

Making War in Asia—in 1900

By STUART CREIGHTON MILLER

Seven years ago, the United States fought a protracted and bloody war of counterinsurgency in the Philippines. Circumstantial evidence suggests the possibility that Americans initiated the fighting in 1899, only two days before the Senate was to ratify the treaty with Spain, in order to stampede recalcitrant legislators who were balking over the controversial provision to annex the Philippines.

Once the fighting erupted outside Manila, Maj. Gen. Elwell S. Otis assured the American public that the Filipino nationalist forces of Emilio Aguinaldo would be wiped out in a matter of weeks, a sanguine prediction he continually reiterated with each demand for more troops. Newspapers openly accused Otis of inflating enemy body counts while concealing American losses. The general returned a hero to Washington in 1900, and all doubts were washed away in a sea of toasts and patriotic testimony. Once home, Otis exchanged his sword for a pen with which to attack the peace movement for encouraging the Filipinos to continue fighting; long after they were obviously defeated.

The highly respected Republican senator from Massachusetts, George

F. Hoar, became the leading dove, and was in the awkward position of challenging the legality of a war sponsored by his own party. Other distinguished Americans joined him, and university campuses from Ann Arbor to Cambridge hosted peace rallies at which this "inhuman war of extermination" was denounced by professors, who evoked public cries of "treason" for describing the Stars and Stripes as "an emblem of tyranny and butchery in the Philippines."

In spite of the Army's heavy handed attempts at censorship, correspondents were able to corroborate suppressed rumors of American atrocities in the Philippines: civilians were being slaughtered, herded into concentration camps, tortured to extract information and confessions, and shot as hostages. As frustration mounted in our generals, they began to repeat the tragic errors of their Spanish predecessors. When denial was no longer viable, the atrocities were attributed to our native allies, the Macabebes, a despised group who once served Spain. Euphemisms were invented to mitigate the practices: "relocation camps of instruction and sanitation" were designed to protect the natives from "Aguinaldo's enslavement." Hence the "water cure," a favorite means of

torture that often proved fatal, was never used, sometimes resorted to by our native allies, or was described as "merely an unpleasant experience" for the victim. But first prize must go to President McKinley who described the process of subjugating the Filipinos as "benign assimilation."

As the credibility gap widened, unorthodox tactics were justified on the grounds that the insurgents were not revolutionaries, but "bandits" who wore no distinguishing uniforms and blended into the peasantry after ambushing and bobby trapping our troops. For our generals, who cut their military teeth on Indian wars, the ultimate justification was racism. As biologically inferior and treacherous savages, the Filipinos did not rate conventional modes of warfare. Maj. Gen. Adna R. Chaffee cautioned reporters not to wax sentimental over the shooting of a few "goo goos," as our troops called the natives.

A government attempt to demonstrate that flagrant violations did not go unpunished backfired when it was learned that the murder of a Filipino cost one officer a modest fine and the loss of thirty-five places on the promotion list. The sensational atrocity trial of a Marine major hurt the Administration more when the defense con-

tended that he was simply following Brig. Gen. Jacob H. Smith's orders to take no prisoners, shoot all males over the age of ten, and make the island of Samar "a howling wilderness" in retaliation for the bloody ambush of an American company. Smith's subsequent court-martial led to a reprimand and early retirement for him and for the Army's Chief of Staff.

By 1902 Americans had had their fill of atrocities and were eager to sweep the dirt under the rug. The New York Times thanked Harper's for "sanely" pointing out that the use of torture and the shooting of hostages were humane practices in that they shortened the war and saved lives. Teddy Roosevelt still insisted that Americans were fighting in the Philippines "for the triumph of civilization over forces which stand for the black chaos of savagery and barbarism."

The heavy cost of the war—in lives, emotional and political divisiveness and a tarnished national honor—should have sobered America sufficiently to question permanently the efficacy of military intervention to frustrate nationalistic aspirations.

Stuart Creighton Miller is associate professor of social science at San Francisco State College.

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"KILL EVERY ONE OVER TEN."

...GEN. JACOB H. SMITH.

