

The Failure and Success of the U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Campaigns in the Philippines in  
1902-1904 and 2002-2003

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In the years 1902-1904 the U.S Army was engaged in a conflict with insurgents in the Philippines. This insurgency arose, partly, in response to economic, political and cultural conditions that deprived the indigenous Philippine population of the means to exist in a manner that they perceived as appropriate for their way of life. In the years 2002-2003, the U.S. Army was once again engaged in a conflict with insurgents in the Philippines. Once again, this insurgency arose, partly, from the perceived belief of the indigenous population of the Philippines that the economic, political, and cultural conditions in the Philippines were not in accordance with their desired way of life. The Philippine insurgencies mentioned above illustrate the importance of the role of economics, politics, and culture in defeating insurgencies and quelling internal dissent. An indigenous population, content with its way of life, able to provide for itself by availing itself of an efficient economic system, able to express its political views in a workable political system, and able to define and adhere to a community culture in which its values are evident, is less-likely to mount and sustain an effective insurgency against the established government and the rule of law. Understanding this concept is an essential element in combating terrorism and insurgency. As the examples of the Philippine insurgency of 1902-1904 and 2002-2003 illustrate, in order to be successful at the strategic level, counterinsurgency campaigns must address and remedy, at the tactical level, the underlying economic, cultural, and political conditions that led to the insurgency.

In the years 1899-1902, the United States went to war against Spain to settle a number of disputes between to these two countries. One of the theaters of this war was the Philippine Islands which were a Spanish possession at the time. In this theater, the United States defeated Spain in a series of naval and ground engagements, and established American hegemony over the Philippine archipelago. Once they established themselves as the controlling authority in the Philippines, the U.S. was left to administer the disparate islands of this political entity. Over the course of the years 1902-1904, the U.S. came to understand the difficulties inherent in exercising authority over a distant land with economic, political, and cultural institutions and traditions different from its own; and the impact that the failure to address these differences would have on their ability to effectively administer the land.

Initially upon establishing its dominance on the islands of the Philippines, the U.S. Army organized itself to administer the territory it now controlled. The control that the American established was, in some cases, contrary to that the Filipinos themselves had for their country:

Although the Americans and Filipinos shared a common interest in defeating Spain, relations between the two allies deteriorated steadily... The most important reason was a fundamental difference in objectives. The goal of the (Filipinos) was immediate independence for the Philippines... the United States [desired] to retain the islands for itself. Thus, by late summer the two allies eyed each other warily.<sup>1</sup>

This system of organization envisioned by the Americans was one that placed control of the indigenous population above cooperation with it, and that placed the establishment of American administrative practices over recognition of indigenous institutions and traditions. As a result, a process of alienation took place in which the Filipino population came to recognize the American presence as detrimental to their existence and way of life. This alienation eventually led to conflict and insurgency; the discontent of the Filipino population manifested itself against the

American presence, and the Filipino population sought ways to combat the American presence and do away with its influence.

This discontent found its genesis in the initial engagement of the U.S. Army forces with the indigenous Philippine population. As they made their way through the Filipino countryside, the American Soldiers found allies and opponents. The allies worked with the American Soldiers, and supported their endeavors. The opponents suffered the loss of much of their belongings and property, including their homes and villages. Numerous examples of Army abuse of noncombatants could be seen in the way the U.S. Army Soldiers treated the Filipinos. In one particular instance, near the town of San Luis De Taal in December of 1901, American Soldiers and their supporters from the Pueblo of Bauan conducted a patrol in search of insurgents. On their patrol, “(the American Soldiers and their Filipino supporters) first looted and burned every shack in sight and shortly the ponies had a much heavier load than they started out with... what they could not carry away, they destroyed.”<sup>2</sup> These abuses deprived the native Filipino population of their ability to maintain their economic livelihood, exercise their political inclinations, and practice their cultural traditions.

The type of heavy-handed tactic used by the patrol to Bauan steeled the native Filipino population against the American presence in the Philippines. The original discontent engendered by these abuses led to organized resistance to the Americans. This organized resistance sought to maintain the Filipino way-of-life and prevent the U. S. Soldiers from imposing the American way of life on them. One expression of this Filipino way-of-life was found in the Moro population of Mindanao, one of the larger islands in the southern Philippines. The Moros were Malays who came to Mindanao in the fourteenth and fifteenth century and converted to Islam. There, they established a feudal society that maintained its autonomy throughout the centuries,

fighting off the incursions of other people of various religious and political affiliation. In so doing, they built a reputation for ferocity and intransience. Their cultural and social habits, especially piracy and slavery, were out of step with the developing habits of the European powers that were slowly making their way around the globe.<sup>3</sup> This Moro way-of-life, and the way-of-life of other Filipino cultures as well, was coming into direct conflict with the American presence in the Philippines, and their purpose in being there:

The business of the Moro leadership was war. Anyone who lived beyond (their borders)... was the enemy. War for the Moros was an indivisible blend of Allah's will, material gain, and personal prestige; it was a way of life which provided the warriors with women and slaves to support the tribe and with the psychic satisfaction of bloodshed and conquest... The European on Mindanao was feared and hated, feared only because of his modern firearms..., hated for his religion, appearance, manners, diseases, and interest in ending slavery, piracy, and polygamy. (The Moro) had no reason to assume that these new Europeans would be any less ruthless in ending the Moro way of life.<sup>4</sup>

This conflict of interest had at its foundation the economic, political, and cultural habits and traditions of each of the parties, and the stubbornness with which each party pursued its objectives indicated that there would be no swift or lasting peace until they were achieved.

By 1902, the U.S. Army came to understand that their ability to pacify the indigenous Philippine population was limited by its aggressive and abusive practices. The U.S. Army came to realize that in order to quell the insurgency and develop a Filipino society that would work with them and not against them; they needed to provide an economic, political, and cultural environment in which the population felt comfortable. Following a period of inconclusive maneuvering and attacking, Major Robert Lee Bullard arrived on the scene in the summer of 1902 and initiated a program of activity that was intended to bring peace and prosperity to the region. Instead of relying solely on aggressive and punitive tactics, MAJ Bullard sought to improve the Moro standard of living. In order to improve Moro economic opportunities, he

worked to provide an adequate road network in the area and enlist the Moro's labor in building it. He also attempted to learn the Moro language, studied its language, and read about its culture. He assisted the Moro during a cholera epidemic in the region, allowed them to be treated in an American hospital, and did not work to force the Moros to convert to Christianity. For awhile, MAJ Bullard's activity served to demonstrate how the addressing of the problems of the economic, political, and cultural elements of the Moro's society in a respectful and non-threatening way, allowed the Americans and the Moros to cooperate in the establishment of a peaceful Philippine community.<sup>5</sup> This example of the Moro rebellion in Mindanao, in the Philippines, from 1902-1904, and the efforts of the U.S. Army to pacify this insurrection, is an example of how a culturally distinct society, faced with particular economic, political and cultural challenges, resists an outside authority that seeks to impose its will on them. As this example also shows, it is only by working to solve the underlying economic, political, and cultural problems that caused the insurgency, in a respectful and cooperative manner, that a counterinsurgency can be effective.

To highlight the lesson of the Moro insurrection of 1902-1904, it is useful to look at a similar episode of counterinsurgency operations where the lessons of the past are put into practice. For this example, the Philippines once again are the point of focus. Following the terrorist attacks on the United States in September of 2001, the U.S. Army became engaged with a worldwide network of terrorist elements. In the ensuing struggle, one of the areas of operation for the Army was once again the southern Philippines; this time in an attempt to destroy the operational capability of the Al-Queda affiliated Abu Sayyaf Group.

In 2002-2003, the Abu Sayyef maintained its stronghold in the extreme southern areas of the Philippines, on the islands of Basilan and Jolo. On Basilan, as with their counterparts in the

Mindanao a century earlier, the insurgents of the Abu Sayyaf in 2002-2003 are culled from a population with significant economic, political, and cultural problems. Far removed from the center of Filipino society, the indigenous population on Basilan is economically poor, politically insignificant, and culturally alienated (as Muslims in a predominantly Christian nation. As such, one of their alternatives as recourse for an improved way-of-life is to join the insurgent group known as Abu Sayyaf:

Abu Sayyaf's strongest support was in the south and east of the island, where government services were, not surprisingly, the weakest. The islanders' biggest concerns were clean water, basic security, medical care, education, and good roads... [The island] had already had elections, many of them, which had achieved little for the average person... Abu Sayyaf activities had shut down the schools and hospitals, and the guerrillas had kidnapped and executed teachers and nurses.<sup>6</sup>

As with the Moros of a century earlier, the Abu Sayyaf sought to maintain a way-of-life conducive to their well-being at the expense of the greater indigenous population. They sought to subvert the rule of law in an otherwise lawful and democratic society for their own purposes.

In order to combat this insurgency, the U.S. Army in this instance used the lessons of the past in working to undermine the insurrectionist activities of the Abu Sayyaf. The American Soldiers on Basilan sought out the indigenous population on Basilan and surveyed them as to the root causes of the insurgency. Recognizing, that most of their concerns centered on the economic, political, and cultural shortcomings and disputes among the population, the American Soldiers sought to solve these points of contention. As with MAJ Bullard one hundred years earlier, the American Soldiers immersed themselves in the indigenous population of Basilan, and attempted to understand their perspective. In so doing they established a respectful and cooperative humanitarian effort that sought to correct the shortcomings in this Filipino society in a non-threatening way:

(The Army's mission) was to help Filipino troops kill or capture international terrorists. This was accomplished by orchestrating a humanitarian assistance campaign, which severed the link between the terrorists and the rest of the Muslim population: exactly what successful middle-level U.S. Commanders had done in the Philippines a hundred years before... 'we changed the way we were perceived... when we arrived on Basilan, Muslim kids made throat-slashing gestures at us. By the time we left, they were our friends.'<sup>7</sup>

The efforts of the American Soldiers in Basilan resulted in the construction of an effective infrastructure (piers, roads, airstrips, etc.), and the initiation of population well-being programs (health and dental care for children, digging of new water wells, etc.). As such, they address the underlying economic, political, and cultural concerns of the indigenous population.

The success of the U.S. Army in Basilan in the Philippines in 2002-2003 was due to the application of the lessons learned 100 years earlier in Mindanao in the Philippines. The recognition of, and the conscientious addressing of, the underlying root causes of insurgency, that is to say economic, political, and cultural dissatisfaction in a given society, are the key element in successful counterinsurgency campaign. As demonstrated in the 1902-1904 effort conducted against the Moro insurrection, an aggressive punitive campaign combating only the results of insurrection is destined to fail. Combating the root causes of an insurgency is the only effective way to overcome the debilitating effects of a ineffective social system.

The relative failure and success of the U. S. Army in battling the rebellions in the Philippines in 1902-1904 and 2002-2003 offers insights into the factors that allow for long-term strategic success against insurgencies worldwide. By recognizing the importance of economic, cultural, and political factors affecting a given society, and by working within those societies to address those factors, strategic success against insurgencies can be won.

## ENDNOTES

1. Richard W. Stewart (general editor), *The United States and the Forging of a Nation, 1775-1917 (American Military History, vol. I)*, Washington D.C.: Center for Military History (Department of the Army), 2005, p. 354.
2. John Chambers, et.al. (editors), *Major Problems in American Military History*, Florence: Wadsworth Publishing, 1998, p. 168.
3. Allan R. Millett, *The General: Robert L. Bullard and Officership in the United States Army, 1881-1925*, Abington: Greenwood Press, pp. 165-167.
4. Ibid., p. 167.
5. Ibid., pp. 171-172.
6. Robert D. Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts, with the Army Special Forces in the Philippines and Afghanistan – laboratories of counterinsurgency (Lesson 10 of Lesson H100, Module II, NRSMC-35)*, Ft. Bliss: Sergeants Major Academy, 2003, p. 4.
7. Ibid., p. 5.

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