America is proud of its part in the great story of
the Filipino people...Together our soldiers
liberated the Philippines from colonial rule
(George W. Bush, Speech to the Philippine Congress,
18 October 2003).

The Philippine–American War (c.1899–1913), which led
to the colonial subjugation of the Philippines by the United
States for over forty years and the suppression of
the first independent republic in South-East Asia, is one of
America’s forgotten wars. The historical amnesia
surrounding this conflict is no accident. It is an enduring
legacy of US government and military propaganda, widely
disseminated by a largely supportive corporate press,
which contributed in no small way to the American victory
both at home and abroad. Propaganda is understood here
as the deliberate falsification, distortion or tendentious
portrayal of events to justify a political
cause to the wider public. What I want
to argue about this case, is that successful
propaganda does not occur in the context
of an otherwise rational and empirically
verifiable public discourse. Successful
war propaganda has to be reconciled with
the symbolic self-interpretations of a
national community. In the United States,
which was founded on a revolutionary
republican imaginary combined with a
racialised and expansionist missionary
vision of Manifest Destiny, this was not a simple or
uncontested matter back in 1899.

This article provides a brief account of the
American conquest of the Philippines and the attendant
atrocities that accompanied it. It will also explain how
these brutal events were justified to the American public
as hard but necessary acts of ‘Benevolent Assimilation’,
for the benighted tutelage of the Filipino. In particular,
attention is paid to how propaganda was used to justify a
colonial war, dehumanize the Filipino ‘other’, rationalize
atrocities and erase alternative interpretations of events
from the official record.

The Philippine–American War
The origins of the Philippine–American War lie in the
circumstances producing the Spanish–American War of
1898. The United States, after the Civil War and the
completion of its westward expansion, emerged as the
dominant power in the American hemisphere. The
Spanish Empire by contrast was in a state of terminal
decline. By the 1880s most of Spain’s former colonies
had won their independence, with the exceptions of Cuba,
Puerto Rico and the Philippines. In the late 1890s the
Spanish were endeavoring to suppress armed
revolutionary movements in both Cuba and the
Philippines. The Cuban struggle attracted the support of
rival American press barons Joseph Pulitzer and William
Randolph Hearst, whose grossly sensationalist styles of
yellow journalism aroused American public sympathy
both for Cuban independence and for US intervention.
In 1897 readers were outraged by almost daily reports
(real and fictive) of Spanish atrocities (Tebbel 1996).
Consequently, when the battleship USS Maine exploded
(probably due to mishap) in Havana harbour on 15
February 1898, the press barons and hawkish politicians,
found it easy to insinuate Spanish guilt and rally the public
for war (Schirmer 1972, 51–2). This
pressured the initially reluctant Republican
president, William McKinley, to ask
Congress to declare war on Spain on 25
April, with the publicly avowed aim of
liberating Cuba (Schirmer 1972, 55).

The first military action occurred on
1 May when the US Pacific Fleet under
Admiral George Dewey destroyed an
antiquated Spanish flotilla in Manila Bay.
In Cuba and Puerto Rico, poorly supplied
and dispirited Spanish troops soon
surrendered to larger American forces (Schirmer 1972,
87). Encouraged by military success and lobbied by his
industrialist supporters, who saw opportunities for new
export markets in the Far East, McKinley quietly resolved
to acquire the Philippines as a permanent American
possession. The question of whether the Filipinos might
want to govern themselves was not even entertained.
By August the fighting ended and Spain formally ceded
its remaining Pacific and Caribbean territories to the
United States through the Treaty of Paris on 10
December 1898. In recompense for ceding the entire
Philippines, Spain was paid 20 million dollars (Constantino
1975, 219).

When the US Senate was asked to ratify the treaty,
the mixed motives in US policy came decisively to the
fore as policy-makers and the public split on the question
of America’s plans for its new ‘colonies’. Although the
US had a history of aggressive expansion into Mexican
and Indian territory, this was a debatable precedent for
 annexing an overseas empire. The war with Spain had
been popularly supported as a war against tyranny,
reminiscent of America’s own War of Independence. Opinion divided henceforth into two camps. The pro-imperialist Expansionist camp was led by a new generation of post-Civil War Republican politicians like Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, who envisaged the United States aggressively asserting its role as a world power, especially in Asia and the Pacific. The vast majority of the mainstream American press was supportive of this chauvinistic patriotism (Miller 1982, 16; Vaughan, 1994). Expansionist editors began to warn that the anti-colonialist traditions of the United States, from the Declaration of Independence to the Monroe Doctrine, should not be seen as ‘fetishes’ holding back progress (Miller 1982, 21).

Against the ratification stood a diverse array of Anti-Imperialists whose supporters ranged from principled democrats and humanitarians through to extreme racists denouncing the threat of ‘Asian miscegenation’. The Anti-Imperialist League was formed from these ranks in June 1898 and included many prestigious public figures, such as former President Grover Cleveland, industrialist Andrew Carnegie and America’s most popular novelist of the day, Mark Twain (Zwick 1992). A number of leading newspapers in Boston, New York and Philadelphia sympathised with the anti-imperialist cause but their readership was narrower than the Expansionist press (Zwick 1992).

In the Philippines, unbeknown to the American public, the story on the ground was markedly different from that circulating between contending world powers. Filipino nationalists had been engaged in continuous armed struggle for independence from Spain since August 1896. This independence movement was initially inspired by the social commentaries of the polymath writer and reformist leader, Jose Rizal (1861–1896). His martyrdom before a Spanish firing squad fueled the impending revolt, reformist leader, Jose Rizal (1861–1896). His martyrdom before a Spanish firing squad fueled the impending revolt, a transfiguration that underscored the social and cultural accomplishments of the revolutionaries who had begun fighting for complete independence from Spain. Later the leadership of the revolution was wrested from Bonifacio by the Spanish-educated gentry under the leadership of General Emiliano Aguinaldo (1869–1901), who began fighting for complete independence from Spain. Aguinaldo next proclaimed a Revolutionary Government and appointed a Cabinet (Constantino 1975, 213). The US administration was alarmed at the speed and effectiveness of their ‘Indian’ allies (as Dewey called them) and hurriedly deployed 11 000 troops for the capture of Manila. As it would have complicated the propaganda task if the Filipinos had liberated themselves before the Americans arrived, official lying and censorship by the administration and military authorities escalated. American soldiers sent to secure Dewey’s victory were told that they were going to liberate a beleaguered people from Spanish oppression and many felt frustrated by what they had to do in Manila (Meter and Bloom 1998).

The US public was given no information about Filipino aspirations and American editors generally shared their government’s assumption that ‘the natives’ were incapable of self-government. The few American journalists initially on the scene were subject to strict and capricious military censorship (Miller 1982, 86–7; Tebbel 1996, 331–2). Prior to hostilities, government and military pronouncements were the public’s sole source of information and these were designed to depict the situation in the most favourable light for the occupation. While negotiating the Treaty of Paris the administration simply kept issuing non-specific, soothing platitudes about keeping the ‘Banner of Liberty’ flying in the Philippines and ‘America’s moral obligation’ to protect the natives from lawlessness (Miller 1982, 23). Only one brief column on Aguinaldo’s Declaration of Independence appeared in the US press; buried on page eight of the San Francisco Chronicle it was headline ‘Aguinaldo Plans to Become Dictator’ (Vaughan 1994).

‘Benevolent Assimilation’: Justifying Colonial Conquest
Following secret negotiations and a staged battle to ensure it would not fall into Filipino hands, the Spanish surrendered Manila to the Americans on 13 August 1898. The following day the American Commander, General Wesley Merritt, proclaimed a military government and barred Philippine forces from entering the city (Miller 1982, 43-4). At this point relations between the Philippine Revolutionary Government and its allies deteriorated. Aguinaldo knew he had been betrayed but sought to consolidate his position in the event of negotiations. McKinley revealed his administration’s intent on 21 December in a proclamation made without congressional approval, entitled Benevolent Assimilation. It asserted that Spain had ceded sovereignty by treaty

American editors shared their government’s assumption that ‘the natives’ were incapable of self-government.
to the United States and that military rule would now be extended from Manila to the entire archipelago. The rest of the proclamation was a classic example of colonialism in denial. While averring ‘that we come, not as invaders or conquerors, but as friends to protect the natives’ replacing ‘arbitrary rule’ with ‘the mild sway of justice’, the proclamation also clarified that all resistance would be met with ‘the strong arm of authority, to repress disturbance…’ (McKinley 1898). America would bestow ‘the full measure of individual rights and liberties which is the heritage of free peoples’ (McKinley 1898) by indefinitely dominating the Philippines, by force if necessary. Some notable Anti-Imperialist commentators were derisive but most editorials commended the proclamation’s ‘civilising’ missionary message (Zwick). Initially General Otis, who succeeded Merrit, sought to avoid premature hostilities by circulating an edited version of the proclamation to the Filipinos with the references to American sovereignty deleted. This backfired badly when another American commander, unaware of the censorship, distributed the unexpurgated text. When the revolutionaries received this doublethink document they were outraged (Miller 1982, 52).

In defiance, the Revolutionary Government convened a Constitutional Convention at Malolos in January 1899, electing Aguinaldo as President and inaugurating the first Philippine Republic. This move would be to no avail. On 4 February US troops patrolling disputed territory shot unarmed Filipino sentries, provoking the skirmish that would justify an all-out attack (Tebbel 1996, 331). Congress was misled by the administration who claimed that the ‘insurgents’ had started the conflict (Vaughan 1996). America would bestow ‘the full measure of individual rights and liberties which is the heritage of free peoples’ (McKinley 1898) by indefinitely dominating the Philippines, by force if necessary. Some notable Anti-Imperialist commentators were derisive but most editorials commended the proclamation’s ‘civilising’ missionary message (Zwick). Initially General Otis, who succeeded Merrit, sought to avoid premature hostilities by circulating an edited version of the proclamation to the Filipinos with the references to American sovereignty deleted. This backfired badly when another American commander, unaware of the censorship, distributed the unexpurgated text. When the revolutionaries received this doublethink document they were outraged (Miller 1982, 52).

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**US troops patrolling disputed territory shot unarmed Filipino sentries, provoking the skirmish that would justify an all-out attack.**

The superior firepower of the American assault decimated Aguinaldo’s regular army. On the first day the Filipinos suffered 3,000 deaths; the Americans lost sixty (Miller 1982, 68). This bloodbath was presented in most American newspapers as a necessary evil consistent with the civilising goals of Benevolent Assimilation. The Chicago Times-Herald editorial, for example, sought to persuade its readers that:

The slaughter at Manila was necessary, but not glorious. The entire American population justifies the conduct of its army at Manila because only by a crushing repulse of the Filipinos could our position be made secure... We are... the trustees of civilization and peace throughout the islands (Vaughan 1994).

Aguinaldo was forced to retreat northward before the American advance and within a year conventional warfare was abandoned in favour of guerilla tactics. Early American military successes led to optimistic journalistic projections that the ‘insurrection’ would soon be over. This optimism was bolstered by the concerted propaganda campaign of Governor-General Otis who claimed that Aguinaldo was nothing more than an opportunist ‘adventurer’ or ‘tribal chieftain’ without popular support, and that the majority of Filipinos welcomed the benefits of American rule. Any journalists who sought to cover the other side were promptly expelled (Miller 1982, 93). Otis appreciated the need to win the information war on the home front and his propaganda techniques anticipated methods to be deployed in future wars. In 1899 there was no department or team of specialists available to write his material so he personally issued daily press releases exaggerating military successes. Each minor sortie was pitched to the press with great fanfare as delivering the ‘final stroke’. All failures were covered up or reconfigured into partial successes and there were also horrific accounts of enemy atrocities (Miller 1982, 73). General Joseph Wheeler devised daily stories about ‘Fiendish Filipinos’ or Aguinaldo’s ‘Dusky Demons’ who had no respect for ‘civilized warfare’ (Miller 1982, 93). Wheeler even claimed that the Filipinos contrived the mutilation of their own dead, burnt villages to the ground and killed women and children so as to make it appear that Americans had committed these atrocities.

Towards the end of 1899, as American forces became bogged down in the bloody quagmire of guerilla warfare, Otis’s upbeat and exaggerated claims and his heavy-handed censorship drew criticism even from the pro-imperialist press. The general seemed to believe his own propaganda that the war was practically over and refused to request desperately needed reinforcements. With the presidential elections approaching loyal Republican editors advised McKinley that Otis must go if the war was to be won (Miller 1982, 99). He went voluntarily in April 1900. The administration sought to counter doubts about the war by feting the ‘conquering hero’ with nationwide
receptions and gala celebrations. The public, it seems, was in need of a hero and flocked to applaud his triumphs. Otis played the part with suitable pomp and circumstance, but persisted in making embarrassing claims about the war being over. His successor, General Arthur MacArthur, soon contradicted him by calling for more troops. The total number of occupation soldiers would reach 126,000 before the country was subdued (Diokno 1980).

Contrary to military propaganda, the vast majority of Filipinos were in favour of keeping their independence. Even when Aguinaldo was captured in March 1901 and swore allegiance to the United States, fierce fighting continued despite enormous costs to the civilian population. While the tide of struggle was eventually suppressed and President Roosevelt declared the ‘insurrection’ officially over on 4 July 1902, armed resistance kept occurring in differing locations until 1907. It would flare up again periodically until 1913, at which time the election of Democrat president, Woodrow Wilson, meant that Philippine independence could be brought to the bargaining table, although full sovereignty was not granted until 1946 (Constantino 1975, 247).

De-Humanising The Filipino ‘Other’

It is a truism that, in war, governments will dehumanise the enemy to justify killing. In the Philippine–American War, widespread Anglo-Saxon chauvinism and racism amongst the American populace and its military, provided fertile ground for de-humanising the new Filipino ‘other’, about whom they knew very little except that they were brown in appearance. It was this feature that led the future Philippine governor and US president, William Taft, to refer to the Filipino paternally as America’s ‘little brown brother’ (Tebbel 1996, 341). Abolitionist sentiments were strong in Republican circles, so overtly racist views were not part of the administration’s official policy; nevertheless racialisation was embedded in military and public discourse on the American–Filipino relationship.

A survey of American press coverage of the war identified several themes in the racialisation of Filipinos across a wide range of publications (Vaughan 1994). In 1898 the popular Munsey’s Magazine was typical in describing the Filipino as relatively low on the ‘scale of civilisation’ (Vaughan 1994). Some reports and cartoons depicted Filipinos as black natives, identifying them with African-Americans in readers’ minds, but this was not as common as the ‘Indian’ stereotype. Many newspapers compared Filipinos to Native Americans, about whom most of their readership held fearful stereotypes; they consequently transferred those feelings onto the Filipinos. This conflation of images was particularly useful once the fighting broke out, giving rise to headlines like the San Francisco Call’s ‘Success of the Moment Against Filipino Braves’ (Miller 1982, 71). In the 1900 presidential campaign, Theodore Roosevelt would often compare the Filipino rebels with the ‘cruel and fierce’ Apache warriors of yesteryear (Miller 1982, 152).

Another common stereotype represented the Filipino as an ignorant or somewhat petulant child in need of America’s stern but benign tutelage. This image found its way into many cartoons and comics of the period. Even the liberal journal Nation, in June 1898, described Filipinos as ‘big children, who must be treated as little ones’ (Vaughan 1994). This widespread image of the Filipino as childlike, immature and in need of American education persisted up until independence. It was exemplified in Edward Dmytrik’s World War II propaganda film Back to Bataan (1945), where the Filipino-boy character, Maximo, cannot yet spell liberty but learns its meaning by sacrificing himself to save an American commander (played by John Wayne).

The adult-child metaphor was suspended when the guerrilla war dragged on and stories of American victories gave way to those of frustrated soldiers harried and ambushed by a ‘cowardly’ enemy. At these times, the image of the Filipino as petulant child gave way to that of an ungrateful, treacherous and uncivilised savage. Such depictions provided the moral ammunition necessary for savage reprisals (Vaughan 1994).

Rationalising Military Atrocities

The disparity in casualties continued: by the end of 1902 there were around 20,000 Filipino combatants killed in action compared to 4234 Americans (Diokno 1980). The number of civilians who died as a result of the campaign is difficult to determine but is somewhere between 250,000 and 600,000 (Constantino 1975, 251; Zinn in Schirmer 1972, ix). The reasons for such a massive death toll have to do with the popular nature of the revolutionary struggle and the tactics adopted to counter it by American commanders, who were under pressure from Washington to effect a swift and total victory. When Aguinaldo’s army dispersed, Filipino soldiers hid their weapons and slipped unnoticed into a supportive populace only to re-group and strike again when the enemy let down their guard. American reprisals for guerilla raids were routine by 1899 and grew...
increasingly brutal as the war wore on. Yet, when General MacArthur was queried by the Senate about his own statistics which showed a very low number of enemy wounded or taken prisoner, relative to those killed, he offered the rationale of his soldiers’ superior marksmanship (Storey and Codman 1902).

The atrocities of American troops included: the torture of suspected rebels; refusing to take prisoners; wholesale massacres of entire villages of men, women and children; and starvation resulting from relocating large populations. A variety of torture techniques were used to extract information from Filipino prisoners, the most notable of which was the so-called Water Cure. This involved forcibly pouring several gallons of water into the mouth of a pinioned victim until their stomach distended in excruciating pain. The water was then squeezed out, sometimes by a soldier jumping on their stomach (Constantino 1975, 248).

Anti-imperialist editors were initially reluctant to publish reports of American atrocities for lack of corroborating evidence. The standard Army response was to denounce such reports as false or greatly exaggerated but, in 1899, soldiers’ letters home began graphically detailing their ‘nigger fighting business’ (Miller 1982, 88) of burning villages, killing all inhabitants and torture. The army was ordered to investigate. Such investigations though, were perfunctory and cosmetic; their main purpose was to persuade the authors to retract. A sufficient number of retractions appeared in the Republican press to cast doubt on these accounts which many Americans did not wish to believe anyway. In cases where the evidence was irrefutable, a counter-tactic was to cite some respectable personage who would argue mitigating circumstances and trivialise the harm. After the Water Cure had been exposed in a pro-Republican journal, Outlook, for example, the Rev. Homer Stunz, in the Central Christian Advocate, defended the practice because ‘the victim has it in his own power to stop the process’ (1902; Miller 1982: 248) by confessing what he knew. Rev. Stunz seemed convinced that the procedure was entirely dependent on the obstinacy of the accused and, therefore, not really ‘torture’. American papers continued to carry reports of atrocities but these were swamped in many more stories about the deprivations of war and the barbarism of the enemy (Vaughan 1994). It was hard to break through this smoke screen of moral equivalence.

An infamous case of retribution occurred on the island of Samar in October 1901, where General Jacob Smith ordered his officers to treat all civilians not actively collaborating in the towns as the enemy. Samar, he said, was to be turned into a ‘howling wilderness’. Smith stipulated ‘I want no prisoners. I want you to kill and burn: the more you kill and burn the better you will please me’ (Constantino 1975, 249). This order, he further specified, was to apply to all inhabitants above the age of ten and led to a feverish series of massacres. When reports reached the American public in early 1902 about events in Samar, the standard cover-ups, generalities in reportage and rationalisations could not avert press scrutiny or calls for a public inquiry. President Roosevelt, in damage-control mode, authorised Smith’s court-martial promising to punish all perpetrators of barbarism. Both the press and public fell for this ploy and heaped praise on their ‘morally decisive’ president. The New York Times assured the people that its president was humane and would ‘not permit anything to be swept under the rug’ (Miller 1982, 237). Even the Anti-imperialist press was impressed by Roosevelt’s rhetoric but it was a case of talking tough while doing very little. Richard Nixon mimicked these tactics after My Lai in 1970 and we should not be surprised if George W. Bush adopts them in relation to the recent torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. General Smith was found guilty of allowing his men to act cruelly but his punishment was merely an admonition and early retirement (Tebbel 1996, 406).

Another outrage that emerged at the time of the court-martials was the ‘reconcentration’ strategy adopted by General Franklin Bell in Batangas and Laguna Provinces ‘to make the state of war as insupportable as possible’ for a civilian population harbouring guerillas (Tebbel 1996, 368). Bell ordered that the entire rural population be herded into designated zones within the purview of US garrisons. The people were directed to bring their belongings, livestock and as much food as they could carry into the zones. Bell later said this measure was ‘to protect the peace-loving villagers from guerilla depredations’ (Ileto 1999, 30). After 1 January 1902 everything—property, crops, food stores, animals and humans—outside the zones was subject to sweeping ‘search and destroy’ missions (Constantino 1975, 250; Miller 1982, 208). Bell labelled this process ‘pacification’, a name that survived to haunt America in Vietnam (Tebbel 1996, 368). The general also carefully instructed his men not to keep detailed records of these missions; he wanted deeds not words. Approximately one sixth of the population of Luzon died due to illness in the overcrowded camps and the famine induced by the agricultural devastation of pacification. American aid was sent to ameliorate the disaster but it took years for this once-prosperous region to recover (Constantino 1975, 250). Further to this, Bell explained that the loss of life by killing alone has been very great, but...not one [Filipino] has been slain except where his death has served a legitimate purpose of war’ (Miller 1982, 367)
The response of the US administration to all of the reported atrocities was consistent. On 17 February 1902, the Secretary of War, Elihu Root, stated: ‘The war in the Philippines has been conducted by the American army with scrupulous regard for the rules of civilized warfare, with careful and genuine consideration for the prisoner and the non-combatant, with self-restraint, and with humanity never surpassed’ (Storey and Codman 1902). News of the concentration camps and ‘search and destroy’ missions reached the United States, creating widespread shock. Americans had been appalled by reports of Spanish ‘reconcentrado’ camps used against Cuban revolutionaries in 1897; indeed the reports provided justification for going to war with Spain. Anti-imperialists were quick to make the equation between what American forces were doing and the Spanish record in Cuba. This comparison drew denunciations from the Expansionist press. The Anti-imperialists, however, on the crest of public opinion forced a Senate inquiry into the reported atrocities but the Republican majority ensured that it would be in closed sessions and limited the witnesses. The combined effect of the Senate hearings and court-martial revelations did lead to some temporary contrition on the part of the Expansionist press but the public was tiring of the issue. The occupation of the Philippines was now a fait accompli and since the 1900 election the pro-imperialists were securely in power (Miller 1982, 245). Roosevelt simply weathered the storm by repeating that firm action had been taken and that the atrocities were an aberration committed by a small minority who had succumbed to the temptation to retaliate against ‘the fearful cruelties of a savage foe’ (Storey and Codman 1902). By May 1902 the pro-imperialist editors were gradually reasserting their previous stands justifying the war to a relatively prosperous, complacent and forgetful public. As time went on they would soon forget this costly and unpleasant ‘insurrection’ which was never declared a ‘war’.

**News of the concentration camps reached the United States, creating widespread shock.**

Contesting Historical Erasure And Imperial Amnesia

An English journalist present at Manila in 1898 observed sardonically ‘the Filipino’s are insurgent, although they never have been subjected to the Yankee domination which they are fighting and, therefore, are no more insurgents than were the Spaniards’ (Miller 1982, 266). The designation ‘insurrection’ was transparently designed to bolster the contested US claim to sovereignty and erase from history the Filipino struggle for independence.

Nowhere was the lasting success of propaganda more evident than in the fact that the Philippines ‘insurrection’ was not officially recognised as a war in the United States; in 1999, the centenary of the first Philippine Republic and the American invasion, the United States Library of Congress revised its classification to ‘Philippine–American War’ (Zwick 1998). The work of countless Filipino activists and Anti-imperialists finally revised a significant official misnomer. This symbolic concession, however, is unlikely to be adopted by the current US Administration as it seeks to re-make history in accord with its strategic and economic interests. It too, is employing propaganda to achieve its objectives. Like its Republican Expansionist predecessors of 1898, the Bush Administration must do this in a manner that makes its objectives appear compatible with America’s shifting and sometimes incongruous self-interpretations of revolutionary self-determination, divine mission and colonial innocence. Effectively sustaining these significations helps maintain public support and quells doubt. By failing to mention the Philippine–American War in his speech to the Philippine Congress last October, President Bush, clearly demonstrated that denying colonialism, while building an empire, remains an integral part of this administration’s propaganda repertoire.

**References**


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