

Suppressed History: How the Filipino Revolt Paved the Way for Vietnam and Iraq

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America's wars of aggression against Viet Nam and Iraq might not have been waged if the U.S. government had not censored the true story of the widespread atrocities its troops committed in the Philippines at the end of the 19th Century.

America's invasion of the Philippines in 1898 in the Spanish-American War and the suppression of that nation's independence fighters afterwards resulted in the deaths of 4,374 U.S. troops — about as many as have been killed in Iraq. It also led to the deaths of 16,000 "guerrillas" (indigenous Filipino resistance fighters) and at least 20,000 civilians, writes Stephen Kinzer in his new history, "Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change From Hawaii to Iraq" (Times Books, Henry Holt and Co.)

The atrocities by U.S. forces, including a dreadful form of "waterboarding," were so ubiquitous that novelist Mark Twain suggested redesigning the American flag by painting the white stripes black and replacing the stars with the pirate skull and crossbones.

In a review of Kinzer's book, Dean Lawrence Velvel of the Massachusetts School of Law at Andover notes, "The disappearance of the episode from our history books paved the way, of course, for the imperialism, and the repetition of disaster, which reached their zeniths in the disasters of, first, Viet Nam, and now Iraq," Velvel writes. "It is another of the gross distortions of the history profession...."

As Kinzer writes, "The scandal over torture and murder in the Philippines, for example, might have led Americans to rethink their country's worldwide ambitions, but it did not. Instead, they came to accept the idea that their soldiers might have to commit atrocities in order to subdue insurgents and win wars."

Despite Washington's success in censoring atrocity reports during the first half of the war, reporters got the sordid details from returning veterans. As the Philadelphia Ledger reported in 1901: "Our men have been relentless; have killed to exterminate men, women, children, prisoners and captives, active insurgents and suspected people, from lads of ten and up, an idea prevailing that the Filipino, as such, was little better than a dog...Our soldiers have pumped salt water into men to 'make them talk,' have taken prisoner people who held up their hands and peacefully surrendered, and an hour later, without an atom of evidence to show that they were even insurrectos, stood them on a bridge and shot them down one by one..."

Velvel writes that America made war on Spain in 1898 as part of its search for influence. "Christianizing heathen nations, building a strong navy, establishing military bases around

the world, and bringing foreign governments under American control were never ends in themselves. They were ways for the United States to assure itself access to the markets, resources, and investment potential of distant lands.”

Although the U.S. economy grew tremendously during the last quarter of the 19th Century, Velvel continues, the fruits were distributed unevenly. “Conditions for most ordinary people were steadily deteriorating. By 1893, one of every six American workers was unemployed, and many of the rest lived on subsistence wages. Plummeting agricultural prices in the 1890s killed off a whole generation of small farmers” and “strikes and labor riots” broke out from New York to California.”

American leaders clamored for an imperialist policy on grounds the country needed to resolve its “glut” of overproduction when, in fact, Americans lacked the means to consume. “The surplus production from farms and factories could have been used to lift millions out of poverty, but this would have required a form of wealth redistribution that was repugnant to powerful Americans. Instead they looked abroad,” Velvel writes, adding that today’s “globalization” is imperialism by another name.

Velvel is cofounder of the Massachusetts School of Law at Andover, a law school purposefully dedicated to the education of minorities, immigrants, and students from working-class backgrounds who would otherwise not be able to embark on a legal career. The school is famed for providing an affordable, quality education and widely regarded as a leader in the reform movement to make legal education more practicable.

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