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Challenging Imperialism: Soldier's Letters and the Anti-Imperialist League

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ABSTRACT

When Commanding General Elwell Otis imposed a strict censorship on news sent to the mainland United States of America in 1899, the soldiers' letters became important sources of information on the events in the Philippines. While the letters were intended for the perusal of the soldiers' family members, some of these came into the hands of the Anti-Imperialist League (AIL). Consequently, the Anti-Imperialists used these letters as tool in challenging the imperialistic pursuit of the United States government. This paper examines the role of soldiers' letters in the anti-imperialists fight for Philippine independence. Most of the letters utilized were gathered from different libraries in the US. Some of the letters were written by regular soldiers while others were written by volunteer soldiers. To countercheck some of the letters published by the AIL, letters that were not published, but presented the same views, were also taken into account. While the focus was on the soldiers' letters in relation to their role as agents of empire, it will also look into the lives of the ordinary soldiers as letter writers connecting not only with their family and friends, but also with their communities back home.

Keywords: Philippine-American War, soldier's letters, Anti-Imperialist League

Introduction

As the United States government continued to send soldiers in the Philippines to comply with Commodore George Dewey's request for ground troops, the role of the military as the government's agent for its imperialistic design became apparent. President William McKinley (1897-1901) explicitly gave the authority to the US military commander to execute his Benevolent Assimilation policy by establishing a military government. McKinley ordered the military to let the people of the Philippines know that the Americans came as "friends" and not as conquerors. Moreover, the military had to protect the people's rights and properties.

Due to the power vested upon the military governor, Dewey became the highest official in the colony representing the US government. The US President gave him absolute power over the land and the people. In the beginning, because of the common Spanish enemy, the soldiers had fostered friendly relations with the Filipino revolutionaries under the command of Emilio Aguinaldo. This relationship was, nonetheless, short-lived, for on the night of February 4, 1899, the American and Filipino soldiers, who fought side by side against the Spaniards, engaged in a bloody battle, thus, becoming bitter enemies. The war resulted in a number of casualties on both sides that agitated the anti-imperialists. The anti-imperialists called the dreadful battle a "war of criminal aggression" (Boutwell, 1902).

The accounts of soldiers' encounters with the Filipino revolutionary forces through their letters and their descriptions of inhumane acts of torture, burning of villages, killing of young boys, massacres, and slaughter of women and children provided the bases for the Anti-Imperialist League's (AIL) struggle in ending the war. The AIL, an organization founded in 1898, aimed at preventing the American occupation and annexation of the Philippines, became the most vocal opponent of the colonial pursuit of the United States. The AIL members comprised of rich, educated, and influential individuals who possessed an independent mind. They considered themselves as heralds of reform. They were the "representatives of the highest intelligence and the best culture of the country" (Beisner, 1968). Thus, they

looked upon themselves as morally upright and having the duty and obligation to save the nation and the world. They believed that the acquisition of the Philippines was a violation of the principles stated at the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution. Furthermore, they viewed the militaristic campaign of the government as a crime against humanity. Members of the AIL used these soldiers' accounts to expose how notions of civility and benevolence were translated into the most severe forms of violence and repression and how these accounts received the strongest forms of public indictment through legislative channels.

The Soldier as Part of a Community

In the book *The Mirror of War: American Society and the Spanish-American War* (1974), Gerald Linderman studied how the Spanish-American War divided and united the American society. He argued that the Spanish-American War was not a "great war", which was contrary to Senator George Frisbie Hoar's belief, that it was a "great war" and John Hay's contention that it was a "splendid little war" (Linderman, 1974). According to Linderman, the war did not result in the integration of the society. But the country was divided due to commercialism. Moreover, the war did not create a character of moral value that would help unite a heterogeneous society. What was interesting in his study was his notion that the citizen-soldiers or volunteers coming from different states mirrored the community they came from and belonged.

Linderman's discussion emphasized the relationship of the locale and the center during the war. He argued that the citizen-soldiers and the townspeople "saw the company, wherever located, as an extension of their community." Each company coming from different states possessed distinct characteristics, virtues, and lifestyles. The volunteers found their home "as a primary focus of emotional attachment and allegiance." Conversely, the community took much responsibility in taking care of their soldiers by maintaining close contact and communication with them wherever they might be. As part of a community, each citizen-soldier had a level of pride of his Regiment representing his own state. As Henry Thompson of

Company K, 1st Regiment Nebraska Volunteers narrated in his letter of January 5, 1899 to his parents,

> The Nebraskan boys can get along better with the Filipinos than any other regiment here… Yes, General Otis said that the Nebraska regiment was one of the best, and he could not spare us yet. He put us out next to the insurgents as we could best get along with them. The insurgents think that we are very good to them, as we give them something to eat every time they come over and see us. So I don't hardly think it is easy for them to attack us, because if you once make friends with them, they will just stick up for you. They will do most anything you want them to do. But let them come. We are ready to die or kill the whole outfit of them any time that they may wish to come inside of range to fight. They will find us all ready to have a little fun with them… (Nielsen, 2001, pp. 87-88)

The letter showed that even each state militia differed with their relationship with the Filipinos. The good relationship fostered between the early encounter between the Nebraskan and the Filipinos would end, however, when the Philippine-American War began. Private William Grayson, one of the Nebraskan boys, admitted that he fired the first shot, which caused the outbreak of the Philippine-American War. It was clear from the letter that while they had a good relationship with the Filipinos, the soldiers were "ready to die and kill the whole outfit." The letter, written just a day after General Otis published his edited version of the Benevolent Assimilation Proclamation of President William McKinley, unintentionally suggested the good but restrained relationship between the Americans and the Filipinos.

The problem of communicating with the soldiers outside their community became a major concern for the local officials back home. They made it a point to obtain information as much as they could about their fellow citizens abroad. When the companies were still inside the US, a visit or excursions to the military camps were even organized (Linderman, 1974). Consequently, in order to receive information for those deployed overseas, the community that sent soldiers abroad sent

correspondents. Especially with the big newspaper companies, they sent one correspondent for every state regiment deployed outside the country (Linderman, 1974). However, in the absence of sufficient funds for a reporter, the local newspapers usually commissioned a soldier to send letters for publication. Most of the letters detailed the everyday life of a soldier from day to day activity from outside and inside the camp as well as the condition of rations and well-being of the other soldiers (Linderman, 1974). Other than the commissioned soldier or the newspaper correspondents, the letters from the soldiers themselves were the main source of information for the folks back home.

The soldiers ignored Secretary of War Russell Alger and Philippine Military Governor General Elwell Otis's ban on military personnel sending letters for publication. Even correspondents started to address their letters to family and friends who in turn sent them to the newspapers (Linderman, 1974). This informal communication became extensive, which resulted in the influx of letters from soldiers reaching a number of American individuals and families. The dissemination of information coming from the soldiers' letters became a communal affair, from the soldiers to their families, from the families to local newspapers and from the newspapers to the American mainstream. The anti-imperialists, on the other hand, elevated the affair from community to the national level. The anti-imperialists not only informed the nation about the war, but also enjoined the people to act against the militaristic and imperialistic endeavor of the US government in the Philippines.

The letters of the men of the hometown regiment dispatched abroad affected the way small-town citizens viewed the war (Linderman, 1974). The whole community became active participants in the war. They became part of a culture, a community that transcends the boundaries of home. The soldiers' letters became part of a popular literature printed in newspapers and gave the readers a glimpse of what was happening inside a world they did not belong. In so doing, the soldiers removed the barrier, the distance, and the gap between them in the battlefield and their family or community in the home front. The soldiers' letters became an instrument in connecting the soldiers abroad and the readers at home forming an "embryo of the

nationally imagined community" (Anderson, 1991). The citizens helped the needy families of soldiers left behind. The community even went on by sending local doctors to cure the sick and wounded soldiers. Whereas the soldier saw the war as an extension of their community, the citizens saw themselves as part of the battle. The community caterers provided food to the trainees. The soldiers' drills were an entertainment for the townspeople to watch. With the closeness between the soldier and his community, it would appear that the victory of the fallen soldier was their victory and the defeat of the soldiers abroad was their defeat.

When the Spanish-American War began, it seemed to be a festive activity for the nation. The different states wanted to be part of the glorious battle by sending some of their citizen-soldiers of the National Guard. The idea of helping the Cuban nation out from bondage idealized the concept of manifest destiny that gave the American public a sense of pride. They believed that it was their moral responsibility to help the subjugated people to gain their freedom.

In relation to the Philippines, the soldiers also believed that it was their moral obligation to spread civilization to this unfamiliar place and to help the people experience progress. As one Nebraskan volunteer wrote,

> We came here to help, not to slaughter, these natives; to fight the oppressor Spain, not the oppressed. It strikes me as not very fair to pursue a policy that leads to this insurrection, and then keep us volunteers out here to fight battles we never enlisted for. I cannot see that we are fighting for any principle now. ("Soldier's Letters", 1899, p.4)

The letter showed the disillusionment of a soldier about the purpose of the war he was fighting. It was evident that the soldier knew that the battle he was fighting for was not in accordance with his principles of spreading democracy. He was aware that it was no longer helping the oppressed and that they were becoming the oppressors.

Everything went on the reverse when the Philippine-American War broke. The battle that started as a war for liberation in Cuba had turned into a war of subjugation in the Philippines. Some of the American soldiers who were eager to fight before the Philippine-American War started were now eager to go home when the war escalated. In a letter of Tom Crandall of the Nebraska Regiment, he said,

> The boys are getting sick of fighting these heathens, and all say we volunteered to fight Spain, not heathens. Their patriotism is wearing off. We all want to come home very bad. If I ever get out of this Army, I will never get into another. They will be fighting four hundred years, and then never whip these people, for there are not enough of us to follow them up….The people of the United States ought to raise a howl and have us sent home. (Anti-Imperialist League, 1899, p.7)

In a tone of desperation, the soldier writer asked the American people to help them voice their grievances. He was appealing to the public in the home front to speak for the soldiers in the battlefield. There was urgency to the tone, which meant that they wanted the people to let the government know that the soldiers wanted to go home badly and immediately. The war had caused demoralization among the soldiers. One of the letters even recounted that they had a vote "to determine how many wished to remain for an extra six months" (Anti-Imperialist League, 1899). As expected, nobody voted. The enthusiasm and the patriotic fervor that brought them to enlist had died down.

For those who had served during the Philippine-American War, they considered their duty to be a cause of shame rather than honor. In a letter, Corporal Raymond Ellis of the 17th US Infantry said: "The longer I stay here, and the more I see and think of the matter, the more fully convinced I am that the American nation was and is making a blunder" (Anti-Imperialist League, 1899, p.16). He added: "I don't believe the people in the United States understand the question or the condition of things here or the inhuman warfare now being carried on. Talk about Spanish cruelty: they are not in with the Yank. Even the Spanish are shocked." Finally, he lamented, "Of course I don't expect to

have war without death and destruction … But it is a fact that the order was not to take a prisoner, and I have seen enough to almost make me ashamed to call myself an American" (Anti-Imperialist League, 1899). The letter showed the discouragement on the part of the soldier. He saw the war as a blunder that caused shame to the country and to the American people. Implied, however, was the desire of the soldier to end the war, which was in congruent with AIL's claim.

A more disheartening letter came from Private Theodore Conley of the Kansas Regiment. He wrote:

> Talk about dead Indians! Why, they are lying everywhere. The trenches are full of them… More harrowing still: think of the brave men from this country, men who were willing to sacrifice their lives for the freedom of Cuba, dying in battle and from disease, in a war waged for the purpose of conquering a people who are fighting as the Cubans fought against Spanish tyranny and misrule. There is not a feature of the whole miserable business that a patriotic American citizen, one who loves to read of the brave deeds of the American colonists in the splendid struggle for American Independence, can look upon with complacency, much less with pride. This war is reversing history. It places the American people and the government of the United States in the position occupied by Great Britain in 1776. It is an utterly causeless and defenseless war, and it should be abandoned by this government without delay. The longer it is continued, the greater crime it becomes- a crime against human liberty as well as against Christianity and civilization. Those not killed in the trenches were killed when they tried to come out…no wonder they can't shoot, with that light thrown on them; shells busting and infantry pouring in lead all the time. Honest to God, I feel sorry for them. (Anti-Imperialist League, 1899, p.9)

In the letter was Private Conley's disillusionment about the war, which he considered as "reversing [American] history," for it put the US in the ranks of tyrants. Like the letter of Corporal Ellis, Conley also urged the US government to abandon the

"causeless and defenseless war" as soon as possible. The anti-imperialists, particularly the AIL, wanted to share to the American public these kinds of letters. It did not only support the AIL's claim of "war of criminal aggression," but also presented some of the key elements that the AIL was propagating as well. It justified the AIL's conviction that the US acquisition of the Philippines was against the principles of liberty and democracy drawn from the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution. Consequently, these letters became very instrumental in the AIL's anti-colonial and anti-war campaign.

Soldiers' Letters

In the book *In my Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America,* Konstantin Dierks (2009) argued that letters have power— "a power significant for its invisibility." The AIL used the letters of the soldiers as a powerful tool to stir the minds of the people to act against the imperial pursuit of the American government. As Dierks (2009) pointed out, "old letters served as special windows into past experiences, and above all into the intersection of cultural imagination and social action." Thus, letters do not only recreate the past, but also help in understanding the past. This was so because letters, according to Dierks (2009), were not only a witness to history but also part of history. Thus, soldiers' letters are important sites of memory for the Philippine-American War.

The letters written by soldiers with varying ranks during this period are voluminous. Although some of these letters were published, most remained in the confines of the archives and libraries all over the country. These letters that contained voices of the soldiers that needed to be heard. They must be heard from the soldier's standpoint. Sometimes, their presentation may not have style or may not pass academic standards, but its naturalness gave meaning to the letter. It was in the "naïveness" of the soldier writer that the importance and relevance of the letter was valued. The bold attitude of the soldier made his letter so appealing because it was devoid of political influence or maneuvering.

In most cases, scholars used these letters to explain the establishment of an empire. Stuart Miller, for instance, used the letters to show the extent of cruelties in the military campaign to conquer the island (Miller, 1982). Kristin Hoganson (1998) presented letters to prove that the war of conquest had caused degradation among the soldiers and American manhood in general. But looking closely into these correspondences, they presented a different narrative that questioned the institution of empire. The AIL was aware of this, which led them to utilize these letters to justify their agitation. These letters were crucial in revealing important aspects of empire as well as about the Philippine-American War. The AIL published and used some of these letters to rationalize their claim to end the war, which they called the "war of criminal aggression" ("Soldiers' Letters," 1899). A number of these personal letters by soldiers during the Philippine-American War appeared in leading newspapers at that time such as *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Harper's Weekly* as well as in anti-imperialist newspapers such as *Springfield Republican*, *San Francisco Call*, *New York Evening Post*, and *The Nation*.

When the soldiers' relatives saw the significance of the letters, they began to publish some of these personal letters. The letter writers were ordinary soldiers who participated in an extraordinary event. No matter how ordinary their lives and participation had been during the war, their letters to loved ones were very crucial in understanding the varied aspects of the Philippine-American War. One example was Joseph McCallus' *Gentleman Soldier: John Clifford Brown & the Philippine-American War*, a reprint of an earlier published book of John Clifford Brown published by his family members. According to Joseph McCallus (2004), John Clifford Brown was born on March 28, 1872 to the wealthiest family in Portland, Maine and "was comfortable within the East Coast social circles." He graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and worked as an electrical engineer with the New York Telegraph and Telephone Company for five years (McCallus, 2004). He was a blue-eyed, tall, handsome fellow whose character, according to McCallus, was "built on a series of dualities—a man trained in the practical sciences and consumed by romantic adventure." When war broke in 1898, he left his job, joined the volunteer army, and served as a lieutenant and captain in the New York regiment. After being mustered out

as a volunteer, Brown re-enlisted in 1899 at the age of twenty-seven, this time in the Regular Army. He saw action in the Philippines as a private in the Regular Army's Corps of Engineers, assigned as a cartographer for Brigadier General Samuel Young (McCallus, 2004).

With an added editor's introduction and historical background about the war, the letters, and the letter writer, McCallus placed the exploits and activities of John Clifford Brown during the Philippine-American War into historical context. It seemed that Private Brown had already anticipated the publication of his letters. In one of his letters, he requested his mother to keep his letters saying,

> "I am going to send home from time to time letters addressed to me. I wish you would put them in desk unopened. They will be nothing but rough notes, which I may sometime expand into something. Everything important I will put it in my letters" (McCallus, 2004, p. 63).

Indeed, his letters were truly a vital contribution in understanding the war. As the cartographer of his company, he produced Northern Luzon maps, which showed the route that the soldiers took while chasing the Filipinos. On January 16, 1901, Private Brown succumbed to disease. The cause of his death was "dysentery, enteritis, and typhoid fever" (McCallus, 2004).

Another significant compilation of soldiers' letters were those written by Private Clayton Allard of Company L, 9th US Infantry. His letters were never published during the war, but Clayton's descendants compiled these and published them in 2006. Entitled *Uncle Clayton: A Soldier's Life in Letters, 1898-1901*, the book presented the letters of Private Clayton Allard in a chronological manner. David Allard, Private Allard's nephew, edited the letters. Private Allard belonged to a family of patriots in the State of New York. His great-grandfather and grandfather served in the Revolutionary War and Civil War respectively (Allard, 2006). Just like Private Brown, Private Allard re-enlisted in the Regular Army at the height of the Philippine-American

War. He first enlisted at the age of twenty-seven on June 4, 1898 and then on March 2, 1899

According to David Allard (2006), his Uncle Clayton belonged to a world "where family meant real, personal relationship." Moreover, the family managed to keep close family relations through "letter writing and visiting in person." He also asserted that the letters of his Uncle Clayton "reveal much of his personality and his innate curiosity about the world where he found himself." Indeed, Private Allard's letters detailing his experiences during his deployment in Manila, Pampanga, and Samar provided a vivid presentation not only of his encounters with the enemy, but also the extent of military cruelties such as burning and killing of women and children. His letters to different people transcended the life of a soldier inside the battlefield. Private Clayton also gave a description of the mundane life of a soldier outside the combat zone.

Another important book containing soldiers' letters during the Philippine-American War was Thomas Nielsen's *Inside the Fighting First: Papers of a Nebraska Private in the Philippine War*. It contains Private Henry O. Thompson's letters and diary entries during the course of the war. Private Thompson left his farming life to volunteer for the Pacific War. He joined the Company K, 1st Regiment Nebraska Volunteers. Unlike the letters of Privates Brown and Allard, Thompson's letters were unedited, except for some punctuation marks, resulting in the presence of errors. Thomas Nielsen (2001) attributed the grammatical, spelling and punctuation errors to Private Thompson's shift from the Danish to the English language. He was born to Danish immigrant parents, enabling him to become part of two communities.

As part of the Nebraska volunteer corps, Private Thompson's account was very significant in highlighting the start of the conflict. Despite the grammatical errors, the unedited version reflected more the voice of the writer than those edited ones. Most of the historical accounts had used the testimony of Private Grayson to present the onset of the Philippine-American War. Since the military officials submitted a report different from the testimony of Private Grayson, the letter of Private Thompson, corroborating Grayson, told a different story about the beginning

of the struggle. While the official report of the government put the blame on the Filipinos, the letter of Private Thomson and the testimony of Private Grayson attested that their group fired the first shot.

Even individual scholars and members of historical associations who had seen the importance of these letters began to compile and publish such letters. Examples are A.B. Feuer's *America at War: The Philippines, 1898-1913*, which presented letters, memoirs, journals, songs, and poems written by the soldiers during the Philippine-American War. By presenting these, Feuer (2002) said, "their writings have put a human face on the American soldier." Justin Lucian published the letters of Peter Lewis in *A Soldier's Letter: April 19, 1900, The Letter of Peter Lewis*, after realizing the importance of the letters to future scholars working on the Philippine-American War. One of the earliest and most comprehensive books about the Philippine-American War that contained letters of soldiers was Marion Wilcox's *Harper's History of the War in the Philippines*. The book was a compilation of primary sources, journals, letters, memoirs, and newspaper articles about the Philippines during the American occupation. What was crucial was the list of volunteers and enlisted personnel it provided, giving important demographic details about those who served during the Philippine-American War. It also showed original pictures of peoples and places during that period.

John H. Nankivell's *Buffalo Soldier Regiment: History of the Twenty-Fifth United States Infantry, 1869-1926*, Joseph Markey's *From Iowa to the Philippines: A History of Company M, Fifty-first Iowa Infantry Volunteers, Just Outside of Manila: Letters from Members of the First Colorado Regiment in the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* were products of the historical societies and Regiment's efforts to preserve the memory and honor of the gallant soldiers who had served for the country. What was significant with these books was not only the soldiers' letters, but also the brief discussion about the activities and histories of the entire volunteer regiment and their community. These books presented previous battles of the volunteers, especially their exploits during the Mexican War, Civil War, and Indian Wars.

The *Soldiers Letters: Being Materials for the History of a War of Criminal Aggression* (1899) was a pamphlet consisting of soldiers' personal letters. None of the letters showed the name of the recipient. Some of the letters were unnamed and some lacked information about the writer. Some of the published letters did not even have exact dates, but based on the date of publication, the soldiers wrote them within the first months of the battle. It was the earliest compilation of letters by soldiers who served during the Philippine-American War. The historian Paul Kramer considered it as the most misused source about the war. He found fault on other scholars who utilized these letters "without tracing them back to original materials" (Kramer, 2006). Richard Welch (1974) agreed with Kramer saying that some of the letters published by the anti-imperialists "lacked specific detail, were based on hearsay evidence, and saw the accusers request the cloak of anonymity." Indeed, these would not be the best source for historical inquiry.

For the AIL, these letters became the most crucial documents that they had disseminated. It was through these letters that the AIL acquire its strength and its revitalization. It was through also these letters containing soldiers disillusionment, hatred, and grievances as well as misconduct such as looting, raping, burning of villages, massacres, and tortures that the AIL capitalized on and found support for its anti-imperial campaign. It was through the letters that the AIL found the enthusiasm to continue their anti-imperial battle after the defeat of the Treaty of Paris. The letters became the AIL's foundation in forming an anti-colonial discourse that stirred public senses that led to Congressional investigation, which eventually placed the Philippines on the path of independence. For instance, Edward Atkinson used the letter of H.D. McCoshan, a resident of Marinette, Wisconsin, who served in the Philippines as sergeant in Company H, First South Dakota, to prove his point related to the health condition of the soldiers. Dated May 12, 1899, the letter addressed to Jos. Laruman, a local merchant says:

> Two days after San Fernando was taken our regiment had but 139 men on the line, the remainder being dead, sick, or wounded. General McArthur complained of the number of men sick, other regiments being in the same

> shape as ours, and Major Potter was sent into Manila to rush men to the front.
>
> Acting under instructions, he sent out 108 men. Of these 30 were unable to reach the depot, a mile distant, many of them fainting on the way, some 28 or 30 ultimately arriving at San Fernando in worse condition that when sent to Manila, the others being ordered back by surgeons along the line of railroad, who was at a glance that they were in a precarious condition.
>
> I can prove by the record of the hospital that men were ordered to the front whose temperature was 103 degrees, and men from other regiments fared no better." (Atkinson, 1899, p.26)

The letter revealed the pathetic situation of the soldiers in the field. It showed how sickness and diseases consumed most of the military serving in the Philippines. It presented the effect of chasing the enemy at a severe temperature. The mentioning of the actual numbers gave intensity to the account, while the citing of names of officers gave credibility to the story being told. Thus, reading the letter enabled the reader to picture the actual condition and the gravity of the war. This served as justification to Atkinson's claim regarding the cost of the war in the Philippines.

On January 13, 1902, Senator George Frisbie Hoar submitted a resolution to the Senate demanding the establishment of a special committee to examine and report the state of affairs in the Philippines as well as the condition of the inhabitants (Welch, 1979). The influx of soldiers' letters to his office, addressed originally to family members and containing numerous crimes committed by the United States military in the Philippines prompted Hoars' decision (Welch, 1979).

Aside from the letters it published, the AIL also got its strength from the American people's adherence to their cause. The letters that the AIL published in the local newspapers reached different states. In fact, the anti-imperial newspapers allotted a segment solely for this purpose. Even if it was just a small portion, it enabled the readers—mostly learned and intellectual American

people—to see what was happening in the Philippines. More important, the letters informed the American people what their government was doing on that other side of the globe. The soldiers' narratives, describing their experiences and exploits, created a discourse that questioned the government's colonial policy. Since most recipients of these letters were family members, they participated in the discourse.

The actual words of the soldiers gave these letters their authority and value. The "direct, unvarnished experience" that the men at war presented gave truthfulness to the narratives (Winter, 2006). It was through this personal war experiences that the soldiers' letters were valued. As Jay Winter put it,

> These letters were constructed as a window into a special world, an odd world of the familiar and the unfamiliar mixed in equal parts. The letters disclosed the exposure of soldiers to a level of extreme violence and suffering that most of us never approach; their passage through the crucible of war gave their voices reverberations, which seemed to come from another world. They represented those who had gone through war as an 'inner experience,' something extraordinary, something overwhelming, a secret which only they could know. (Winter, 2006, p. 114)

It was through these narratives, written in a way understood by the recipient that the letter reader became one with the letter sender. It triggered the emotions of the people and compelled them to act and to become involved. The ordinariness of the soldiers writing these letters made the American public relate to their worries, concerns, dilemmas, and sentiments. The commonness of the individual soldier enabled them to connect to the ordinary and the common American people. The "imagined community" that was established through the letters enabled the soldiers and the people reading their letters to remain connected.

In the absence of modern technology such as computers, laptops, tablets, and cellphones, letter writing was the only means of communication between the soldiers and their families and friends back home during the war. Letter writing became one of

the soldiers' pastimes. Dierks (2009) argued, "letters served as a coping mechanism, a sanctuary from war, even an anemic refusal of it." The reason why soldiers put so much time and effort on "writing, reading, and carrying letters" was "to give war a kind of pause" (Dierks, 2009). But a more intense reason was that the soldiers were encouraged to write back home in order to alleviate boredom and loneliness as well as to assure their loved ones that they were still alive and in good condition especially for those assigned in faraway places. At the same time, they wanted their families to have information about the latest news in the Philippines.

An interesting example is the story of John Buchanan of the Twentieth U.S. Army Regiment who sent his letter in a cartridge box. Entitled "A Letter in a Cartridge Box," the *New York Times* had this very touching story:

> Miss Anna Buchanan has received a unique letter from her brother John A. Buchanan, who was with the Twentieth in the Philippines. The letter, which is dated February 15, came enclosed in a cartridge box. The regiment was in the trenches at that time, returning the galling fire of the insurgents. The boys could not get back to camp to write letters and they carried no stationery with them. Young Buchanan, however, wanted to write home. He knew that his relatives would be anxious to hear from him and he wanted to let them know that he was with his regiment doing business. In his pocket he carried letters which he had received from home. The envelopes he tore open and used for writing paper. He placed the pieces in a cartridge box and fastened the box with a piece of his shoestring, in lieu of anything better. He had no stamps, but wrote the address with his piece of a lead pencil and marked in one corner of the box "soldier's letter." ("A Letter in a Cartridge Box," 1899)

Just like the enthusiasm of Private Buchanan in sending letters to his family, the homefolks, likewise, were eager to receive news about the actual situation of their sons, brothers, husbands, and

about the war in general. As such, these soldiers' letters became an important link between the soldiers and their community.

Although there was cable, it was for official communications use only. Cable was also expensive and was limited to brief messages for private individuals since it was government controlled. As one private in the Utah Battery wrote,

> The cable news has kept the home folks fully informed as to the progress of this "goo-goo hunt," so it is unnecessary to recount any details of battles. The cruelties of Spain towards these people have been fully discussed, but if the thing were written up by a recent arrival here, he would make a tale just as harrowing. But the old boys will say that no cruelty is too severe for these brainless monkeys, who can appreciate no sense of honor, kindness, or justice. ("A Letter in a Cartridge Box," 1899, p. 3)

Thus, the cable news was there to justify the actions of the government, to present the cruelties of the Spaniards rather than to give information about what was happening about the soldiers in the field. Comparing the Spanish with the American occupation, the soldier told about the similarity of the dreadful situation of the Philippines. But implied in the soldiers' letters was the racial prejudice of the letter writer toward the Filipino people. Welch pointed out that the soldiers' racial casting of the Filipinos such as "brainless monkeys and no sense of honor, kindness, and justice" was due to the preconceived ideas of the soldiers back home. Welch argued, "it was the color of the Filipino, not his battle techniques, that fixed the terminology of calumny." Hence, the supremacy of the white race was instilled in the minds of the soldiers. The soldier also warned the American public about the incompleteness and untruthfulness of cable news reporting, instilling the public misrepresentation of the actual war in the Philippines.

Between the words of the military leaders and the words of an ordinary soldier, the American public seemed to be more inclined to the words of the ordinary soldiers for their truthfulness (Linderman, 1974). In contrast to the US government, whose

decisions and action depended on the accounts and reports of the commanding officers and military leaders who did not even fight even a single battle with the Filipino revolutionary forces, the soldiers' letters contained all the drama, excitement, and actions inside the battlefield. It was in these contradictions where letters became important and relevant. This was so because letters "were granted a truth value, to expose the 'true' political allegiances and activities in a revolutionary time when there were many incentives to hide truth beneath the façade" (Dierks, 2009). According to James Blount (1913), "the War Department did not want the people to know, did not want to admit itself, how plucky, vigorous, and patriotic the resistance was." Therefore, the soldiers, together with some newspaper correspondents, worked together to keep the American public, who had been "kept in darkness," informed (Blount, 1913). As Samuel Hynes (1997) argued, the soldier's tale may be an "imperfect version" of what happened during the war not only because each was telling his own truth, but also due to the "nature of memory and language." Despite these imperfections or limitations, their tales were still the nearest to the truth about what the men did during the war (Hynes, 1997).

Even Senator George Hoar, although he had declined the AIL's invitation to speak during the organization's annual meetings, supported the latter's campaign to end the war. Pointing to the strict military censorship over the cable to and from the Philippines, Senator Hoar averred, "the information which we get as to the events in the Philippine Islands comes almost wholly from sources interested in the promulgation of the war" (Schirmer, 1972). He demanded that, "every effort shall be made to give the people full and accurate knowledge of the facts… so carefully withheld or perverted by the organs of imperialistic policy" (Schirmer, 1972). Thus, unable to rely much on the cable system and news, ordinary military men had no better option but to write letters to show what they thought was the "real" happening, which sometimes contained their own perception and sentiments resulting in derogatory depictions and remarks about Filipinos.

Whereas letter writing was encouraged during the Spanish-American War, letters discussing the atrocities and the brutalities were discouraged during the Philippine-American War.

The government imposed strict censorship. When General Otis threatened to put the newspaper correspondents in the Philippines "off the island," a united staff correspondent of American newspapers stationed in Manila signed a "cablegram of protest" to the US (Blount, 1913).[1] The appeal attested that "the censorship has compelled us to participate in this misrepresentation by excising or altering uncontroverted statements of facts on the plea that 'they would alarm the people at home', or 'have the people of the United States by the ear'" (Blount, 1913). Such facts included hospital reports, failed field operations, field heat exhaustions, naval operations, and complete reports of the situation (Blount, 1913). Even private letters, such as letters to family members and friends, were not exempt from censorship. Nonetheless, despite the restriction order, letters from combat fronts continued to proliferate, and, as a result, some newspapers allotted a column for the publication of some of the soldiers' letters.

Thus, in the middle of the censorship, the letters became one of the most sought sources of information about what was happening in the Philippines. It was through the letters that the public was informed. These letters not only narrated the depth of the US military involvement in the conflict, but also gave a vivid representation of how soldiers treated their enemy. These also gave a powerful, elucidating, and striking revelation about what was happening inside the battleground such as massacres, the burning of houses, and the killings of innocent women and children. The soldiers also included in their letters the decisions and blunders that their superiors had made. These letters also contained the soldiers' thoughts and views about their government and their role as agents of the state, as well as their dreams, their goals, and their aspirations. The soldiers' own experiences gave strong authority to these letters. Sometimes, even the officers giving orders did not know what was happening inside the battlefield, but the ordinary soldiers knew the real battle because they were in the frontline. They knew the actual number and sometimes names of casualties, the manner of fighting, and the nature of the enemies.

Importance of Letter Writing

Letter writing had been part of the ordinary routine of soldiers in the field. As Private Brown wrote his mother, "most of the men in the room, there are ten of us, were writing" (McCallus, 2004).[2] It was through these letters that the soldiers connect to their loved ones, families, and friends back home. Writing letters became an obligation for the soldiers, especially those whose communities could not afford to have a correspondent, because it was the only means of informing their families about what was happening to them. For the family back home, receiving letters was such a happy moment and much-awaited event because it gave them assurance that their sons, brothers, or husbands were still alive or in good health. It somewhat removed the gap between the soldiers and their families left behind and made their worlds closer to each other. The feeling of loneliness and longing for home were some of the main contents of soldiers' letters, mostly longing to be together with the recipients of the letters. In a letter of Private William Mercer, Tennessee Volunteer, to his parents, dated June 27, 1898, he wrote, "I would like to see you all awful bad," after learning that the family back home was planning to go to the mountains (*William Mercer Papers*, Folder No. 189).

Letters served as special window into a person's innermost thought, feelings, and desires. More often than not, these letters contained extreme emotions of love and hatred, of excitement and disappointments, and of victory and defeat. William Merrill Decker (1998) defined letters as "texts that pass from an addresser to an addressee." They contained a recipient. Therefore, unlike diaries and journals, letters are meant to be shared. As such, they are transferred from one person to another, making it a cultural object (Decker, 1998). Interestingly, war letter recipients were mostly female. In a news report, during that time, it said, "at least two-thirds of the missives are addressed to 'Miss' or 'Mrs,' perhaps the greater number to 'Mrs.,' for under this title are the mothers and wives" ("Santiago Mail Obstructed," 1898). In that same article, the writer stated that the words frequently seen on top of the envelopes were "to my beloved wife'" or "to my dear old mother." ("Santiago Mail Obstructed," 1898). With most of the recipients as women and the letter writers

as men, it showed how gender played an important aspect during the war. The letter presented an equal role between both sexes during the war. As Amy Kaplan (2002) observed, there seemed to be a separate space between men and women during empire building, with men usually connected with the "foreign or frontier" while the women with the "domestic or home." Hence, she argued that these two spaces were not separate spheres, but were "inextricably intertwined" and "intimately linked" (Kaplan, 2002). Thus, while most people associated women with home and domestic, Kaplan (2002) argued that women's sphere was flexible and that "women have an important mission on the frontier." They have a "high mission, prerogative, and duty to counsel, to sustain, and to control" (Kaplan, 2002).

Indeed, whereas the war was a world dominated by men, through the letters, the women became part of the drama, excitement, disillusionment, hatred, and bitterness the soldiers were experiencing. By answering their sons', husbands', or friends' letters, they somehow alleviated the soldiers' boredom and loneliness, thus becoming agents and part of the imperial undertaking. And as the letters reached the hand of the AIL members, these became instruments in contesting and reenacting the Philippine-American War into the domestic sphere, which in turn helped in the formulation of the nations' domestic and foreign policies.

In *Uncle Clayton: A Soldier's Life in Letters*, for instance, it had only five letters addressed to males. He addressed his letter four times to his father, with two of these addressed as "dear mother and father," and two for "dear father," and one for his uncle addressed as "dear uncle and auntie." The first letter to his father was when Private Clayton narrated his battle with the Filipino insurgents during his deployment in Guagua, Pampanga, one of the heaviest battle zones during the Philippine-American War. Dated September 22, 1899, Clayton recounted,

> Dear Father, I received your letter a week ago and will answer it now and try to tell you a little about the Philippines. The weather is quite warm today and we have just had dinner, baked beans an excellent thing for this country but then the government never did

> understand how to feed their men in a warm climate…We have been attacked numerous times since we came to garrison this town August 16th. They always attack in the night and the first time the center of attack was at post No. 2 where Sgt. O'Connor was with his outpost. They crept up into a bamboo field within a short distance of us and fired. The flash blinded the men for a moment but they returned it… I have to sleep at the bridge tonight where No.1 post is in case of attack we will be handy… I lost about 25 lbs. but am getting better adapted to this country… (Allard, 2006, p. 57)

It would seem that Clayton's first letter suited what his father wanted to hear. The letter was a response to the query of the father. Although Clayton had been describing his battles and his loss of weight, his letter also gave an assurance to his father that he was in good shape. The second letter was when Clayton asked his father if he could use his political influence for his immediate discharge. In his second letter, dated May 2, 1900, Clayton said,

> Dear Father…I would like to get out of service bad but hated to lose the transportation which is about $130.00. Now, I know a lad who got a politician to help him and all he did was to write to one of the officials at Washington that he would like this man discharged with full benefits and he was. I believe Dan Ainsworth would be just the man because he stands pretty high in politics or did. Do you suppose you could see him about it? It would not do any harm anyway. (Allard, 2006, p. 102)

Although the letter intended not to malign the military or the government institution, it exposed how politics played a role in relation to military affairs. It also showed how the community helped their fellow citizens during the war, revealing the cooperation between the society back home and the soldiers abroad. Through the letters, the people receiving the letters were able to see the places where the soldier writers were, the people they were fighting against, the battles they engaged with, and most importantly, they were able to see the most ordinary things that the soldiers do in their everyday life. On the other hand,

they also gave the people receiving the letters an idea about the extent and brutality of the soldiers' encounters with the enemies. Significantly, it gave a hint of the real feelings of the soldiers towards the government's imperialistic policy. Included in their letters are their grievances, disillusionment, and criticism of their duty as agents of the state.

A number of letters were of this nature. Sergeant Arthur Vickens of the First Nebraska Regiment wrote, "I am not afraid, and I am always ready to do my duty, but I would like someone to tell me what we are fighting for" ("Soldier's Letters", 1899). Edwin Burritt Smith used these words during his speech entitled "Liberty or Despotism" at the AIL's Liberty Meeting at Chicago ("Liberty Track No. 1," 1899).[3] Others brought out their hatred about the whole affair. Captain Elliot of the Kansas Regiment talked about "war" as "hell" ("Liberty Track No. 1," 1899). Sergeant Will A. Rule of Co. H, Colorado Volunteer thus defined Filipino warfare as "when [...] an order calling out all of the women, and children, and then setting fire to houses and shooting down any niggers attempting to escape from the flames" ("Liberty Track No. 1," 1899). The soldiers used this tactic during combat called "guerilla warfare." The Filipinos turned to guerilla tactic in November of 1899 when they no longer had the capacity to undertake a conventional warfare. As the impatience grew in pursuing the guerillas, the war turned more violent and more horrific. Thus, letters containing violence, disillusionment, and demands to end the war, supported the claim of the AIL about the war of criminal aggression.

The soldiers' letters also contained racist rhetoric that benefitted the AIL. From the *Soldiers' Letters* published by the AIL, words soldiers commonly used in describing their actions were "goo-goo hunt," "nigger-fighting business," "rabbit hunting," "kill and burn business" and in regarding the Filipinos were "niggers," "brainless monkeys," "jack-rabbits," "heathens," "Injuns," "dark-skin," "goo-goos," and "Indians." These words would be part of the AIL's rhetoric in formulating their anti-colonial and anti-war poems, speeches, and other forms of expressions. In the AIL's Chicago Liberty Meeting held at Central Music Hall on April 30, 1899, wherein they condemned the

slaughter of Filipinos, J. Laurence Laughlin used the "nigger-hunting" word.[4]

Conclusion

The Philippine-American War tarnished the "exceptional image" of the US. It changed the mindset of some of the idealist soldiers who enlisted in the belief that they are helping a country out from bondage. The soldiers' true feelings about the war and about their government were made known through their letters to their family, friends, and relatives. The anti-imperialists translated the soldiers' words expressing their role as agents of empire into a rhetoric that challenged the institution that the soldiers were serving and the policy that brought them to the war. Using popular genres such as poems, satires, and stories transmitted through newsprints and speeches, the anti-imperialists were able to awaken the consciousness of the American public. The racial undertones in the soldiers' letters aroused the sentiments of the people who, at this moment, were experiencing and were facing racial problems back home. The Philippine-American War, as well as the future of the Philippines, was now at the center of public and government debates.

Soldiers assigned to the Philippines during the initial victory of Dewey probably thought that they were luckier than those who arrived during the onset of the Philippine-American War. One reason was that there was no censorship imposed at that time. Thus, the soldiers were encouraged to write home because of the "splendid little war," wherein they could boast about their victory, heroism, and valor. In addition, their relationship with the Filipinos was not as hostile as during the war. But when the war against the Filipinos erupted, the US government-imposed censorship, especially on the news about the war in the Philippines. As such, even the letters of the soldiers were scrutinized by government agents. Whatever the course of action and whatever circumstances they encountered, the solders continued sending letters to their loved ones at home. When the war with the Filipinos broke out, there was a proliferation of soldiers' letters, making these the main sources of information of

their communities about the real situation in the Philippines, which the national government and the military tried to conceal.

The soldiers' letters with their unformed and unstructured nature consisted of numerous grammatical and spelling errors. However, this did not make the letters less credible. On the contrary, became more dependable because of its "naïveness," devoid of any political restrictions. The ordinariness of the letters represented the ordinary life of the person writing it. Although official documents were important, it did not give the whole picture. Philip Caputo, a Vietnam veteran, writing about his experiences inside the battleground during the Vietnam War in the 1970's, said, "there was another side to the war, about which no songs were sung, no jokes made. The fighting had not only become more intense, but more vicious" (Caputo, 1977).[5] The soldiers' accounts about the actual battles and activities gave the reader the feel of what was life inside the camp. They gave details about the place, the people, and the ordinary life, which provided those who were not there a view of what was inside. They represented a vivid picture, a minute detail that furnished meat to the traditional straightforward retelling of events.

The numerous letters that Senator Hoar received from soldiers and parents gave him the courage to pursue an investigation of the inhuman acts committed by the U.S. army and volunteers in the Philippines. The soldiers' letters, together with the AIL's propagation of anti-war sentiment, prompted the policy makers to act. President Roosevelt officially ended the war, although the fighting was still ongoing and would last a decade more in the southern part of the Philippines. President Roosevelt abrupt declaration of the war's end was a victory for the anti-imperialists. The anti-imperialists knew that the President's act was to silence their group, but they were quick to recompose and renew their battle. The creation of an investigating body and the ending of the war meant triumph for the AIL. The end of the war did not mean the end of the anti-imperialists struggle. Instead, it reenergized the AIL to continue their fight against the root of the problem, the imperial policy of the government. This time, the AIL members were pushing the government "to right the wrong" they did to the Filipino people by giving them independence.

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Notes

[1] See also *Review of Reviews*, (August 1899) 137-138.

[2] Letter of Private Clifford Brown dated 22 June 1899 to his mother published in Joseph McCallus', Gentleman Soldier, 63.

[3] *Liberty Tract No. 1.*, Central Anti-Imperialist League , Chicago 1899, original copy is in William G. Sumner Papers, Yale University Library. Also printed in *The Anti-Imperialist Reader: A Documentary History of anti-Imperialism in the United States Vol. 1* edited by Philip Foner and Richard Winchester (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc.,1984), 293. Edwin Burritt Smith was a writer, lawyer, teacher, and political reformer from Illinois.

[4] *Liberty Tract No. 1.*, Central Anti-Imperialist League, Chicago 1899, original copy is in William G. Sumner Papers, Yale University Library. Also printed in *The Anti-Imperialist Reader: A Documentary History of anti-Imperialism in the United States Vol. 1* edited by Philip Foner and Richard Winchester (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc.,1984), 292. James Laurence Laughlin finished his Ph.D. at Harvard University in 1876 and taught political economy at Harvard, Cornell, and University of Chicago.

[5] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1977), 228. Also published also in *The Vietnam Reader,* ed. Stewart O'nan (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1998), 159.

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