

History Gives Us a Warning on U.S. Imperialism



As a young reader, I was captivated by Barbara Tuchman's 'The Proud Tower', which explores the period leading up to World War I and the fervent colonial ambitions of European powers in Asia, Africa, and South America. Tuchman vividly describes how this era saw European nations racing to carve out empires, driven by promises of wealth, power, and a sense of national prestige. American

leaders, too, were drawn to the allure of colonizing distant lands, envisioning an empire that could elevate the United States on the global stage.

In Tuchman's narrative, one figure stands out as a steadfast opponent of American imperialism: Thomas B. Reed, Speaker of the House during the critical periods of 1889–91 and 1895–99. Reed, a deeply principled leader, saw American imperialism as a dangerous departure from the ideals of freedom and self-governance enshrined in the country's founding documents. To him, the push for empire was not only a moral misstep but a betrayal of the core belief in the Natural Rights of Man—a principle that he believed set America apart.

Reed's opposition was particularly notable during debates over the annexation of Hawaii and the Spanish-American War, which led to the U.S. acquiring territories like Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. Many American leaders and citizens viewed these acquisitions as signs of progress, but Reed perceived them as morally and politically misguided. He argued that imperialism would compromise American values, burden the country with costly responsibilities, and lead to conflicts with other nations.

Reed's stance was not without consequence; his opposition to imperialism placed him at odds with influential figures of his time, including President William McKinley and prominent members of Congress who supported expansionism. Reed ultimately resigned from Congress in 1899, in part due to his disillusionment with the country's direction. By walking away, he underscored his commitment to principles over power, making a powerful statement against the tide of imperialism sweeping through American politics.

In *The Proud Tower*, Tuchman presents Reed not just as a political leader but as a symbol of integrity and a reminder of the principles upon which America was founded. His legacy serves as a call to remember that true patriotism lies in upholding the nation's core values, even if it means standing alone against popular opinion. Thomas B. Reed became a political hero of mine.

Today, as we navigate recent political changes, Reed's example feels as relevant as ever. With Donald Trump's election, many feel that the country is again at risk of compromising its foundational principles. Trump's cabinet appointments and

policy directions have raised concerns about America's progress over decades in diplomacy and democratic values. Abandoning international agreements in favor of an "America First" policy, while appealing to some, is fraught with risk. For those who see American values as grounded in ideals of equality, justice, and integrity, Trump's presidency brings an urgent call to defend these principles—much as Reed did in his time. In many of Trump's appointments, I see not statesmen but opportunists.

It's worth remembering that Trump won only 50.4 percent of the popular vote—a margin of 0.4 percent. That's hardly a mandate to overturn decades of work. Blame also lies with the Democrats for failing to curb their own shift to the extremes. America's strength lies in finding a center, not in drifting to extremes. The political pendulum has become a wrecking ball.

Who will be our next Thomas B. Reed?