

HIS12424 – AMERICA AND THE WORLD SINCE 1898 – FALL 2013

Obligatory Essay Assignment

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“Consider the U.S. conquest of the Philippines. Was this overseas colonial conquest more exceptional or more typical of the exercise of U.S. power in the world during the period between 1898 and 1945? Explain your view precisely and in detail.”

Argument

The American colonial conquest of the Philippines was an exceptional, not a typical, exercise of U.S. power between 1898 and 1945, provided that we include Guam in this analysis. The reasons for this judgment are simple: Because the Philippines and Guam are located in the South China Sea very close to the Eurasian landmass or hemisphere, the so-called "old world," and therefore too far from the Americas for potential statehood, their actual colonization by the United States is atypical of American conduct in this period. If the Philippines and Guam had been located in the very "backyard" of the United States, the analysis would have been different.

An Irresistible Prize

With the Spanish-American war, the United States flexed its muscles as a major world power for the first time, having positioned itself as a transcontinental nation controlling two significant coastlines through its westward expansion during the 19th century. For the context at hand, the most interesting aspect of this conflict was its extension not only beyond America's national borders on the Western Hemisphere but to an archipelago adjacent to an overseas continent. And this is the primary reason why America's Asian colonial conquest was historically unique. It was in discord with the ideology that evolved as Wilsonianism, the notion of national self-determination and so on, but when control of the Philippines was transferred from Spain to the United States at the Treaty of Paris in 1898, it proved to be an acquisition too tempting to resist – not only as a temporary arrangement but one lasting half a century.

It may be easy to argue that the conquest and subjugation of non-white peoples, whether they be Native Americans, Mexicans, or Filipinos, and the subsequent occupation and administrative dominance of their lands, are all part and parcel of the same pattern and that the colonization of the Philippines is typical of U.S. policy from the start. But in addition to the fact that the Philippines (along with Guam) is a long way from the Western Hemisphere (which makes it exceptional in itself), the element of colonialism proper must also be considered. The European empires had shown that colonialism is expensive; it proved difficult and often cumbersome to maintain, especially when there was a great geographical distance between the mother country

and its colonies. The U.S. aspired to build an empire, but this should be based upon a smarter model than its European predecessors. The goal was access to markets through a universal open door policy and through economic interdependence among nations. Establishing a colony on a foreign shore (or at least *near* a foreign shore) was contrary to the political guidelines being developed by the U.S., although such policies had not yet emerged at this tentative stage. America wanted spheres of influence, not remote regions where it would have to play nanny and bully forever, which was a pattern that the European powers had become embroiled in and contributed to their destruction.

One of the explanations for America's colonization of the Philippines may be that in the 1890s, almost two decades before the utterly destructive Great War which brought the European powers to its knees financially, followed by their colonial structures collapsing like houses of cards later on, the clear distinction between old-fashioned colonialism and what was to become the style of American global dominance had not yet surfaced. In other words, prior to Woodrow Wilson's presidency, the only model available for expansion of national power on the international scene was the traditional one exemplified by the British, Spanish and French empires. But the real reason why the United States became embroiled in dominating an Asian colony seems to be that the opportunity popped up as *an irresistible prize* during the Spanish-American war, in exchange for \$20 million.¹

Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas

Some of the possessions taken from Spain were located in America's so-called backyard (Latin America), which means that the exceptionalism we are attributing to the scenario in the Philippines is not relevant to the Western hemisphere for the reasons given, regardless of how much U.S. dominance of Puerto Rico and Cuba through the Roosevelt Corollary may (or may not) otherwise resemble traditional colonial rule.

¹ Michael H. Hunt & Steven I. Levine. *Arc of Empire*. (The University of North Carolina Press, 2012) ch. 1, p. 17

Hawaii might be compared to the Philippines insofar as both of these possessions served the purpose of providing a foothold for the U.S. in the Pacific and the Far East respectively. There is, however, a qualitative difference: Hawaii was classified as a territory in 1898, apparently on par with the territories on the American continent during the westward expansion. (There is an element missing here that we shall come back to, namely white majority settlement.) States were added to the union when people in new territories applied to Washington for statehood, and although this did not happen with Hawaii until 61 years later, there are two important differences between Hawaii and the Philippines: 1) The former was incorporated as a U.S. territory; the latter was a colonial possession transferred from Spain to the U.S. as spoils of war. 2) The former was close enough to the American landmass, albeit barely so, to be considered the ultimate frontier of westward expansion. It would not make sense to consider the westward expansion beyond Hawaii, because then the International Date Line gets in the way, which had been established in 1884 in Washington D.C. at the International Meridian Conference.

In other words: Hawaii is part of the westward expansion; the Philippines is not. This means that colonialism, even when relatively broadly defined as the absence of autonomous home rule whereby one nation establishes and maintains the forced dependency of another nation in peacetime, has never been implemented by the United States outside its proclaimed backyard on the Western Hemisphere, with the sole exceptions of the Philippines and Guam. And that is why the U.S. conquest of the Philippines and Guam was exceptional, not typical, of the exercise of U.S. power in the world during the period in question (between 1898 and 1945). As a case in point, the U.S. did not demand a share of the spoils after the Great War (the former German colonies). On the contrary, American administrations from Wilson to FDR expressed an increasing disapproval of European colonialism, something that also became a bone of contention between Roosevelt and Churchill during the second world war.

There may seem to be a pattern regard to the Caribbean and Central America that appears to be almost identical to the Asian conquests. So we may be splitting hairs here. But regardless of how many similarities we may be looking at, the very location of the former classify these countries as offshore buffer zones bordering on the U.S. itself, as potential expansions of the nation or empire.

Direct or indirect domination?

The dictionary definition of a colony is "a country or area under the full or partial political control of another country, typically a distant one, and occupied by settlers from that country." A classic model would be Colonial India as it was ruled (in various sections) by Holland, Denmark, France, Portugal, and especially Great Britain after the Bengal Rebellion of 1857, when it became known as British India, later the British Indian Empire, under the direct control of the British crown. This is the situation described for a colony proper: Total political control by a far away foreign power. But colonialism isn't that clear cut and simple, because there are various stages between complete independence and total colonial domination. If we permit ourselves to borrow a term from the Ottoman Empire, we may say that what the U.S. implemented in Puerto Rico, Cuba, Panama and so on was a kind of *suzerainty* – namely a condition where a region or people is a subordinate to, or dependent upon, a superior external power which grants the country in question some limited domestic autonomy. This term, "suzerainty," seems applicable to U.S. conduct in its own backyard (especially the Caribbean and Central America) because it was used to describe the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and its *surrounding regions*. The model is also applicable to the nations of Eastern Europe under Soviet dominance during the Cold War, when the term "spheres of influence" was applied to both sides of the Iron Curtain.

A sphere of influence is commonly understood to involve *indirect* domination by one national power over another, or over several others, in terms of culture, economics, politics, and the military. So there is a qualitative difference, then, between colonies and spheres of influence. The latter became the dominant principle for U.S. foreign policy, not only between 1898 and 1945, but beyond. It was most clearly defined through Wilsonianism from 1919 after it had been developing during the Great War. In 1898 the U.S. did not yet seem to have had any particular guideline, slogan, plan, principle or pattern to follow in its foreign affairs. In other words, during the Spanish-American war, there seems to have been no appreciable perceived difference between colonization on the one hand and the pursuit of spheres of influence on the other, which may be the real reason why the Philippines was colonized in the traditional manner, with its native population changing ownership (from Spain to America) like cattle.

The question of annexation

There is an additional factor involved here that may be seen as a duality, and it's equally applicable to Latin America and Asia. One element is the question of statehood and citizenship; the other is white racism. These elements are so interlinked throughout American history that it is important to take them into account with regard to the Philippines. The case may be easily argued that during the westward expansion in the 19th century, the United States emulated the Roman model. With every new territorial conquest, which always involved an area bordering on the expanding empire itself and never in any remote location, the inhabitants were offered citizenship in the union when the status of statehood was bestowed by Washington. There was, however, one significant caveat or condition involved that differed from the case of the Romans: Eligibility for statehood was contingent upon a majority of white settlers, preferably of Northern European extraction. During the Mexican-American war, President Polk contemplated conquering all of Mexico and annexing it, but he did not get the necessary support and the suggestion was quickly dropped, because Mexicans were viewed as a racially inferior people that they did not want in the union. The same dilemma (in addition to the problem of language) may have been a factor with regard to important offshore territories like Puerto Rico and Cuba. Both of these countries were acquired from Spain as spoils of war, along with the Philippines and Guam, but apart from the important difference in geography already mentioned, there is also a difference in procedure, or method of control and suppression, and this difference may corroborate the argument that American conquest of Asian territories is a unique occurrence rather than a typical one. Cuba is an interesting comparison to the Philippines. Both of these countries had uprisings and independence movements against Spain, but there is a difference in how the U.S. responded to each of these challenges. In the case of Cuba, the overall objective was preserving and securing American commercial interests. Thus at the Cuban-American Treaty of 1903, the Cubans were given a certain measure of autonomy in exchange for Guantanamo Bay, where the U.S. had built its naval base in 1898. The attitude towards the Filipinos, on the other hand, is very interesting, not only because it reflects the racism in an overt way but perhaps especially because it matches the British attitude to the people of India.

Independence would not work. The childlike nature of the Filipinos, according to the president's [McKinley's] recital, would lead them into "anarchy and misrule."²

The argument that the Filipinos were too "childlike" to manage their own society seems like a contrived *raison d'être* for American colonialism. There is also a direct connection between British and American quest for dominance here, albeit not on the diplomatic or political level, but on the ground. Hunt & Levine tell us about Private William Grayson, a British immigrant to the U.S. who actually fired the shot that sealed America's "manifest destiny" in Asia.³

The notion about Filipinos being too childlike to manage their own affairs is obviously racist, and this contributed to the long duration of the colonization, because white European and American racism did not loosen up until after World War II.

This context also makes Hawaii highly relevant. It was given statehood in 1959, when white racist prejudices were in the process of receding. This would have been unthinkable half a century earlier.

Conclusion

Definitions, terms and descriptions of the various modes of dominance or governance exercised by the United States may be convoluted and extremely challenging to disentangle. Cuba was granted independence in 1901 through the Platt Amendment, although this arrangement allowed unilateral U.S. involvement in Cuban affairs, and Panama achieved independence with U.S. support through its recession from Colombia.⁴ Absolutely no measure of independence, however, was granted to the Philippines until after World War II, when such moves were becoming politically unavoidable. It is not only an occupation of unusually long duration compared to most of the others but also an exceptional one in its total suppression of all resistance until 1946.

² Ibid.

³ Op. cit. p. 10

⁴ Stephen G. Rabe. *The Killing Zone* (Oxford University Press 2012)ch. 1, p. 6