

"Serving the Cause of Humanity"

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This chapter outlines several issues concerning so-called "Spanish-American War" plaques, focusing on Philippine Study Group of Minnesota's campaign to correct a commemorative plaque in the Minnesota State Capitol.

THE MIDWEST

25. “Serving The Cause Of Humanity”

MINNESOTA St. Paul

America is full of statues and plaques that seem to commemorate the Spanish-American War. Just as “the doughboy”—the lone infantryman wearing a heavy metal helmet—became the symbol for World War I, “the hiker”—a bare-headed GI casually holding a rifle—appeared on many Spanish-American War memorials. The National Association of Spanish War Veterans is said to have placed at least fifty copies of this statue all around the country.¹



On the base of most Spanish-American War monuments is a bronze plaque with the war's standard memorial symbol, a circle over a Maltese cross. Around the circle are the words “Spanish-American War, 1898-1902”; on the four arms of the cross are “Cuba,” “Puerto Rico,” “Philippine Islands,” and “U. S. A.”² Inside the circle a bare-armed “native woman” with her chains broken kneels before the U.S. soldier and sailor who ostensibly liberated her. This scene inverts history: any rational Filipina would have bolted for the woods when American soldiers or sailors came near, knowing full well she might be shot or see her house burned and her male children killed.

Combat in the Spanish-American War began on May 1, 1898, and ended August 13 of that year. The U.S. navy destroyed the Spanish Pacific fleet in Manila Bay on May 1 and the Spanish Atlantic fleet off Santiago de Cuba

on July 3. Two weeks later Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders helped compel the surrender of Santiago de Cuba, effectively ending the war. Troops under Nelson Miles took Puerto Rico with almost no opposition. In the entire war only 379 Americans died in battle; 1,604 were wounded.

How did a hundred-day war wind up with a five-year timespan on its monuments?

The answer to this puzzle points to one of America's least happy foreign adventures—our war with the Philippines. Hostilities in the Philippine-American War began on February 4, 1899, half a year after the Spanish-American War ended. On July 4, 1902, Theodore Roosevelt, who became president upon McKinley's assassination, declared the war won. Hence the "1898–1902."

Except for the curious dates on our Spanish-American war memorials, the Philippine-American War lies almost forgotten on our landscape. One of the few places that openly recognizes this war is a large bronze plaque in the rotunda of the Minnesota State Capitol. It honors the Thirteenth Minnesota All Volunteer Infantry as "one of the first regiments to carry the American flag across the seas." It mentions how this unit "participated in Battle of Manila, August 13th, 1898, ending the War with Spain." The plaque then details where the men fought next, as part of the United States army in the Philippine-American War: "Military Police of Manila, August 22nd [1898] to March 17th, 1899. Volunteered for the Philippine Insurrection on March 25th. Sent to the front in the campaign against insurgent Filipinos under Chief Aguinaldo." In one way this marker is a good thing: Minnesota at least recognizes that the Philippine-American War took place. But almost every phrase on it is a lie.

The Thirteenth Minnesota never volunteered for "the Philippine Insurrection." John Roberts, a bugler in the unit, said on his return, "We enlisted to fight the Spaniards, to fight them for two years if necessary, but we did not enlist to fight niggers in the Philippines, and if we had been asked to do so I, for one, would have refused." The McKinley administration sold the Spanish-American War to the American people on the grounds that the Spanish were colonial overlords and the oppressed people of Cuba, in particular, deserved to govern themselves. So the volunteering done by the Thirteenth Minnesota, although couched in racist terms by Roberts, involved a good measure of idealism.

Moreover, there was no "Philippine Insurrection." This term suggests that the United States held legitimate power in the Philippines, against which some Filipinos rebelled. Nothing of the sort was true. This was a war of conquest by an outside power, not an insurrection by a subordinate faction. The Filipino independence movement controlled most of the nation including all of the main island of Luzon except Manila when the United States attacked. Filipinos date their independence from June 12, 1898, before the American army even got there, and celebrated their centennial in 1998. They are clear about the role of the United States as invader. American historians too now agree on the more accurate "Philippine-American War."

The last two words, "Chief Aguinaldo," are sillier yet. The Filipinos were not American Indians; Emilio Aguinaldo was no "chief." After the United States attacked the Filipinos, United States leaders tried to portray the war as some kind of uprising limited to a few "tribes." Earlier, when the Filipinos were our allies against Spain, American officials had considered Aguinaldo the leader of all Filipinos.

The United States sent some 125,000 troops to the Philippines. About 10,000 lost their lives including 4,234 who died in combat. Another 2,818 were wounded. Thus the war was almost ten times as hurtful to our population as the Spanish-American War. Indeed, in absolute numbers more Americans died in combat in the Philippine-American War than died in the American Revolution or the War of 1812—more, in fact, than in all but six of our wars.³ Still more Americans died of disease in the Philippines. For the other side it was "the bloodiest conflict in Philippines history, including World War II," according to historian Leon Wolff. Americans killed and counted the bodies of 16,000 Filipino soldiers; total Filipino combat deaths exceeded 20,000. Among the civilian population, deaths from combat, disease, and starvation exceeded 200,000 and possibly reached 700,000. Thus in duration, effort, and losses at least, the Philippine-American War far overshadows the Spanish-American War. Since monuments are expressly intended to recognize effort and losses, every Spanish-American War monument in the United States might reasonably be renamed. Even the images on them didn't come from the Spanish-American War. "The hiker" and "hiking" were terms used by U.S. soldiers in the Philippine-American War to describe themselves and their campaigns to root out Filipino guerrillas from their mountain strongholds. In the Spanish-American War, the United States mostly attacked *cities*.

If more memorials noted the Philippine-American War, Americans might remember it better.⁴ As a citizen who came of age politically during the war in Vietnam, I have come to regret that neither I nor most Americans recalled the Philippines War in the 1960s, for it was a lost memory that might have prevented the war. Parallels between the two wars are many. In both countries the United States initially allied with a colonized people and then turned on them, reestablishing colonialism. The Filipino independence movement had been our ally against Spain, just as Ho Chi Minh's forces in Vietnam had been our allies against Japan during World War II. In the Philippines, the United States simply replaced Spain as the colonial master. In Vietnam, after Japan fell, the United States first tried to prop up France, the previous European colonial ruler, before installing its own puppet regime in South Vietnam after the Vietnamese ousted the French.

Even more than in most wars, truth was the first casualty in the Philippines and in Vietnam. Deception began from the outset when United States officials lied to explain why our troops were now fighting the Filipinos. (78 tells how we actually came to attack them.) In Vietnam the United States claimed to be "defending" the "nation" of South Vietnam against "outside aggression," while in reality American forces were the outside aggressors.

In both wars, the administration lied to the American people about the "progress" of the war. In the Philippines army officials kept journalists from many parts of the islands and censored their reports to the United States. Eleven correspondents sent a joint news story to their papers, charging that official dispatches "err in saying 'the situation is well in hand'" and had given Americans "an ultra-optimistic view that is not shared by the general officers in the field." In Vietnam, veteran correspondents labeled the armed forces' daily briefings "the five o'clock follies" and laughed when officials continued to see the "light at the end of the tunnel." This report to the *New York Post* from the Philippines by Albert Robinson could have been filed seventy years later from Vietnam by merely changing the last word to "Saigon": "There are towns here which have been 'captured' again and again, each time with a 'glorious victory.' Today it is unsafe for an American to go even ten miles from the city of Manila."

As in Vietnam there were no front lines in the Philippines war, and as in Vietnam, soldiers could not easily discern friend—"amigo"—from foe. The results were not surprising: GI's adopted the slogan "There are no more

amigos." Generals declared that all civilians must enter "reconcentration camps" (in Vietnam officials would call them "strategic hamlets"), and anyone outside them would be fair game. In both Vietnam and the Philippines, American troops called the enemy "gooks"; white Americans also used the term "nigger" for Filipino enemies.

The Minnesota plaque lists twenty battles in which the men participated and ten generals under whom they fought, followed by details of their mustering out. To the left of the list is a beautifully done scene of American soldiers attacking a village on Luzon. The typical sightseer, not having read accounts by participants, would have no idea what happened after the soldiers took that generic Luzon village. "We have been vastly more cruel than the Spanish," said Roberts. "I have known of orders being given which, if put in writing, would read, in effect: *Let there be no wounded among the enemy.*" Private A. A. Barnes of the Third Artillery wrote from Luzon to his brother in Indiana: "Last night one of our boys was found shot and his stomach cut open. Immediately orders were received from General [Frank] Wheaton to burn the town and kill every native in sight; which was done..." L. F. Adams from Missouri wrote home about another campaign in Luzon: "In the path of the Washington regiment...there were 1,008 dead niggers and a great many wounded. We burned all their houses. I don't know how many men, women, and children the Tennessee boys did kill. They would not take any prisoners."

These were no isolated incidents. After a Filipino attack on a U.S. army post on Samar killed 38 of 74 men and wounded another 30, Brig. Gen. Jake Smith was told to "pacify" the island. He ordered all civilians out of the island's interior and confined them in stockades. "Turn the entire island into a howling wilderness," he told his troops. "I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn; the more you kill and burn the better it will please me." All male persons over age ten who had not already surrendered were to be shot. "Within six months Samar was as quiet as a cemetery," concluded historian Leon Wolff. Wolff quoted an observer, "Even the Spaniards are appalled at American cruelty."

As in Vietnam, war crimes committed by U.S. personnel in the Philippines "seldom saw the light of day," in Wolff's words; "those that did were systematically denied or minimized." In Vietnam, except for one man, Lt. William Calley, who drew a few years of house arrest for ordering and administering

the murders of civilians in the My Lai massacre, no American received significant punishment for war crimes. In the Philippines there was not even a Calley. The army brought up several officers and men on charges, but officials realized that the responsibility for the outrages led straight up the chain of command, so most got off with reprimands, some with small fines.

There are still more parallels with the war in Vietnam. American soldiers despised their assignments, so rot appeared in the army, and a serious anti-war movement arose at home. As in Vietnam, hawks then claimed that anti-war agitation was raising enemy morale, hence prolonging the war. Neither war stemmed from direct pressure by American commercial interests, which had no significant investments to protect in either country. Individual political leaders—McKinley and Roosevelt in the Philippines, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon in Vietnam—made the fateful decisions to send and maintain troops to subjugate the Asians we claimed to be helping.⁶

Another parallel between the wars was the popularity of the Filipino and Vietnamese revolutionary leaders compared with the unpopularity of the puppet leaders the U.S. installed. Dwight Eisenhower admitted that in a fair election, Ho Chi Minh would win 80 percent of the votes in Vietnam. John Bass, writing in *Harper's* decades earlier, said the same about Aguinaldo: "The whole population of the islands sympathizes with the insurgents; only those natives whose immediate self-interest requires it are friendly to us." And for that reason both wars lasted a long time.

Vietnam is often called our longest war, but depending upon the date chosen for its ending, the Philippine-American War arguably lasted longer. When President Roosevelt declared victory on July 4, 1902, nobody really celebrated. Military historian John Collins judged that the war dragged on to 1913. Serious incidents continued as late as 1916.

When Americans swept the Philippine-American War under the rug of our Spanish American War memorials, we lost our collective memory of it. In 1926, Moorfield Storey and Marcial Lichauco published a farsighted critique of the war, *The Conquest of the Philippines by the United States, 1898-1925*. They asked, "Why revive these memories that we would fain obliterate?" They answered by pointing out that Americans were still lying about the war: "With all this history behind him, the President of the United States [in 1925] still asserts that the islands came to us 'unsought.'" Finally, they argued that if we stay ignorant of this history, "what American

representatives have done in the past may be done again." They meant in the Philippines, but their words had wider prophetic implications. Americans on all sides of the Vietnam War invoked various analogies to campaign for or against our involvement there—Munich, the domino theory, Korea, and the like. Few referred to the Philippines war however—a pity, because that analogy would have been so close.

The Minnesota plaque, only slightly superior to total amnesia, employs an astonishing paragraph to summarize the war: "They served the cause of humanity. They battled to free the oppressed peoples of the Philippines Islands, who suffered under the despotic rule of Spain." If soldiers from the Thirteenth Minnesota All Volunteer Infantry coming home on October 12, 1899, could have seen it, they would have laughed those words off the wall. On that day President McKinley joined Minnesota Governor John Lind to welcome the troops home to Minneapolis. In the presence of the president, Lind used the occasion to raise troubling questions about American imperialism: "By our growth and development the mission of the American volunteer soldier has come to an end. For purposes of conquest and subjugation he is unfit, for he carries a conscience as well as a gun. The volunteer soldier has always stood for self-government, liberty, and justice."

By 1948 when the plaque went up, American imperialism apparently no longer troubled anyone. Half a century of U.S. interventions had made sending troops into other countries seem routine. But in 1998 a group of Filipino Americans and other Minnesota citizens got a temporary exhibit installed in the rotunda of the Capitol that presented accurate information about the Philippine-American War. They are now trying to persuade state officials to allow a permanent corrective plaque to go alongside or instead of this 1948 delusion. Their example shows that Americans are not forced to remain ignorant of the Philippine-American War or other history. The final essay in this book, "Getting into a Dialogue with the Landscape," suggests that we can still correct our Spanish-American War monuments all across the country to reflect more accurately the *wars* they memorialize. It is too late for such an enlightened landscape to have an impact on our 1960s Southeast Asian policy, but Grenada, Panama, and other escapades show that the United States still finds it easy to fight "splendid little wars" (78) in the Third World. We cannot know how recovering our memory of the Philippine-American War will affect America's future as a

nation, but our Vietnam debacle demonstrates that ignorance of this war has hardly been bliss.⁷

1. At least 26 hikers by Theodora Ruggles Kitson still stand along with at least 24 by other sculptors.
2. Sometimes “China” is added instead of “Porto Rico” or “U.S.A.,” adding in another unrelated war, the Boxer Rebellion.
3. In order, America’s ten deadliest wars have been the Civil War, World War II, World War I, Vietnam, Korea, the Mexican War, the Philippines War, King Philip’s War, the Revolution, and the War of 1812.
4. American history textbooks also promote amnesia; they devote almost eight pages to the Spanish-American War and only a paragraph or two to the Philippines War. The army also needs to recall the Philippines War more honestly. Its website lists the Spanish-American War but not the Philippines War among its “major wars.” The army really knows better; another inventory, “Campaigns of the United States Army,” lists eleven different campaigns under “Philippines Insurrection,” only three under Spanish-American War.
5. Another account lists 48 dead and 22 wounded.
6. I would grant that American commercial interests played a “cultural” role in both interventions. Some American political leaders saw the Philippines as a base that could be used to further United States interests in China and throughout the Far East. Some American political leaders believed that our intervention in Vietnam would further United States interests in other Third World countries.
7. Leon Wolff, *Little Brown Brother* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 40–48, 58, 67–69, 100, 221–62, 274–76, 305–7, 319–63, Lawton quoted on 290; Moorfield Storey and Marcial Lichauco, *The Conquest of the Philippines by the U.S., 1898–1925* (NY: Putnam, 1926), 121–29, 152–54; “As Cruel As Spain,” probably from *Minneapolis Times*, 1900?, from soldier’s scrapbook, Minnesota State Historical Society, courtesy Kyle Ward; Robert Tomsho, “Death Toll,” *Wall Street Journal*, 11/19/97; James C. Thomason Jr., Peter W. Stanley, and John C. Perry, *Sentimental Imperialists* (NY: Harper & Row, 1981), 115; Jim Zwick, <http://www.rochester.ican.net/~fjzwick/centennial/war.html> 9/97, 4/98; <http://mcs.net/~flip/usrp.html> 9/97, 5/98; *Philippine Historical Markers* (Manila: Republic of Philippines Bureau of Public Schools, 1958), 42; William Bruce Wheeler and Susan D. Becker, *Discovering the American Past* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1990), 99; Julius W. Pratt, *America’s Colonial Experiment* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1964), 80; John Collins, *America’s Small Wars* (DC: Brassey’s, 1991), 17; <http://www.army.mil/cmb-pg/campaigns> 4/98; Daniel B. Schirmer, “U.S. Racism and Intervention in the Third World, Past and Present,” *FFP Bulletin* (winter 1994); Oscar V. Campomanes, “Grappling with the Filipino as Primitive: The American Soldier in Love and War (1903)” (New Orleans: Society for Cinema Studies Conference, 1993), 17; Arthur M. Schlesinger, ed., *The Almanac of American History* (NY: Putnam, 1983), 392; William McKinley, speech to Methodists, 11/21/1899,

in Joseph R. Conlin, ed., *Morrow Book of Quotations in American History* (NY: Morrow, 1984), 138; Richard Hofstadter, "Manifest Destiny and the Philippines," in T. P. Greene, ed., *American Imperialism in 1898* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1955), 59–60; George Stephenson, *John Lind of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: U. of MN Press, 1935), 174; Ken Meter, e-mails, 1/3/98; Leonard Inskip, "For war's centennial, a useful second look," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 6/11/98.

