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America's Next Top Model: The Philippines and the U.S. Empire¹

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There are various benefits that hegemonic powers hope to get from dominating others. Sometimes the hegemon can obtain economic benefit, enhancing the profits of its corporations. Sometimes the hegemon acquires strategic benefit, with military bases or more disguised visiting forces agreements. Sometimes the hegemon gets political compliance, with obedient votes at the United Nations or other international fora.

But one other key benefit that a dominant power can receive from a subordinate state is that the latter can serve as a model to the world of the wondrous consequences of subordination. For more than a century the Philippines has served as a model for United States policymakers and pundits. This doesn't mean that Washington had no economic, strategic, or political interests in the Philippines -- it certainly did. But in addition to these standard imperial advantages, the United States had the further advantage of being able to trumpet the Philippine case as a model for the rest of the world. Indeed, the Philippines has been America's top model.

Like runway models, international models are often cosmetic creations, more illusion than reality. But this doesn't make them any less valuable as models; in fact, this may make them all the more desirable to supporters of the American empire.

Let me examine some of the uses of the Philippine model, focusing on different periods of Philippine history. I begin with the model of 1898.

Conquest

Three years ago, President Bush traveled to the Philippines and addressed the Philippine Congress. His speech met his usual high standards for accuracy, declaring, for example, that "Since the liberation of Iraq, we have discovered Saddam's clandestine laboratories suitable for biological and chemical weapons research, ...his elaborate campaign to hide his illegal weapons programs. We've shut down terror camps, denied terrorists a sanctuary."²

Bush told the assembled legislators that in the 107 years since Jose Rizal's "heroic death, Filipinos have fought for justice, you have sacrificed for democracy -- you have earned your freedom." "Together," said Bush, "our soldiers liberated the Philippines from colonial rule."³

Well, not quite. U.S. and Filipino troops defeated Spanish colonialism, but the United States then proceeded to impose its own colonialism on the Philippines. White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan explained to reporters that it was Rizal's "martyrdom that inspired the country. And later, revolution broke out and Asia soon had its first independent republic."⁴ That's true, but what McClellan left out was that that first independent republic was stillborn, crushed at birth by the United States. So while Filipinos established the first independent republic in Asia, the

United States fought the first counter-insurgency war in Asia designed to thwart Asian self-determination.

And that counter-insurgency war was -- like all counter-insurgency wars -- a brutal affair, with horrendous human costs for the Philippines. It's not surprising that contemporary cheerleaders for imperialism, like Max Boot, think the Philippine-American war of a century ago provides a good model for Iraq today. That war, Boot wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed,⁵ cost the lives of some 200,000 Filipino civilians, but it "is a useful reminder that Americans have a long history of fighting guerrillas -- and usually prevailing, though seldom quickly or easily." (We might note, that if a recent report in the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, is accurate, the civilian toll in Iraq is already three times Boot's figure for the Philippines.⁶ But as a fraction of the total population, the Philippine war was bloodier -- at least so far.)

But it's not just neocons like Boot who see the Philippine-American war as a model for Iraq today. Thomas E. Ricks, a Pulitzer-prize winner and Pentagon correspondent for the *Washington Post*, has recently written a damning account of U.S. military policy in Iraq entitled *Fiasco*.⁷ Despite his criticisms of U.S. policy, Ricks rejects the idea of withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq. Instead he presents what he calls "The Best Case Scenario: The Philippines, 1899-1946."

"The analogy here is to the American war in the Philippines at the end of the nineteenth century. That episode began badly in 1899...And when U.S. troops proved poorly prepared, and some reacted with brutality, the American public was dismayed."

Note how the responsibility for atrocities is attributed to poor troop preparation. Ricks never seems to realize that a national policy of colonization presupposes treating the colonized people as inferiors, which leads inevitably to racism and atrocities. In the same way, Ricks attributes the U.S. fiasco in Iraq to bumbling incompetence, never asking whether a policy of deceit and domination inevitably engenders opposition. But let's continue with Ricks's comments on the Philippine-American war:

"But by late 1900, the U.S. had begun to adjust."

The implication here is that there were early atrocities and then the U.S. learned the error of its ways. But on the contrary, the most brutal campaigns of the war were at the end, in Batangas and Samar (not to mention subsequent gruesome campaigns against the Muslims in the southern Philippines).

"By 1902 the war was over, but U.S. forces remained in the country for decades," writes Ricks and he quotes Brian Linn that this was "'the most successful counterinsurgency campaign in U.S. history.'" Linn has written a widely acclaimed military history of the Philippine-American war⁸ that, remarkably, in over 400 pages of detail never ventures an estimate of the civilian death toll in the conflict, something you'd think would have some bearing on how successful we judge the counterinsurgency campaign to have been.

So, with this sanitized version of the Philippine-American war as his model, Ricks optimistically hopes for similar success in Iraq, which "really means staying in Iraq for years."

Almost all historians of the Philippine-American war acknowledge that the Samar campaign led by General Jake Smith (whose mission was to turn the island into a "howling wilderness")⁹ was incredibly barbaric. Another historian whose work has been much praised, John Morgan Gates,¹⁰ suggests that the U.S. record in the war not be judged by Smith's campaign in Samar, but by J. Franklin Bell's war effort in Batangas. Bell's campaign, says Gates, was "a credit to the American army," "a masterpiece of counter-guerrilla warfare" (p. 263) and "all that Smith's work on Samar should have been and was not" (256-57). It was recognized by "both civil and military officials in the Philippines" that "Bell's campaign in Batangas represented pacification in its most perfected form" (288). Where Smith was court-martialed for his behavior in Samar (though only receiving an admonishment as punishment), Bell was congratulated by President Roosevelt for his campaigns in southern Luzon and later promoted by Roosevelt to Army Chief of Staff.¹¹ In short, Bell was the U.S. military's top model.

So let's look at this model of American military leadership. Bell introduced the policy of "reconcentration" in the province -- the same policy that the Spanish had used, eliciting humanitarian revulsion. Essentially the population was forced into overcrowded and unsanitary stockades and everyone and everything outside was fair game. Bell's orders to his commanders¹² gives some sense of what his policy entailed:

"It is an inevitable consequence of war that the innocent must generally suffer with the guilty," said Bell. "Natural and commendable sympathy for suffering and loss" should "take a place subordinate to the doing of whatever may be necessary to bring a people who have not as yet felt the distressing effect of war to a realizing sense of the advantages of peace." Regarding civilians: "neutrality should not be tolerated." Every person "should either be an active friend or be classed as an enemy." (So George Bush wasn't the first.) Town officials suspected of aiding the enemy "may be impressed as guides" and made to march "on foot daily at the head of columns or detachments until they have had a drastic lesson." Bell acknowledged that "with very few exceptions, practically the entire population has been hostile to us at heart," and he called for "firm and relentless repressive action" as the only way to teach these people "the necessity for submission to the legally constituted authority." Everyone was required to respect the American flag and was no longer to pass it by with "sullen disdain."

Somehow, this doesn't seem like a model of how to promote self-determination.

Independence

A second period in Philippine history that has often been proclaimed a model begins in 1946, with formal independence.

In his October 2003 speech to the Philippine Congress, President Bush proclaimed:

"Democracy always has skeptics. Some say the culture of the Middle East will not sustain the institutions of democracy. The same doubts were once expressed about the culture of Asia. These doubts were proven wrong nearly six decades ago, when the Republic of the Philippines became the first democratic nation in Asia."¹³

There were indeed doubts expressed about Philippine democracy in 1946, but not about the deep desire of Filipinos for democracy. That was clear. What raised doubts was the commitment to democracy of the Philippine oligarchy -- and of the United States government which backed the oligarchy.

In 1946, Washington wanted the Philippines Congress to amend the Philippine Constitution to give U.S. investors special rights in the Philippines. Since the opposition party in the legislature had enough votes to block passage of the amendment, the Philippine President and his supporters expelled eight leftist members of the House of Representatives and three members of the Senate, which was just enough to get the amendment through.¹⁴ The amendment was then submitted to voters in a referendum. Given that the United States tied full payment of promised war damage funds to Philippine acceptance of the amendment, a yes vote should not have been surprising. But just to make sure, school teachers were prohibited from serving as poll watchers on the ground that they were biased against passage and polling places were moved out of the rural areas where radical peasants were strong. The "size of the majority," noted a U.S. official, "will be greatly increased with all able-bodied voters being counted whether they vote or not." The amendment was ratified.¹⁵

A few months later, the French minister in Siam told the U.S. ambassador there that goal of French policy in Laos and Cambodia was to grant these territories the same measure of independence as the U.S. granted to the Philippines. Washington cabled the U.S. ambassador to reply that the Philippines was totally independent and that any special arrangements -- economic ties or military facilities -- were based on the free decision of the Filipino people through plebiscite or their elected representatives.¹⁶

The French were not alone, however, in their failure to appreciate this point. The *Washington Post* noted editorially that the "basic fact to remember is that independence for the Philippines will not take them out of the orbit of our close and immediate interests any more than the independence of Cuba broke the intimate ties between that country and our own."¹⁷

The Huk Campaign

In the early 1950s, the Philippines fought a counter-insurgency war against the Huks. This too has been deemed a model.

For example, writing in 1967, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. criticized U.S. policy in Vietnam. He prayed that the U.S. would win, but was afraid that too many mistakes had already been made. According to Schlesinger, JFK had understood that the way to win in Vietnam was with effective counter-insurgency. "Magsaysay's campaign against the Hukbalahaps in the Philippines suggested the model: tough military action against the enemy, generous provisions for amnesty, real and sweeping social reform."¹⁸

So here again was the Philippine model, but once again a model based not on *actual* events, but on mythical events. Yes, the Huk insurgency was defeated in the early 1950s. But Schlesinger's

list of ingredients -- generous amnesty and real and sweeping reforms -- had nothing to do with it.

There was an amnesty proposal for the Huk guerrillas aired in the Philippine Congress in 1952. However, the Philippine military and the U.S. military advisors who essentially directed the Philippine military opposed the proposal, and the proposal died.¹⁹ Earlier, the U.S. military advisors had gotten the Philippine president to suspend the writ of habeas corpus; when it was restored two years later, more than 1,000 people were being held without charge. U.S. officials also advised Philippine military intelligence to set up searching and screening campaigns over cordoned areas suspected of harboring Huks; under this program 15,000 people were arrested in the first half of 1951 alone.²⁰

Humane treatment of Huks -- or the peasantry more generally -- was not the policy. Before 1950, a Philippine officer, Napoleon Valeriano, headed up a counter-insurgency group called Nenita that was described this way by his friend, U.S. CIA operative Edward Lansdale:

"These Filipinos run around Central Luzon with skull and crossbones flags flying from their jeeps and scout cars.... Cruelty and lust for murder are commonplace....

"They merely shoot their newly captured Huks, often in the back of the head. It is hard to prove sedition, the true crime, against these folks, so why waste time with legal proceedings."²¹

When Magsaysay assumed the Defense portfolio in September 1950, there was a reduction of random brutality against the civilian population, but as Michael McClintock, a leading specialist on counter-insurgency, has noted,

"the terror component of counterinsurgency and the organizational form of the Nenita group remained, but was applied in a more studied manner by [Valeriano's new group] and other special units after 1950. Nenita, moreover, rather than fading away in disgrace became a model for counterinsurgent organization in the 1960s."

This was the real Philippine model.

As for real and sweeping reforms, there were none. In 1952 an overzealous U.S. land reform advisor suggested a mild land redistribution program for the Philippines. The Speaker of the Philippine House of Representatives promptly denounced him as a Communist and the United States recalled him from Manila in August 1953. With the insurgency near defeat, Washington decided that only negligible reform was needed, but even this was not pursued. Not surprisingly, the land tenancy rate increased from 1948-60.²²

But if real reform was absent, cosmetic reform was not. Magsaysay established -- with great fanfare -- a program called EDCOR which promised "land for the landless," resettling tenant farmers and in particular ex-Huks in Mindanao. But in a country with 600,000 landless families fewer than 1,000 families were resettled and only 246 of these were ex-Huks.²³ In short, the lives of the people were impacted almost not at all.

Democracy and Martial Law

The Philippine political system from 1946 to 1972 was formally democratic. And, as the CIA noted, there was "a broad and ingrained popular acceptance of the idea of democratic values and practices and constitutional restraints."²⁴ Nevertheless, the political system didn't actually offer the average person an opportunity to affect government policy, instead providing a means for contending elite factions to rotate in and out of office. The two major political parties were indistinguishable in terms of ideology, and vote-buying, fraud, and violence by the private armies of the elite were the key determinants of electoral success. This didn't prevent U.S. politicians from frequently and effusively celebrating the Philippines as America's showcase of democracy.

But in the late 1960s, Philippine democracy was beginning to become real: organizations of students, peasants, and workers began to have some impact on the political system. This meant genuine challenges to the status quo were emerging, including to the U.S. military bases and to U.S. corporations. And therefore, U.S. officials and U.S. investors no longer considered Philippine democracy a model.

Instead, they backed Ferdinand Marcos when he declared martial law, arrested his political opponents, closed own Congress, muzzled the press, and ruled by decree. "Democracy is not the most important issue for U.S. foreign policy," a State Department official told Raymond Bonner. "The most important thing is the U.S. national interest, our security interest, our economic interest."²⁵ As a U.S. Congressional staff report noted, "in the Philippines, our own colonial step-child and 'showcase of democracy' in Asia, the United States appears to have adopted a new pragmatism...." U.S. officials, said the report, "appear prepared to accept that ... military bases and a familiar government in the Philippines are more important than the preservation of democratic institutions which were imperfect at best."²⁶

Washington offered no criticism of Marcos's declaration of martial law and stepped up its economic and military aid. And the American Chamber of Commerce in the Philippines sent Marcos a telegram wishing him "every success" in his "endeavors to restore peace and order, business confidence, economic growth and the well-being of the Filipino people and nation. We assure you of our confidence and cooperation in achieving these objectives."²⁷

Nine years later, Marcos, still in power, announced that he was lifting martial law. In fact, this was all cosmetic, because he retained all his martial law powers intact. U.S. vice president George H. W. Bush visited Manila and raised a toast to Marcos: "We love your adherence to democratic principle and to the democratic processes."²⁸

People Power

Seventeen years later, Bush junior addressed the Philippine Congress. "There is so much to be proud of in your beloved country: your commitments to democracy and peace, and your willingness to oppose terrorism and tyranny." Bush was right about Filipinos' impressive commitment to peace (they would soon withdraw their troops from Iraq). And he was right too

about their commitment to democracy and opposition to tyranny, as they demonstrated when they ousted the Marcos dictatorship in what was indeed a model to oppressed people everywhere. Where Bush was not right was in his claim that democracy is a shared conviction of Filipinos and the U.S. government.

For during the darkest days of the Marcos dictatorship, Washington backed the dictator. And though various U.S. officials now try to claim credit for what the Filipino people did, they do not share in the credit.

Take Paul Wolfowitz, who has been called by the *Washington Post* the Bush administration's "idealist-in-chief."²⁹ In 1983 as Assistant Secretary of State he briefed his new boss, George Shultz, on the situation in the Philippines in preparation for a visit with Marcos. Human rights were listed *last* on Wolfowitz's agenda. First was the desire "to provide visible evidence of the excellent state of U.S.-Philippine relations." Wolfowitz explained to Shultz:

"Our relationship with the Philippines is dominated by our interest in the maintenance of unhampered use of our military facilities at Subic and Clark. These facilities are essential for our strategic posture in the Far East as well as in the Indian Ocean areas. We also have important economic interests in the Philippines, and the U.S. remains the chief foreign investor there."³⁰

It was only after it was obvious that Marcos could not last that U.S. government officials began to pull away from him. Admiral William Crowe, the U.S. Pacific commander reported in 1984, as one close observer paraphrased it, "There is no hope for my naval base with that guy as president of that country. Choose between Marcos and that base."³¹ And over the next months, Marcos's position deteriorated further -- the Philippine economy went into a tailspin, the communist New People's Army grew exponentially -- and the dangers to U.S. interests grew.

At the end of 1985, Marcos declared a snap election for February and then proceeded to steal it in front of the whole world. At this point, Mr. Democracy, Paul Wolfowitz, urged caution before the U.S. consider terminating military aid to Marcos. As Evans and Novak reported, Wolfowitz and another conservative on the National Security Council were "determined not to be the architects of destabilization."³²

That very day, however, the split within the Philippine military took place and the end came quickly. The people of Manila -- for whom democracy actually meant something -- took to the streets and Reagan finally withdrew his support from Marcos, but clearly not out of any commitment to democracy on his part.

There is much that the Philippine people have done that merits our deep admiration: their long and continuing struggles for justice, democracy, and self-determination. These are models for us all. But the Philippine models that we hear most often proclaimed -- on how to wage counter-insurgency or how to accept subordinate status within the American empire -- are nothing but sorry attempts to prettify the most ugly of policies.

Notes

¹ Paper presented at a conference on "Empire and Resistance in United States-Philippines Relations: A Symposium," UCLA, Los Angeles, Dec. 2, 2006, in honor of Daniel Boone Schirmer. Boone was a great believer in the importance of studying the past in order to learn important lessons for the present, and it is in that spirit that this paper was written.

² George W. Bush, October 18, 2003, Remarks by the President to the Philippine Congress. Available online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/10/20031018-12.html>.

³ Bush is referring to the turn of the century here, not the defeat of the Japanese occupation, which he addresses in the subsequent sentence: "Together we rescued the islands from invasion and occupation."

⁴ Scott McClellan, Press Gaggle by Office of the Press Secretary, October 18, 2003. Available online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/10/20031018-8.html>.

⁵ "A Century of Small Wars Shows They Can Be Won," July 6, 2003, section IV, p. 10.

⁶ Gilbert Burnham, Riyadh Lafta, Shannon Doocy, Les Roberts, "Mortality after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: a cross-sectional cluster sample survey," *Lancet*, www.thelancet.com. Published online October 11, 2006.

⁷ Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, New York: Penguin, 2006, 433-34.

⁸ Brian McAllister Linn, *The Philippine War, 1899-1902*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000.

⁹ Linn, p. 396n23, notes that the phrase is usually attributed to Smith, but it may have been part of an order to Smith from the commanding officer in the Philippines, Gen. Adna Chaffee.

¹⁰ John Morgan Gates, *Schoolbooks and Krags: The United States Army in the Philippines, 1898-1902*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973.

¹¹ Stuart Creighton Miller, *"Benevolent Assimilation": The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899-1903*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, pp. 237, 260.

¹² Hearings before the Committee on the Philippines of the United States Senate in Relation to Affairs in the Philippine Islands, 1902, pp. 1607ff.

¹³ Bush, October 18, 2003, Remarks by the President to the Philippine Congress.

¹⁴ See Stephen Roskamm Shalom, *The United States and the Philippines: A Study of Neocolonialism*, Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1981, pp. 51-59. Actually, even with the expulsions, the amendment didn't have enough votes because the constitution required three quarters of *all* members of each house, not just of those voting.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁸ Schlesinger, *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy, 1941-1966*, New York: Fawcett, p. 37. On praying that the United States would be successful, see p. 57.

¹⁹ Shalom, *The United States and the Philippines*, p. 82.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

²¹ Cited in Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Counterterrorism, 1940-1990*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1992, available at <http://www.statecraft.org/index.html>.

²² Shalom, *The United States and the Philippines*, pp. 84-85.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

²⁴ CIA, *Philippines: General Survey*, National Intelligence Survey, NIS 99, July 1965, excerpted in Daniel B. Schirmer and Stephen Roskamm Shalom, eds., *The Philippines Reader*, Boston: South End Press, 1987, pp. 126-31.

²⁵ Raymond Bonner, *Waltzing with a Dictator*, updated edition, New York: Vintage, 1988, p. 133.

²⁶ Staff Report prepared for the use of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Korea and the Philippines: November 1972*, Feb. 18, 1973, excerpted in *The Philippines Reader*, p. 168.

²⁷ Printed in *The Philippines Reader*, p. 230.

²⁸ Toast by Vice President Bush, Manila, June 30, 1981, in U.S. Department of State, *American Foreign Policy: Current Documents, 1981*, Washington, DC: 1984, p. 1049.

²⁹ David Ignatius, "A War of Choice, And One Who Chose It," *Washington Post*, Nov. 2, 2003, p. B1.

³⁰ H. W. Brands, *Bound to Empire: The United States and the Philippines*, New York: Oxford, 1992, pp. 320-321.

³¹ Ibid., p. 329.

³² Bonner, pp. 437-38.