerning the Philippines. The entire island group, the war board decided, must either be taken or returned to Spain. If the Philippines were splintered, the requirements for defending America's holdings would be too costly, due to the proximity of neighboring islands. Thus, because it was out of the question to return the Philippines to Spain—due to the embarrassment it would cause with the European powers—and impossible to divide the islands safely, the only feasible option was the accession of the entire group- Once the group was under American control, it was only a matter of time until the trade of the United States increased in the Far East, for the Philippines and Carolines would act as stepping-stones to the China market.

Bradford also had dire predictions for the role the Germans would play in America's rapidly expanding sphere of influence in the central Pacific. After Diederich's hostility towards Dewey at Manila Bay, Bradford warned that if the Germans ever came to possess the Caroline Islands they "would most assuredly . . . [make] a bad neighbor."[10]

Clearly the Navy wanted the Carolines, but this was not to be for two main reasons: 1) up until the treaty was signed in December 1898, the U. S. Government was indecisive about exactly what it was going to demand from Spain, and 2) the State Department seemed unable to formulate and make clear to Germany its policy regarding the Carolines. The person who bears the most responsibility for this failure of American policy was the U. S. ambassador to Germany, Andrew A. White.

As the highest ranking American official in Germany. Ambassador White was a great supporter of both Kaiser Wilhelm and his expansionist goals abroad, so much so that he overlooked the best interests of the United States. White

was strongly against American expansionism, because he felt that the periodic changes in administrations would not provide the necessary strength and continuity for an effective colonial policy. The ambassador was such an ardent admirer of the German nation that he was more interested in mending political fences between America and Germany than in worrying about the possibility that the Germans might attempt to obtain Spanish territories in the Pacific desired by the U. S. Navy. White was willing to say anything the German Foreign Office wanted to hear, as long as relations between the two nations improved.

Ambassador White naively believed that by allowing Germany to colonize the Pacific without any resistance, America would gain the same benefits, both military and economic, as if it had procured the territory itself. White also gave the German Foreign Office assurances, without permission from his superiors in Washington, that since Germany had remained neutral at Manila Bay, America would step aside for Germany elsewhere in the Pacific. Because of this the Germans felt free to attempt to gain Spain's remaining possessions in the Pacific.

Although President William McKinley rebuked Ambassador White for giving assurances to the Germans about "matters wholly in the future and uncertain," the damage to the U. S. foreign policy had been done.[11] On 12 August toe armistice between the United States and Spain was signed, and the next day the German Foreign Office secretly contacted the Spanish for the asking price of the islands of Kusaie, Yap, and Ponape, all located in the Caroline group. It took less than a month for the two nations to reach a conditional agreement. On 10 September Spain promised to cede three island groups to Germany— the Carolines, Marianas, and Marshalls—on the condition that these areas were not demanded by the United States in the final peace settlement.

President McKinley selected the five members of the Peace commission with a definite eye towards expansionism. Because the treaty would face ratification in the Senate, three of the five commissioners were senators. Two of these were expansionists: Cushman K. Davis (Republican- Minnesota), Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, and William P. Frye (Republican-Maine). McKinley did not want to be accused of packing the commission so he chose George Gray (Democrat-Delaware), an anti-expansionist, to be the voice of the opposition. Representing the administration at Paris was retiring Secretary of State William R. Day, who would also serve as chairman of the commission. The fifth commissioner was Whitelaw Reid, editor and publisher of the *New York Tribune,* and former ambassador to France. McKinley hoped that Reid, a long-time intimate, would give the President a fair amount of influence with the press. The commissioners' experience and the strength of America's bargaining position promised great things.

When the commissioners sailed from New York City for Paris on 17 September 1898, they carried few explicit instructions from the President. In regard to the Pacific, there were four options. First, they could demand that all Spanish territories in the Central and Western Pacific, including the Carolines and Philippines, be ceded by Spain. Second, they could demand only the Philippine Island group. Third, the commissioners could splinter the Philippines, demanding only the accession of those islands they deemed important to the United States. Their fourth option was the most unrealistic: return the Philippines to Spain with the demand that Spain quickly establish an independent Filipino state. McKinley was inclined to follow either of the first two options, but public sentiment in America was still sharply divided on the question of expansion. The President's instructions to the commissioners reflected his indecision as to what course of action to follow: he told them to use their best judgment in regards to the Philippines and did

not mention the Carolines at all.

The peace commissioners were not without their own opinions as to what the United States should attempt to obtain from Spain's former empire. In the absence of explicit instructions from Washington, their opinions had an enormous impact upon the final terms of the treaty. Senator Davis felt that the United States needed a coaling and cable station in both the Carolines and Marianas, and wanted a large part of the Philippine Island group, as well. Davis was willing to have a third power claim the lower part of the Philippines, as long as that nation was friendly to the United States and had other established colonies in the area, as did Holland. Senator Frye felt that America could not morally abandon the Filipinos to a return to Spanish rule, nor could the United States turn its back upon the missionaries in the Carolines. Frye favored the accession of the Carolines, all of the Philippines, and the Spanish West Indies.

Former Secretary of State William Day took a more moderate stance. Day favored obtaining only the island of Luzon in the Philippines, as it would open the door to the China market. The United States should not seize all the Philippines, he argued, because due to the large number of islands in the group, it would require too great a commitment, both morally and financially, from the United States.

Whitelaw Reid, the only non-politician (though he had run as Benjamin Harrison's vice presidential nominee on the 1892 Republican ticket), was, like Frye and Davis, a strong expansionist. He thought that the accession of a coaling station in the Carolines was of major importance to the Navy and he argued strongly for obtaining the entire Caroline group. Reid was of the opinion that when Dewey seized Manila, he had in fact seized the entire Philippine archipelago by default, since Manila was the capital and center for power and trade. Since the Spanish had ruled the Carolines and Marshalls

from Manila, he reasoned, these islands were in fact mere extensions of the Philippines, and thus the three island groups should be considered as a whole unit. When combined, the island groups would provide the necessary naval, coaling, and cable bases for increased economic trade in the China market.

Senator Gray, the anti-expansionist, favored the retention of none of Spain's colonies in the western Pacific. Gray felt that the Hawaiian islands should be the western boundary of American territory. He warned that by expanding any further, it would require the U. S. Government to build a navy equal to other great powers of the world in order to protect the new possessions.

Formal negotiations with the Spanish peace commission, headed by Eugenio Montero Rios, began on Monday, 3 October 1898. After initial problems dealing with the Cuban war debt were handled, the peace talks encountered a major stumbling block over the question of the Philippines and Caroline Islands. On 25 October, the American delegation cabled Secretary of State John Hay to say that the majority of them felt that the entire Philippine Island group and all of the Carolines should be ceded to the United States. The next day the President sent a message to Paris concurring with his commissioners regarding the Philippines, but making no mention of the Carolines. Frye revealed his frustrations regarding the failure of America to obtain the Carolines to Assistant Secretary of State Alvey A. Adee, saying, "I am sorry the Carolines were not taken by us, as they are infinitely more valuable than the Ladrones [referring to the Marianas, which included Guam], If war is resumed I hope orders will be given to Dewey to seize at once all . . . the Carolines."[12] Dewey had been unable to seize the Carolines originally because he could not spare forces after the arrival of Admiral Diederich's naval force, since he feared that the Germans would claim the Philippines if he left Manila Bay. In response to Frye's appeal, Hay directed the commissioners to attempt to obtain the island of Kusaie in the Carolines

as a cable and coaling station. Negotiations for the entire Caroline archipelago now began in earnest.

The exact goals of Spain regarding the Carolines are unclear. Queen Maria Christina seemed ready to rid her country of all its colonies, but her attitude may not have reflected official Spanish policy. On the other hand, the speed at which Spain began to divest itself of its Pacific possessions, starting negotiations with Germany the day after the cease-fire with America, suggests that the Queen's opinions still had an impact.

On 11 November 1898, at Hay's request, each U. S. commissioner sent the Secretary of State his personal proposal for the policy that should be adopted by the United States towards the Carolines and Philippines. Senator Davis expressed the desire that Spain be allowed to keep Mindanao in the Philippines and the Sulu Islands, in order that the U. S. gain a naval base in the Carolines. Senator Frye's opinion had not varied much since arriving in Paris.

He felt that the United States should pay $5-10 million for the island of Ponape in the Carolines. Senator Gray was once again opposed to annexing any territory from Spain. Whitelaw Reid, like Davis, favored paying for territories, offering $12-15 million to obtain the Carolines, Marianas, and Philippines. Day, showing signs of tiring of the negO' tiations, concluded the telegram to Hay with the opinion that the Carolines should be excluded from the peace treaty so that the document could be signed as soon as possible.[13]

Hay and President McKinley weighed the testimony of the five men and instructed them to continue their efforts to obtain Kusaie as a naval base. Two days later the President reversed his decision, and the Carolines were excluded from the peace ultimatum he ordered sent to Montero Rios on 15

November. Reid and Davis were angered at this sudden change in policy, and Day, for the first time, argued that America should attempt to purchase Kusaie in a separate agreement, after the formal treaty was signed.

At this moment of indecision and confusion among the U. S. commissioners, Germany made an attempt to preserve its 10 September agreement with Spain. The German ambassador to France, George Herbert Munster, met with the American commissioners over dinner on 13 November to sound them out on what the United States planned to do concerning the disposition of the Carolines. The Americans, at this point, had no idea that an agreement had already been reached between Germany and Spain, and thus spoke candidly. The next day the German ambassador reported to the Foreign Office that America planned to gain only one island in the group, Kusaie. The Foreign Office responded by ordering Munster to attempt to dissuade the American delegation from seeking even that one island in the Carolines. Ambassador Munster attempted to convince his old friend Whitelaw Reid that, since Kusaie lay within Germany's sphere of influence (due to the location of the Bismarck Archipelago), the United States should honor Germany's rights in the central Pacific. Reid seemed to bow to the pressure of his friend, and relinquished his demands for Kusaie. Davis and Frye did not give up on the idea of gaining a naval base in the Caroline group, offering Spain $1 million for Kusaie on 29 November, which was refused.

The last week of negotiations in Paris spelled the end of any hopes for American possession in the Carolines. On 1 December, the German Foreign Office, out of fear that the Spanish might accept the purchase proposal of Davis and Frye, sent a message to the State Department objecting strenuously to U. S. efforts to obtain an island in the Carolines. The Germans claimed assurances (perhaps from Ambassador White in Berlin) that the United States would do nothing "in contravention of German rights and interests" in the Pacific.[14] Two days later the Paris Commission learned for

the first time of the German negotiations to obtain the Carolines that had taken place in September. On 8 December 1898, Montero Rios turned down America's offer to buy Kusaie for $1 million, but accepted | the terms of the 15 November ultimatum which ceded the Philippines and Guam to the United States. On 10 December, the Paris peace settlement was signed by U. S. and Spanish representatives, formally ending the war. Beyond [a] Spanish guarantee for religious freedom, there was no mention of the Carolines in the treaty.

On 4 June 1899, the Reichstag formally ratified the treaty with Spain that gave Germany possession of the Caroline Islands. For approximately $5 million, Germany obtained the Carolines, Marianas (with the exception of Guam), and the Marshalls. Spain retained extensive trad- mg privileges in the three island groups and the right to establish a cable station in each group. In case of hostilities, the German Navy would be responsible for protecting Spanish interests in the island groups. Surprisingly, the response in German newspapers was overwhelmingly against the treaty, calling the Carolines' value "small," and referring to them as "our new and worthless colonies."[15] The government was sharply attacked by leftists in the Reichstag, who claimed that the new possessions were too expensive and of little value to Germany.

In retrospect, it is clear that the Carolines would have served the United States as an important base in the Central Pacific. America's sphere of influence in the Pacific stretched from the California coast to the Philippine Islands, except for this pocket of German—and after World War I, Japanese—resistance. The Carolines might have played a major role for the United States by both furthering trade in the Far East and, in light of World War II, in strategic naval operations. The only explanation for America's failure to capitalize on this opportunity was its political inexperience in dealing with foreign powers. When John Hay was ambassador to England, he summed up

the methodology of German foreign policy: “There is, to the German mind, something monstrous in the thought that a war should take place anywhere and they not profit by it.”[16] The German Foreign Office showed far greater political astuteness than its American counterpart. Germany realized that the Carolines held great potential as a strategic base, while apparently President McKinley failed to grasp this concept. The McKinley administration’s lack of foresight would cost the United States dearly in the coming century.