



Will History Remember Iraq?
Forgotten Memories from the
Philippine-American War

2007 SHAFR Conference, Panel 30

22 June 2007

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SHAFR Paper

PANEL 30: The (Mis)Uses of History: The Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq

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6/22/2007

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Contents

Introduction	3
Other Works	6
Rhetoric 1900	7
Rhetoric Today	11
Conclusion	12
Bibliography	14

Introduction

The rhetoric on Iraq from politicians and media commentators could lead one to conclude that American democracy faces a grave threat unique in the history of our country. They focus on what they view as the unprecedented opposition of Congress and the unlawful assumption of powers by the President. The general public perceives that this has never happened before. Previous examples from our past have been forgotten in the effort to sensationalize the actions of the current Bush administration in the attempt to convince the public of the danger that our country faces.

The Philippine-American War occurred as an unintended consequence of the Spanish-American War. Filipinos were expected to embrace the American civilizing mission and instead created a complex insurgency that resulted in brutal actions on both sides, over 4,000 US military deaths, and several hundred thousand civilian deaths from war or starvation/disease caused by war actions. Despite these apparent similarities with Iraq, an on-line search of the New York Times since September of 2001 finds only two articles with reference to the Philippine-American War. An article on April 13th, 2003 discussed the issue of the difficulties of occupation and references the experience in the Philippines. The October 19th, 2003 edition carried an article that covered President Bush's speech while in Manila where he makes reference to this conflict. Aside from book reviews, the Washington Post also remains silent on this previous war. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. comments in *The Cycles of American History* that we have become in the twentieth century, "essentially historyless people."¹

¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. *The Cycles of American History*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 17.

What can we learn from this previous war against insurgents? How did Americans in 1900 view the conflict in the Philippines and what comparisons can be made to the present situation? This paper which is part of a larger master thesis examines some of the rhetoric used both in the public sphere and the political sphere in the presidential election in 1900. Historians recognize the importance of public opinion and the role of the media, however most look for other causations for the direction of American foreign policy. Robert Kagan in *Dangerous Nation* has gone so far as to claim “they (historians) have invented national psychological disorders”² to explain what they see as a deviation in American democracy. The personal motivations of average citizens to direct foreign policy through public opinion, voting or by direct involvement (soldiers, missionaries, teachers, or government workers) create American Exceptionalism. Economic outcomes or psychological impacts provide a means to measure the impact of foreign policy decisions but cannot adequately explain all the individual motivations.

The rhetoric of the past when compared to the rhetoric of today can provide a key to understand the relevance of history to the future debates and direction for American foreign policy. The study of how average citizens in rural America obtained information and developed perceptions on the conduct of the Philippine-American War in the context of their world environment can provide insights into the present conflict in Iraq.

Historians approach history as discrete events. Individuals live each day with the fullness of events. The issue was not just the Philippine-American War. Instead, individuals were faced with numerous international conflicts such as the Boer War and the Boxer Rebellion. Much of the public’s attitudes had been formed by the prior

² Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 414.

Spanish-American conflict and the issue of humanitarian concerns. Moral concerns, the idea of the Christian civilizing mission, and concepts of honor and liberty were important factors that determined how individuals responded to the actions of the McKinley administration. Historian's misplaced attention on the consequences of individual actions has resulted in the recent over emphasis on the role of business and economics in foreign policy decisions both in the past and in the current conflicts. Issues of human rights, personal convictions, and the sense of America's responsibility to promote liberty and freedom caused individuals to get involved in foreign policy debate over the Philippines as they are now engaged in the debate over Iraq. A vigorous and open public debate in 1900 was similar to the current debate today. Whether one ascribes to the theme of American democracy as a grand experiment or America as a nation of destiny, the opportunity for open debate allows public opinion to moderate the actions of the president and allow for a potential change of direction every four years.

Other Works

Some influential works and recent scholarship are briefly presented. An early work by Marcus M. Wilkerson *Public Opinion and the Spanish-American War* raised questions that remain relevant today. “War propaganda is an insidious thing. Once started it gains momentum with success until truth and rational thought are left stranded upon the reefs of discord and strife. ... Lies become a part of the munitions of war.”³ Robert C. Hilderbrand in *Power and the People: Executive Management of Public Opinion in Foreign Affairs, 1897-1921* examined the use of the media and public opinion by Presidents McKinley, Roosevelt, Taft and Wilson. Hilderbrand argued how the public image was craftily shaped through public appearances, orchestrated leaks and censorship of press releases. Paul McCartney in *Power and Progress* provided a very recent effort that steered away from the focus on singular issues such as economics or manliness and instead looked at the broader cultural issues and context for McKinley’s actions. Robert Kagan followed a similar theme in *Dangerous Nation* where he covered the entire history of American foreign relations from the early colonial days up to the Spanish-American War. David Silbey provided a fresh approach in his very recent *A War of Frontier and Empire*. Silbey provided a perspective from the Filipino side not often found in works by American authors. Silbey argued that the idea of a Philippine nation was born during the conflict with America and that scholarship influenced by the Vietnam War has distorted the historical view of this conflict.

³ Marcus M. Wilkerson, *Public Opinion and the Spanish-American War*, (New York: Russell & Russell: 1932, reissued, 1967), 1.

Rhetoric 1900

The political debate over the Philippine-American War coincided with the start of the 1900 presidential campaign in the fall of 1899. Issues of race, freedom, and the constitution were used by both sides in the debate. The Merrill Advocate trumpeted the Republican position and supported McKinley's policies. October 3rd, 1899 provided an article that stated Governor Roosevelt's view that if we had left the Philippines to Spain, greater death and rebellion would have occurred. Two weeks later, the October 14th edition highlighted a speech by McKinley in Minneapolis that indicated these future possessions will be given a government of liberty. And again in the October 31st edition, "Our flag stands for liberty wherever it floats. It is not a flag of imperialism or oppression. It is raised for civilization and humanity."

Republican's would also argue that McKinley's policy mirrored previous president's actions. In another speech, McKinley expressed gratitude to Jefferson for the Louisiana Purchase in an attempt to draw a comparison with McKinley's acquisition of the Philippines. Concern over how opposition would be interpreted by other nations and the rebels appeared in various forms. In the same October 31st edition, an article from a Private Brady expressed concern that the Democratic Parties opposition gave support to the rebels to continue their fight in hopes the Democrats will win the election and withdraw the United States troops. The November 28th, 1899 edition countered arguments of American atrocities and called the rebels thieves and murders. Anarchy would result if the United States would pull out and the article provided evidence of cruelty by the rebels against civilians in areas where no US troops had been.

As the campaign for president heated up, the word imperialism took on negative connotations and the Republicans tried to steer the discussion to use other terms. The March 13th, 1900 edition in an article titled “Imperialism a Hoax” discussed McKinley’s denials that his policy was imperialism. Instead McKinley argued “it was an opportunity to carry to our distant acquisitions life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” An article in the May 29th, 1900 edition titled “Dangerous Business” argued that both the Boer and Filipino insurgents hoped for a Democratic victory and that we “need to present a united front to the world.”

The Wausau Herald supported the Democratic opposition to McKinley. The threat to our constitution and democracy and the inability of the administration became common themes for opponents. The February 24th, 1899 editorial criticized McKinley and his cabinet as fools and inept. Another editorial in the April 21st, 1899 edition stated “Filipino’s need no Sherman to tell them “war is hell”.” Extracts from soldier’s letters discussed burning homes, robbery and desires to “kill all the black rascals.” A May 12th, 1899 article questioned how we can tyrannically oppress a weaker nation in the name of seeking freedom. The next week questioned censorship and how could we know the truth. The June 30th, 1899 editorial accused the Republicans of misrule and corruption. “What are we fighting for at \$12,000,000 and hundreds of lost lives?” July 14th, 1899 raised the issue that troops were poorly equipped and noted General Charles King’s observation that educated Filipinos did not need a “civilizing mission” from the United States. The December 1st, 1899 edition asked the question “Could an Emperor have kept more from the people than President McKinley has done?” Again, the December 29th, 1899 edition pointed out over a thousand of our youth killed for what benefit. Both

parties to symbolize their cause used the flag. For the Democrats, “the flag of the free – let it never stand for oppression” appeared in the May 4th, 1900 edition. The November 2nd, 1900 edition asked voters to be an American and that the paramount question in the election is imperialism and asked is it Christian, is it manly, is it American.

The Republican Party platform in 1900 included several items that addressed the issue of expansion and used human rights arguments. The Philippines Policy platform included the goal to “confer the blessings of liberty and civilization upon all the rescued peoples.”⁴ Additional arguments were given to compare the actions of McKinley to Thomas Jefferson’s acquisition of the Louisiana Territory. “The Republican Party is now following this old Democratic policy, the policy of Jefferson when he secured the Louisiana Territory. The only difference is that the policy was forced on the Republican Party as the result of a war for humanity.”⁵ Liberty, freedom and humanitarian reasons were utilized to defend McKinley’s policy.

Likewise, the Democratic opposition utilized similar human rights arguments. Democratic campaign speeches included virulent arguments against McKinley. “The Democratic Party holds this whole conflict to have been useless, cruel and inexpressibly wicked: undertaken without lawful excuse, in defiance of the express promises of the President, not to employ our arms for the criminal extension of our territory: in contravention of all the precepts upon which the liberties of the American people rest.”⁶ To refute the Republican argument that Democrats in the Senate approved the declaration

⁴ George Spiel ed., *The Battle of 1900 an Official Hand-Book for Every American Citizen*. (Chicago: American Publishing House, 1900), 266.

⁵ Ibid., 181.

⁶ Ibid., 322.

of War with Spain and the subsequent treaty, Democrats argued that the President had deceived them. “From the beginning, intimidation, force and fraud have been the key notes of the administration policy. The ratification of the treaty with Spain in the United States Senate was procured only by threats and misrepresentations proceeding from the White House itself.”⁷

The issue of Imperialism dominated the Democratic Platform of 1900. In the first paragraph, “...that to impose upon any people a government of force is to substitute the methods of imperialism for those of a republic.”⁸ The platform concluded with the appeal to voters of the grave danger that faced our nation.

“Believing that our most cherished institutions are in great peril, that the very existence of our constitutional republic is at stake, and that the decision now to be rendered will determine whether or not our children are to enjoy those blessed privileges of free government which have made the United States great, prosperous, and honored, we earnestly ask for the foregoing declaration of principles the hearty support of the liberty-loving American people, regardless of previous party affiliations.”⁹

⁷ Ibid., 325.

⁸ Ibid., 481.

⁹ Ibid., 489.

Rhetoric of Today

Readers of today should find the rhetoric of the 1900's surprisingly familiar. A quote from Senator Robert Byrd's speech in the Senate October 17th, 2003 "Our emperor says that we are not occupiers, yet we show no inclination to relinquish the country of Iraq to its people" raised the same critique against Bush as used against McKinley. Both sides of the debate use the concepts of patriotism, democracy, freedom and liberty in their arguments. Questions of truth and the use of false or misleading information abound. Competence of leaders, abuses, torture and the increased death toll dominate the issue.

For historians, analysis of current events can prove problematic. Will archival access to confidential documents in the future support or refute the current arguments used by the Bush administration to justify the war in Iraq? Certainly, the future outcome in Iraq will play a key role in how future historians will approach this topic. If a democratic Iraq survives in 2050, historians will seek to understand the factors that led to the success of the Bush administration policies. If instead, the US withdraws without achieving stability and an internal sectarian conflict spreads throughout the region, historians will examine the factors that led to failure.

The initial literature published in the twenty years after the Philippine-American War tended to be more positive in conclusions due to the progress made in the creation of a democratic Philippines. The problems introduced by the Vietnam War along with the Marcos regime in the Philippines caused historians from the 1960's onward to question what was now seen as a brutal and oppressive occupation by American forces in the Philippines. The emergence of insurgencies in both Iraq and Afghanistan has further led historians to revise our knowledge of this past insurgency.

Conclusion

Life is not lived as discrete events. Individuals learn and explore the past based on oral traditions and written scholarship. Collectively, each person combines their experiences with their knowledge of the past to create meaning for their present life. This then allows them to choose an active or passive role in the events that surround them. When past events are forgotten individuals may be forced to act more on emotions than reason. The adage applies that those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it.

Historians have typically focused on the Spanish-American War, Philippine-American War, Boer War and Boxer Rebellion separately. Many studies gravitate towards defining one overarching motivation to explain America's imperial involvement. Markets and economic expansion dominate the historiography. Very recent works have begun to integrate cultural themes and have begun to elevate the role of average citizens in their role of influencing America's direction. This direction needs to be extended to include a comprehensive understanding of how these concurrent conflicts were understood and interpreted by the American public.

Examination of rural Wisconsin newspapers in Wausau and Merrill during the election of 1900 provides one method to achieve an interpretation of public opinion and the impact these events had on individual citizens. When read as a whole instead of looking for specific events, a different perspective emerges from these newspapers. The world and America's place becomes more complex than just an examination of the impact of a singular episode. Interactions, comparisons, and conflicts emerge that had to be resolved by the actors of this time without the benefit of foresight. Present norms and

morals should not be imposed on these actors; instead their world must be recreated as a whole in order to gain a greater understanding of their responses.

Today, as in the past, multiple conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, and elsewhere compete for our attention. How will these current conflicts be resolved? What impact will they have on the future of the United States? Will a new power arise in the future just as the United States arose to replace the British Empire? While most citizens from 1900 may be surprised to discover that the conflicts paramount to their times have now been largely forgotten, perhaps they would still be pleased to see that the democratic debates and disagreements still exist. Hopefully they would agree that the freedom for individuals to make up their own minds and determine their own level of active or passive participation still remains. Whereas McKinley and Bryan invoked the past actions of Jefferson, Jackson and Lincoln into the debate in 1900, the current debate is nearly void of any reference to the past beyond Vietnam. To gain relevance, the challenge for historians in the present is to re-inject the forgotten past into the current debate. The sacrifices made by soldiers in the past implore us to not forget and to apply what we have learned to the best of our abilities lest the future forsake the sacrifices of the present.

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