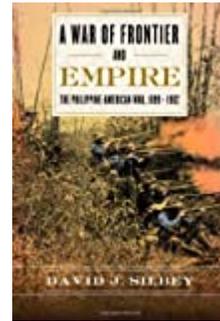




David J. Silbey. *A War of Frontier and Empire: The Philippine-American War, 1899-1902.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2007. 272 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-7187-6; \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-9661-9.



Reviewed by Christopher M. Nichols (Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia)

Published on H-SHGAPE (February, 2008)

Three Conflicts: The Philippine-American War

On the morning of September 28, 1901, Lt. Col. Eugenio Daza led a group of Philippine revolutionaries from their hiding places in a church inside an American army camp on the island of Samar. Armed mostly with bolos and machetes, the Filipino soldiers descended on a group of unsuspecting U.S. troops as they ate breakfast. "With the surprise, and at such close range, the insurgent disadvantage in weapons was neutralized, and bitter hand-to-hand combat broke out" (p. 191). U.S. forces were routed. Those that survived fled to the coast, climbing into small boats, and after several days at sea they made it to the nearest American outpost. Virtually every member of U.S. Infantry Company C had been wounded in the surprise attack, and forty-eight were killed, while approximately twenty-five to thirty Filipino soldiers died (p. 193).

David Silbey chronicles the dramatic events of the war such as these through a driving, concise narrative in *A War of Frontier and Empire: The Philippine-American War, 1899-1902*. The attack was one of the most sensational events of the conflict. For most Filipinos, it was a triumphant military victory. But for the American army,

the events on Samar were best understood as a massacre, which represented their worst single defeat of the war. The American response was swift and terrible, underscoring the inherent military and moral hazards of this sort of conflict. Gen. Jacob Hurd Smith razed the town of Balangiga where the attack happened. He then reportedly issued the much-maligned direction to make the interior of Samar a "howling wilderness" in retribution. These events have tended to give rise to an interpretation of the war as evidence of America's racist, violent, and imperial motivations. Silbey is careful to show that while there is some truth behind such assessments, the Samar atrocities should not be construed as evidence that only the United States committed wrong. Rather, Silbey correctly notes that there was unconscionable violence on all sides.

In recent years new studies of American empire and the conflict in the Philippines have flourished in part because of the pressing questions historians are asking about the U.S. role in the world. Noting the "urgency of the asking," from 1899 to 1902—and today—David Silbey has produced a good, brief survey of what he terms

“three separate and distinct conflicts” in the Philippines (pp. xi, xv). The question “What form was American entry into true global power to take?” lies at the heart of the way that Silbey adeptly surveys and synthesizes much of the work on the American-side of the conflict, including a limited but attentive effort to explore the Filipino perspective (p. xi).

Silbey’s book is an excellent introduction to the Philippine-American War that is primarily a military history and is best suited for students and for a popular audience. *A War of Frontier and Empire* is succinct, well written, and illustrated with maps and photos, although the maps could be more detailed and more plentiful to elucidate precise movements of people and armies.

Silbey argues that the conflict itself represents a transitional moment in American thinking about frontier and empire. He asserts that the Philippine-American War must be understood as occurring in three distinct periods and in terms of three discrete conflicts. First, in 1898, was the brief-lived alliance between U.S. and Filipino forces that fought and defeated Spain (not a major focus for Silbey). Then, in 1899, immediately on the heels of victory over the Spanish, tensions rose and shortly thereafter a “second” war began. It was a conventional conflict between American and Filipino troops in the field, largely restricted to central Luzon and the area around Manila. However, within one year it became clear the United States was likely to win most conventional engagements so, rather than surrender, Philippine revolutionary leader Emilio Aguinaldo chose to engage in what Silbey argues was a “third” war. This was a guerrilla conflict (combined with a series of pacification campaigns) between U.S. and Filipino irregular forces that spread across the archipelago from roughly late 1899 through 1902. Silbey’s thesis that there were “three conflicts” in the Philippines provides an excellent way to conceptualize and analyze the conflict (p. xv). It is also a great way to teach it and is just the sort of compact narrative that historians need to distill for lectures and for reading lists.

A War of Frontier and Empire is structured both chronologically and thematically. The first two chapters examine the precursor ideas and actions of the conflict: the election of William McKinley to the presidency in 1896 and the rise of American imperialism. The main theater of the Spanish-American war was the Caribbean, of course, but once Commodore George Dewey maneuvered his American Asiatic Squadron out from harbor in China, the importance of Pacific naval operations greatly increased. Under Dewey’s command the inexperienced

fleet shocked the world by defeating the seasoned Spanish armada at Manila Bay in only six hours, sinking seven ships without losing a single American sailor. President McKinley was stunned and yet not certain if the United States should push for full control of the Philippine island of Luzon, let alone the whole archipelago. Meanwhile, Aguinaldo’s revolutionary Filipino Army of Liberation consolidated their gains and conquered most of the island chain, forming an independent revolutionary government. As American troops disembarked their transport ships, Filipino revolutionary forces were about to capture Manila from the Spanish. The war against Spain ended quickly yet at the city’s perimeter a dangerous standoff ensued between Americans and Filipinos. This situation dragged on for months until, on February 4, 1899, a minor nighttime skirmish spiraled out of control and “both side’s forces were engaged in a chaotic fight in the darkness” (pp. 64-65). Thus began a second conventional war in which it quickly became clear that the Filipino *insurrectos*, having defeated the Spanish without virtually any help, were no match for U.S. troops.

In Silbey’s account, Aguinaldo comes off as increasingly weakened and naturally vacillating. Yet Silbey finds that he was perspicacious enough to see that for the revolution to continue it would require a major tactical transition. After a series of losing battles in October 1899, the conventional war was nearly over. Hotly pursued, Aguinaldo headed toward the mountains of Bayombong and made a heart-wrenching decision to “go guerilla” in December 1899. According to Silbey, the *insurrectos* “managed to reconstruct themselves organizationally and turn to an unconventional form of warfare that relied on ambush, concealment, and the avoidance of conventional set-piece battles” (p. 143). This new strategy prolonged the hostilities throughout 1900 and forced American troops, under the command of General Arthur MacArthur (Douglas’s father), to fight a grim kind of jungle warfare in which enemies, neutrals, and allies were difficult to distinguish. Aguinaldo hoped that the sustained war would become unpopular enough to help elect William Jennings Bryan, and his anti-imperialist bloc, which pledged to end the conflict. The resounding reelection of McKinley in November 1900 pushed Aguinaldo to despair and deeper into hiding. Within four months he was captured in a bold commando assault. While the fighting dragged on into 1902, “[i]n combination with the surrenders of other generals, [Aguinaldo’s] capture seemed a disastrous capstone” to the revolution (p. 178).

In his gripping narrative, Silbey shows the important role that race played in American descriptions of the war,

particularly the depictions of the revolutionaries. He also highlights the struggles of African American soldiers as they grappled with the racism of their comrades. “The difficulties were profound for African-American soldiers; their duty was to fight against an enemy with whom they had some sympathy, and live among a people becoming victims of the same ‘diabolical race hatred’ that African-Americans experienced at home” (p. 111). These racial realities were so potent that Filipino propaganda stressed the hypocrisy of the U.S. Army and urged its “darker” troops to switch sides, with little success.

Silbey concludes his book with a powerful argument that the war was pivotal for all the nations involved. It signaled the demise of the Spanish empire, “long past its days of glory” (p. 218). The conflict marked the “final war of a frontier ethos” that had driven Americans across their continent and represented “the first war of a global ethos” that would propel them across oceans (p. 218). For the Filipinos, the defeat “looked, in later decades, a lot like victory” because the three wars united the vast, disparate archipelago (p. 218). The islands “became, largely because of the shared experience of revolution, war, and insurgency, a self-conceived nation” (p. 218). In the end, Dewey’s naval victory and the haphazard events of war led to an American intervention that lasted almost half a century. The United States did not grant the Philippines their independence until 1946.

What *A War of Frontier and Empire* misses is common for any synthesis intended for a broad, non-specialist audience. There are a few conspicuous missed dates, such as the overthrow of Hawaii’s Queen Lili’oukalanani (which was in 1893, not 1883) (p. 17), and the misspellings of several names and places: for example, at various points Dagupan is termed “Pagupan,” Sorsogon is rendered as “Sargosan,” and Banaue becomes “Banane.” In addition, a few generals and others receive incorrect names, such as Gen. Henry Lawton, misnamed “William” (p. 84) and Gen. Mariano Trias, called “Antonio” (p. 131). For a book surveying a complex topic requiring translation of Spanish, Tagalog, and other languages into English, these are not major problems.[1]

The book provides a good, succinct summary and a fast-moving narrative. However, though well intentioned and well executed, *A War of Frontier and Empire* has one notable historiographical drawback. It does not quite recover from what is best characterized as the “usual problem” of America-centric historiography on the war in the Philippines. Silbey, like most historians well versed in this subject, himself notes his concern with

the problem of United States-centered, primarily English-language scholarship on the subject. Historians since the 1980s have done much to move beyond America-centric narratives of the conflict in the Philippines. Postcolonial studies and the rise of the transnational frame have now become preferred models for such scholarship and have opened new and insightful vistas on this history. Yet this quandary remains stubbornly persistent in many studies of the larger encounter in the Philippines. Perhaps it is a problem without a clear solution because most of the local Philippines archives were destroyed during WWII. The remaining sources, chiefly those from the turn of the century and the period of American rule, are bureaucratic English-language documents, most of which are located in the National Archives (Washington, D.C.). Nevertheless, excellent new histories, such as Brian Linn’s *The Philippine War, 1899-1902* (2002) and Paul Kramer’s *Blood of Empire* (2006), have begun to rectify this problem. These and other recent histories shed new light on the relationships and intersections of race, empire, nations, and peoples at war and in peace in the Philippines. With so much on-going work in this vibrant field and on a transnational model, it is likely that the next wave of scholarship will continue to chip away at the age-old historiographical problem of America-centeredness.[2]

It is impossible to read the current spate of scholarship on the Philippines and American empire without reference to the present. U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has again furnished a contemporary prism through which to view the complicated history of American expansionism and the challenges of the Philippine-American conflict. Silbey’s *A War of Frontier and Empire* does not directly address these concerns but they are very much evident in his absorbing account. Reflecting on the history of America’s “three wars” in the Philippines emphasizes the urgency of an enduring question: what is America’s proper role in the world?

Notes

[1]. With special attention to multi-linguistic sources, Philippine nationalism, and the revolution, see Julian Go et al., eds., *The American Colonial State in the Philippines: Global Perspectives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Angel Velasco Shaw and Luis H. Francia, eds., *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream, 1899-1999* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Augusto Espiritu, *Five Faces of Exile: The Nation and Filipino American Intellectuals* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Resil Mojares, *The War against the Americans: Resistance and Col-*

laboration in Cebu, 1899-1906 (Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1999).

[2]. See Brian McAllister Linn, *The Philippine War, 1899-1902* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002); and Linn, *The Philippine War and the U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippines, 1899-1902* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Paul Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). Some representative recent works guiding new historiographical directions include: Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United*

States, 1880-1917 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); and Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). See also Christopher Capozzola's review essay, "Empire as a Way of Life: Gender, Culture, and Power in New Histories of U.S. Imperialism," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1, no. 2 (2002): 364-374.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shgape>

Citation: Christopher M. Nichols. Review of Silbey, David J., *A War of Frontier and Empire: The Philippine-American War, 1899-1902*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. February, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14167>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.