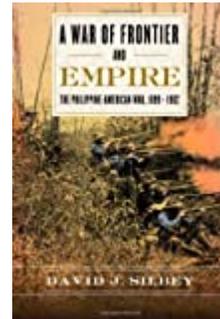


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David J. Silbey. *A War of Frontier and Empire: The Philippine-American War, 1899-1902.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2007. 272 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-7187-6; \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-9661-9.



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Scholar in the Sun

A War of Frontier and Empire is a short (219 pages of text) overview of the Philippine-American War. The author, David J. Silbey, a young historian at Alvernia College in Reading, Pennsylvania, argues that the conflict represented a culminating point for one of nineteenth-century America's dominant social movements—manifest destiny. By 1898 the North American continent appeared too confining for American ambitions. The creation of an overseas empire was one of the major consequences of the war with Spain, but at least some contemporaries saw other more appealing choices about how the United States might interact with the world in the dawning twentieth century. In the author's words, these conflicting currents of opinion made the United States's destiny in 1898 "less manifest and more ambiguous" (p. xiii). In slightly more than three years the conflict in the Philippines—particularly the last two years of guerrilla warfare—put paid to any hopes in American imperialist circles for further territorial expansion by shrinking popular support for such a policy. Somehow, this point eludes the author, despite the fact that he lays the groundwork for such an argument in his opening chapter.

The war became the defining national event for Filipinos, but only long after the fact. At the time, the Filipino war effort consisted of a shifting coalition of regions and groups. Although some Filipino historians have tried to read a collective national consciousness into the behavior of the revolutionaries (insurgents to the Spanish and the Americans), Silbey argues that most of them had no sense of a larger nation. Hailing for the most part from isolated villages, most of the Filipino soldiers gathered outside Manila had never before been more than twenty-five miles from home. Their primary allegiances were local and ethnic rather than national. Silbey extends this argument to explain the behavior of the Filipino army in combat. The glue that held that force together was the social ties that the soldiers brought with them from home into a military environment. The officer class was drawn from local notables while the soldiers came from the peasantry. Acts of good soldiery thus became ways that young men raised in a profoundly class-conscious and deferential society could demonstrate their loyalty to their patrons. Silbey goes even further to argue that the poor showing of the Filipinos in the first major engagement of the war, the bat-

tle of Manila (February 4-5, 1899), was due to the absence of officers, who were attending fiestas. Without their patrons available to see their behavior under fire, the peasant soldiers were inclined to decamp at critical moments in the fighting.

Silbey's linking of social structure, national consciousness (or lack thereof), and military performance is a stunning insight, one that opens up interesting lines for future research. Granted that the Filipinos came out of very isolated local backgrounds; yet we know that the experience of military service in the American Revolution, particularly in the Continental Army, was a profoundly nationalizing event for people from similarly isolated backgrounds.[1] Might something similar be occurring among the Filipinos? If so, might there be more than a germ of truth in the general thrust (if not all the particulars) of the arguments of the Filipino national historians whose work Silbey so easily dismisses? A survey of the type that Silbey has written cannot answer these questions, only raise them. That, Silbey has done in a very provocative fashion. On this issue, Silbey is probably more right than wrong, but a more definitive conclusion will require more work—if, that is, the surviving sources will permit the kind of detailed examination needed.

Admirable as Silbey's exposition of Filipino social structure is, he over relies on this analysis in explaining the Filipino army's battlefield performance. Community based military units have shown great *esprit de corps* and resilience in other wars (witness the volunteer regiments of the American Civil War), but those organizations drew upon existing military organization, tradition, and doctrine. At the sharp end, the hard military realities determine outcomes—decent equipment, adequate supply, proficiency at arms, realistic doctrine, hard training, and experienced noncommissioned and junior commissioned officers determine whether troops can hold their position or maneuver under fire. These were the attributes that the Filipino Army lacked and whose absence put it at a severe disadvantage when faced by a force that possessed such characteristics. Silbey is quite right to point out that many Filipino officers were absent from their units attending fiestas when fighting first broke out on the evening of February 4, 1899, but there is nothing to suggest that they were absent during the fighting on February 5, when the decisive American attack occurred—which rather undermines the author's argument.

Silbey, whose previous work has been in English social history, is obviously a quick study—perhaps too

quick. His research is grounded in published primary and secondary sources; although, he has made good use also of the Spanish-American War veterans' survey in manuscript conducted by the U.S. Army Military History Institute in the 1960s and 1970s. In the process, however, he overlooks several valuable works, including Edith Moses's charming *Unofficial Letters of an Officer's Wife* (1908); James A. Le Roy's scholarly but incomplete *The Americans in the Philippines: A History of the Conquest and First Years of Occupation, with an Introductory Account of the Spanish Rule* (2 vols., 1914); James H. Blount's polemic, that includes snippets of memoir and a fair-minded discussion of some of his opponents, *The American Occupation of the Philippines, 1898-1912* (1912); Heath Twichell's study of the founder of the Philippine Constabulary, *Allen: The Biography of an Army Officer, 1859-1930* (1974); and Ralph Minger's *William Howard Taft and United States Foreign Policy: The Apprenticeship Years, 1900-1908* (1975), among others. This weakness extends into his discussion of one of his main protagonists, the U.S. Army. He depends heavily on Edward M. Coffman's *The Old Army* (1986), a wonderful social history of the peacetime Army, but not sufficient for Silbey's purposes, which is to indicate the combat readiness of the Army on the eve of conflict. His fascination with social structure leads him to ignore doctrine and training. He would have done well to consult recent works by Perry Jamieson and Andrew Birtle. Silbey does use Russell Gilmore's important 1974 article on marksmanship training, but only to provide the technical specifications of the Krag-Jorgensen Rifle. Had he also examined Gilmore's dissertation of the same year, he might have better discerned the thrust of Gilmore's argument and recognized its importance for his purposes.[2]

Although the title and introduction emphasize themes from U.S. history, the internal logic is determined largely by the Filipino perspective. Thus, Silbey's argument that Filipino leader Emilio Aguinaldo was justifiably concerned that reverting to guerrilla warfare would lead to a loss of control of the revolution—which he equated with a loss of sovereignty—leads the author to focus on the conventional phase of the war, with only a passing nod to the over two years of guerrilla war that followed. This is a brilliant insight into Aguinaldo's thinking, but whether the author should use it to structure his book is another question. One way to think about the Philippine-American War (or the Philippine Insurrection) is to look on it as a struggle for sovereignty. Before the outbreak of the fighting, the Americans under the international legal conventions of the time en-

joyed *de jure* sovereignty over the entire archipelago but *de facto* sovereignty only over Manila, while the revolutionaries enjoyed *de facto* sovereignty over everything except Manila. The war determined who would exercise both over all. To win, the Filipinos had only not to lose, while the Americans actually had to achieve total victory. Given the disparities between the American and Filipino forces, there was no way that the Filipinos could reasonably anticipate not losing in conventional operations. So, for the U.S. high command, victory in the conventional phase was only the first and easiest stage. American forces had to prevail in counterinsurgency before achieving success. The great contribution of military historians of the past forty years has been to focus attention on this part of the war. By ignoring the importance of this phase, Silbey returns the historiography to the point it achieved with the publication of William T. Sexton's *Soldiers in the Sun* in 1939.

At the same time *A War of Frontier and Empire* enjoys the virtues of its defects. If the author puts too much emphasis on Filipino social structure, his description of that social structure and his linking of it to military organizations is very deft. Focusing on whole societies naturally leads him to examine domestic politics, policy formation, diplomacy, and their nexus with national strategy—and he does this very well for both the Filipinos and the Americans. If he overemphasizes the conventional phase, he has a very clear exposition of the competing campaign strategies of the two sides, including a good discussion of the logistics problem the Americans faced. In the process he continues the rehabilitation of Major General Elwell S. Otis's reputation as an insightful strategist with a hard-headed view of logistical

realities. At the same time, Silbey integrates and encapsulates the historiography of a number of topics into the text. Over and above all this, he writes well. He combines clarity of exposition with graceful prose.

A War of Frontier and Empire will not replace Brian Linn's *The Philippine War* (2000) as the standard account of the conflict. Because it is both simpler and shorter than Linn's study, *Frontier* is a good undergraduate text, provided one keeps the reservations expressed above in mind. At the same time, because the author engages many of the most important historiographic disputes and, because as a Europeanist he brings a fresh perspective to these disagreements, senior scholars will find much to ponder. Finally, as this review suggests, the volume encourages readers to consider carefully the most basic issues involved in the Philippine-American War. This is, perhaps, the ultimate accolade for any book.

Notes

[1]. See Robert K. Wright Jr. and Morris J. MacGregor Jr., *Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1992).

[2]. Perry D. Jamieson, *Crossing the Deadly Ground: United States Army Tactics, 1865-1899* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994); Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1860-1941* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1998); and Russell S. Gilmore, "The New Courage': Rifles and Soldier Individualism, 1876-1918," *Military Affairs* 40 (October 1976): 97-102; and "The Crack Shots and Patriots: The National Rifle Association and America's Military Sporting Tradition, 1871-1929" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1974).

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