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Philippine-American War

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Abstract

Whether a success or a failure, a counterinsurgency is always influenced by a mixture of politics, the media, and public opinion. The United States was involved in a successful counterinsurgency during 1898-1902. I will attempt to reveal how the mixture of politics, the media, and public opinion contributed to the counterinsurgency victory in the Philippine-American War, 1898-1902.

Background

Throughout the 19th Century the United States foreign policy was one of non-intervention in the political affairs of Asian and European governments. The United States did participate in trade and cultural exchange throughout the globe and evolved into a world power by the end of the 19th Century. She was not isolated; she just did not intervene in any foreign affairs that would lead to war. Generally, during the 19th Century, nations capable of trading and culturally sharing with others did so without getting involved in each other's political affairs. Towards the end of the 19th century, as the interests of nations extended beyond their homeland, leaders of European nations began to think of imperialism as acceptable to help further their national interests and better provide for the needs of their people (Raico, 1995). Spain is an example of a world power whose interests were widespread at this time in history.

The United States, as a world power, had economic and political interests beyond her borders. At this time, some United States government officials and American citizens began to change their thinking about foreign involvement. This fact was proven by the opposition President Grover Cleveland encountered when, in 1895, he declared neutrality concerning the Cubans revolt against Spanish rule. "He faced a small clique of powerful politicians and influential journalists who wanted to intervene in Cuba" (Mabry, US Intervention in Cuba, 1898, 2003). There was also another notable influence on the opinions of the Americans at large. Towards the end of the century, "Yellow Journalism, the sensationalism and often lies of the newspapers, particularly the Hearst and Pulitzer papers" (Mabry, United States Foreign Policy, 1890-1900, 2003), caused many American citizens to feel intervention was a duty and expansionism, or imperialism, was good for the United States.

President William McKinley was inaugurated on March 4, 1897. He, like his predecessor, President Cleveland, sought a peaceful solution to protect the stake that the United States had concerning the situation in Cuba. In spite of his desire for a non-war solution, because of a series of events, which included an explosion in Havana Harbor that sunk the USS Maine on February 15, 1898, President McKinley yielded to congressional and public pressure to go to war with Spain. The United States intervened in the Cuban revolt, sided with the rebels and their quest for independence, and defeated Spain in just a few short months. In this conflict, the Spanish-American War, Spain's 400 year rule as the world's dominant power in the seas ended. The Cubans gained their independence. In the resulting Treaty of Paris, agreed to on October 1, 1898, and ratified in 1899, the United States paid Spain and took possession of the colonies of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines.

While the Cubans were fighting in their homeland for independence from Spain, the Filipinos were doing likewise on the Philippine Islands. After the United States took possession of the Philippine Islands, it was determined that the Filipinos did not have the ability to protect their own interests as an independent nation. They were thought to be incapable of self-government. There was also the belief, that if given their independence, the Filipinos would be subjected to the will of an aggressor nation and the United States economic and political interests would suffer as a result. President McKinley decided that the United States would govern the Philippines until the Filipinos could be educated and taught to self-govern. This led to a continuation of the Filipino insurrection. In 1899, rather than Spain, the fighting was against the United States military. Guerilla warfare and a counterinsurgency operation soon followed.

The Philippine-American War

The United States military conducted one of its most successful counterinsurgency operations during 1899 thru 1902 in the Philippine-American War. The American people, aware of the human and economic costs of war, are always at careful watch over any hostile engagement. During this counterinsurgency, the American people allowed the many decisions and actions of government officials enough time to complete the counterinsurgency to victory. President McKinley and Congress, along with the military, were sensitive to circumstances that could possibly cause public concern. They avoided widespread public dissension to the counterinsurgency by making reasonable decisions and taking quick action to implement them. A better understanding of how the government was able to conduct this successful counterinsurgency without overbearing public dissension can be gained by answering a few questions and discussing a few facts related to its conduct. We will consider the following:

1. Why was the counterinsurgency needed?
2. What was President McKinley's political strategy?
3. What was the level of public awareness and how strong were the voices of various public opinions?
4. Did the President utilize any political technique or strategies with the media to maintain public support of the counterinsurgency?

The Need for a Counterinsurgency

Counterinsurgency operations against Filipino rebels became necessary in November 1899 because they had started using guerilla tactics. In 1898, the Filipinos were fighting against Spain as allies of the United States in the Spanish-American War. They had hoped the United States would help them win their Independence from Spain. The Filipino rebels experienced

success in conventional warfare while attacking Spanish garrisons. Later, the same tactics failed against the United States military. The Filipinos wanted self-rule and with the Americans establishing government of the Philippine Islands, the rebels' hopes for an immediately independent Philippine government dissolved. Emilio Aguinaldo, rebel leader, aspired to be president of the independent Philippine government. He and his followers did not give up their fight for independence. Their change to guerilla tactics caused the United States military to begin counterinsurgency operations.

President McKinley's Political Strategy

President McKinley had learned that Congress and the American people were in favor of expansion of United States interests abroad. This sentiment drove most of his decisions. He still maintained the desire to go about expansion peacefully and his policies and strategies were built around what we now consider American ideals. I'll mention just a few. He believed in being for the common citizen, that their opinions are meaningful, and that the voting public should be properly represented when decisions affecting them are made. He believed in promoting the economic welfare of the people. He believed that expansion was the way to fulfill these ideals. McKinley's expansionist vision was a complex blend of religious humanitarianism, economic internationalism and imperialism that developed through time and political practice (M'Baye, 1999). This blend, first and foremost, was cultivated in a way that was good for the people of the United States. The public recognized that it was genuine and this helped President McKinley maintain public support.

Public Awareness and Public Opinion

The newspapers and magazines of this period were the main source of information for the American public. Those who owned, wrote and edited the press copy that was published to the

masses were in support of expansionism and imperialism. Yellow journalism, the practice of shading, exaggerating, or fabricating reports of events, contributed to the public consensus that the war in the Philippines was worth the cost of lives and other resources. Newspapers and magazines would sometimes report war events, what some considered atrocities, exactly as they occurred. They would then follow up with an explanation as to why it was necessary for the United States military to take the extreme and violent action being reported. The reason for extreme and violent action was sometimes exaggerated or fabricated. Being reported as such, it was much easier for the public to accept the fact that it is sometimes necessary to take such action in war. Most printed media put emphasis on the possible benefits the Philippine Islands and their inhabitants would have for the American people (Vaughan, 1994).

Not all of the American public was in agreement with expansion. “On June 15, 1898, the Anti-imperialist league formed to fight U.S. annexation of the Philippines citing a variety of reasons ranging from the economic to the legal to the racial to the moral. It included among its members such notables as Andrew Carnegie, Mark Twain” (Library of Congress, 1998), and others. “Following the signing of the Treaty of Paris, the league began to decline and eventually disappeared” (Library of Congress, 1998). The disappearance of the Anti-imperialist league is testament as to how strongly most American citizens wanted expansionism to go forward.

Political Technique and Strategies with the Media

President McKinley first addressed the status of the United States presence in the Philippine Islands in his December 5, 1898, Second Annual Message to the American public. He informed the public that the United States military would occupy Manila at least until the disposition of the Philippines was determined upon conclusion of the peace treaty with Spain. Soon afterward the Treaty of Paris was ratified and Spain departed. In his annual messages in

December 1899 and 1900, and in his second inaugural address on March 4, 1901, President McKinley updated the public on the status of the United States military presence in the Philippines. He assured the public that we were maintaining action to achieve our original purpose and goals – to educate the Filipinos so they could one day become independent and be our partners in industry and trade in the Asian markets.

President McKinley used the media to get his message out to the public. He was the first president to use press conferences to get his message out and gain support. “His use of the telephone, the press, and publicity to conduct and manage war and political campaigns became staples of his successors. He invited the nation's press to regular briefings by him or his assistants” (Miller Center of Public Affairs, 2007). President McKinley was assassinated six months into his second term as President and was succeeded by Theodore Roosevelt.

End of the War

President Theodore Roosevelt declared the end of the Philippine-American War on July 4, 1902. The United States military counterinsurgency operation was successful. The military was given enough time to determine with whom to build relationships and with whom to fight. The political decisions were made for the people. The media agreed with the purpose of the action and thereby reported in a way that did not incite opposition to the war. The public was satisfied that the intent for going to war was to protect national interests and for the betterment of the Filipinos as well as the Americans. Through the trials, errors, and uncertainties of this war, the government, the media, and the people all shared the belief that the United States would prevail and that both the Filipinos and the Americans would be better off because of it.

It is important to note that the official end of the war was July 4, 1902. Although, pocketed resistance to American rule continued until 1913.

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