We stand at just such a moment. Perhaps, with enough of what Benjamin identified as signs of resistance — courage and cunning, humor and fortitude — we might take hold of the histories within us; illuminated by crisis, they might guide us into it and through it. To achieve this, the historian's task is to cultivate what Benjamin called the "gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past." Our charge may be less to light the way than to keep torches lit from which unforeseen potentials can be set ablaze.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Kramer is Associate Professor at the Department of History, Vanderbilt University. He may be reached at http://www.vanderbilt.edu/historydept/kramer.html or paulkrameronline.com

# Decolonizing the History of the Philippine-American War

**by Paul Kramer**

The Philippine-American War, the subject of this book, is often said to be a "forgotten" episode in US. history. While the intentions of those who identify it in this way are often admirable—frequently aiming to remedy this oblivion—the statement is nonetheless technically incorrect. The Philippine—American War has not been forgotten. It has been hidden. Most of all, the war has been smothered beneath the protective mantle of the much shorter war that immediately preceded it, the Spanish—American War, a war that unfolds in American history textbooks and in popular memory as a kind of Gay-'90s comic—opera of pleasantness, innocence and easy heroism, its soundtrack by John Philip Sousa, its central tableau Theodore Roosevelt's over-the-top charge up San Juan Hill. We are told, as much by then-Secretary of State John Hay as by the historians that have parroted him, that the war was "splendid" and "little." The solitary Paci•c cut-away in the war's drama features Commodore George Dewey crushing the Spanish Navy at Manila Bay with the thundering weaponry of the U.S.'s new navy. Sometimes, just before the curtain falls, audiences witness the outbreak of something called the "Philippine Insurrection," when "insurgents" there refuse to recognize the United States' sovereignty over the Islands, ceded by Spain at the Treaty of Paris.

In fact, the "insurgents" in question were representatives of a newly independent state, the Philippine Republic, declared by the revolutionary leader Emilio Aguinaldo in June 1898. Exiled to Hong Kong following an earlier, abortive revolt in 1896-97, Aguinaldo had been cultivated and encouraged by U.S. consuls in Hong Kong and Singapore. Commodore George Dewey himself had attempted to use Aguinaldo without recognizing his authority, returning him to the Philippines, where the revolutionary had rallied his forces against the Spanish. By October 1898, when treaty negotiations between Spain and the United States had begun in Paris, Filipino revolutionaries had already destroyed Spanish military power in much of the Northern and Central archipelago. Indeed, for the Philippine Republic, it was not at all clear what if any "sovereignty" Spain still possessed in the Islands that it might bargain with at war's end. Yet former Spanish and American antagonists joined hands in excluding Filipino diplomats from treaty deliberations. The U.S. Army had occupied Manila in August 1898—excluding Filipino troops from the city—and as a settlement was being negotiated, President McKinley had sent an additional 10,000 troops to the Islands. In early February, the U.S. Senate narrowly rati•ed the treaty annexing the Islands, just two days after tensions on the ground between U.S. and Filipino forces erupted in war. But the terms for understanding that war would be dictated by the Treaty itself: it would not be a war between two recognized states, but simply the U.S. enforcing its "sovereignty" in the Philippines against a newly internal "insurrection."

By any measure, the struggle against that "insurrection" would be neither splendid nor little. It would begin as a conventional war, but in the face of defeats by Philippine forces over the •rst nine months, Aguinaldo adopted guerrilla tactics, attempting to use the support, intelligence and camou•age of Filipino villagers to wear down U.S. forces through hit-and-run assaults, exhaustion and disease. The strategy worked through the end of 1900 when, following the re-election of President McKinley, General Arthur MacArthur declared martial law and authorized a wider range of tactics, including the forced "reconcentration" of rural populations, the very tactic that had outraged Americans less than four years earlier when used by Spain against Cuban revolutionaries. Many U.S. soldiers took these orders as authorization for a war without limits, looting and destroying civilian property, torturing captives for interrogation or sadistic pleasure, and refusing to take prisoners. Despite censorship by U.S. commanders, news of these "marked severities" made their way back to the United States, and the conduct of the war became politicized by means of an anti-imperialist movement, eventually resulting in a Senate investigation in 1902. By that point, however, Aguinaldo and other key generals had been captured and a civilian government under the Philippine Commission had been inaugurated in the Philippines. While resistance to U.S. control would continue, President Roosevelt officially declared the war over on July 4, 1902.

The concealment of the Philippine-American War, as a shadowy "insurrection" following the Spanish-American War, was no mean achievement. It had lasted over three years by the most conservative estimates, involved approximately 160,000 total U.S. troops—a peak of 60,000 in the Islands at any one time—and had led to approximately 4,500 U.S. deaths. Filipino forces suffered approximately 20,000 losses, while an estimated 250,000 Filipino civilians lost their lives through violence, starvation and disease. In its brutality and violation of the rights of an emerging Republic, the U.S. invasion appeared to many critics to violate American exceptionalism, the sense that the United States stood for principles of "self-government" and "freedom." In subsequent decades, memory of the war was allowed to strategically erode. If Americans had been enjoined to "Remember the Maine!" during the Spanish-American War, the term "Philippine Insurrection" itself was an invitation to forget. The machineries of martial memory—distinct veterans organizations, commemorative ceremonies and honors—remained largely stilled. Over the next five decades, the "Insurrection" would be the Spanish-American War's ugly, hidden secret.

It was this book, *Little Brown Brother*, published in 1961, that would revisit this long-abandoned history, doing so from a critical perspective unlike anything that had been written before.[1] Its author, Leon Wolff, had been born in November 1914 and grown up in Chicago in a Jewish family, the son of a traveling salesman. He had graduated from Northwestern University, then served stateside as a second lieutenant in the Air Force during World War II. Following the war, he had bounced from job to job, eventually starting a successful correspondence school, the Lincoln School of Practical Nursing, in Chicago; in 1953, he and his family would relocate to Los Angeles, where he would transplant the business and cultivate his interests in golf and jazz.[2] Wolff also had literary aspirations, and would compose four books over the next dozen years. *Low Level Mission* (1957) described the United States' disastrous World War II air campaign against German-controlled oil fields in Ploesti, Romania.[3] *In Flanders Field: The 1917 Campaign* (1958), an account of Britain's tragic World War I offensive in Belgium, was Wolff's most successful work, a number-one best-seller in Britain in all categories, eventually selling nearly one million copies.[4] Wolff followed with *Little Brown Brother* (1961), then authored a final work, *Lockout* (1965), a pro-labor history of the 1892 steelworkers' strike at Homestead, Pennsylvania.[5]

It remains unclear what exactly attracted Wolff to the long-hidden annexation and conquest of the Philippines. According to his son William, Wolff was animated by a powerful and persistent sympathy for the "little guy," his goal in writing being to "elucidate the tragedy of human conflict, specifically focusing on campaigns in which often amazingly oblivious political and military authorities sacrificed their troops in ill-conceived, illogical and brutal military adventures."[6] His narrative of the Philippine-American War in Little Brown Brother is consistent

with this orientation in many ways. While he does not always like them, Filipino "insurrectos" are among his "little guys," and Wolff's narrative respects Filipino inspirations for independence, the first monograph by an American to do so since the war itself, six decades earlier. The majority of the work is dedicated to the complex, diplomatic interchanges between Filipino revolutionary leaders and U.S. officials in early and mid-1898; the Philippine-American War itself begins only about two-thirds into the book. This history is one of American ignorance, hypocrisy and exclusion, as American officials, having given Philippine revolutionaries good reason to believe American promises of "liberation," shut Filipinos out of the Treaty of Paris negotiations, stake a preemptive claim to the Philippines itself, and ultimately start a war of imperial aggression. Wolff is in his glory puncturing the pretensions of U.S. imperialist politicians who rationalize empire with "uplift," the naiveté of anti-imperialists, the ignorance of the Americans with regard to the Islands, the self-deceptions of the Philippine Commission regarding the depth of support for the revolution, and the inflation of U.S. victories by U.S. military commanders in hopes of ending an intractable guerrilla war by fiat. This was no "splendid little war." "It was an old picture," he writes darkly of Filipino defeats during the early stages of conventional warfare, "white men efficiently pumping bullets into the backs of little brown men floundering through the underbrush in search of cover."[7]

With *Little Brown Brother*, Wolff opened to fresh scrutiny a long-shuttered war of U.S. empire, and did so in a self-consciously multi-perspectival manner that consistently tacked between U.S. and Filipino military viewpoints. His exposé was powered by skewering irony. It comes as no surprise that virtually the only figure exempted from its barbs is Mark Twain, whose bitterly satirical "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" flows more or less seamlessly into Wolff's own analysis and tone.[8] Wolff's affirmation of Twain pertains equally well to his own work: "Satire clarifies statistics and sharpens logic, and it had been long indeed since simple citizens had been faced by a light this blinding."[9] Ironic insights abound in the text. Allowing McKinley to pronounce at length on the United States' duty to protect the Filipinos from European powers and to "uplift and civilize and Christianize them," for example, Wolff observes wryly that "[t]here are, unfortunately, certain lacunae and misconceptions here."[10] Responding to Dean Worcester's assertion that the war was "humane," Wolff offers: "A war that kills five thousand men on both sides, maims, cripples and breaks down thousands and causes endless misery to countless thousands more, is a curious variety of humane war."[11]

It is only in his bibliography that Wolff abandons his quicksilver irony for an unusually earnest statement of purpose. "Now that the story is ended," he writes, "it may be well for the author to state his evident bias concerning the

Insurrection." The Spanish-American War which preceded it was "unnecessary," he declares, and "the Filipinos were indeed capable of self-rule." Besides, "the problem was not ours," and the Islands' "forcible annexation" had been "a moral wrong." Wolff asserts that an independent Philippines might have been militarily indefensible and that "in subsequent years the United States did govern her new wards with astonishing decency." But these considerations "only counterpoint[ed]" a larger, anti-imperialist perspective, which Wolff believed "few [did] not share sixty years after the event."[12]

While it is unclear what role decolonization, the global collapse of formal colonialism in Africa and Asia after World War II, played in Wolff's thinking and writing, his rediscovery of the Philippine-American War in 1961, sympathetic to the aspirations of the Philippine Republic and its anticolonial struggle against the United States, captured something of a "decolonizing" spirit. Several reviewers suggested as much. In "an age of America's international prominence and of dying imperialism," wrote Leonard Casper, the book's critical implications were "too clear and too numerous to need comment."[13] Carlos Romulo, Philippine Ambassador to the United States and former president of the UN General Assembly, found the book "timely in the light of the emergence of the new nation states."[14] This was especially evident when the work was contrasted with the last, previous historical monograph on the "Philippine Insurrection," the 1939 *Soldiers in the Sun: An Adventure in Imperialism*, by Captain William Thaddeus Sexton. Sexton directed his work, published by the Military Service Publishing Company, at aging veterans of the con•ict, making quick work of the Philippine-American diplomatic entanglements that Wolff would emphasize and lingering on scenes of battle. Interpretively, *Soldiers in the Sun* was the Philippine-American War for the age of *Gunga Din*—a film released the same year—chock full of treacherous "insurgents," loyal "natives" and traitorous anti-imperialists.

Wolff's account in Little Brown Brother had closer kinship to Graham Greene's novel of decolonization, *The Quiet American*, published in 1955; both had a rich sense, somewhere between irony and tragedy, of the self-deceptions and horri•c consequences of U.S. imperialism. Wolff's publishers, however, split on the "decolonizing" impulses in the book. Doubleday gave its edition, intended for American circulation, the subtitle "How the United States Purchased and Paci•ed the Philippine Islands at the Century's Turn," a nasty bit of alliterative imperialism that ran roughshod over Wolff's own interpretive frame. Longman's simultaneous British edition, however, bore the more sensational, and accurate, subtitle "America's Forgotten Bid for Empire Which Cost 250,000 Lives." Published on the brink of U.S. escalation in Vietnam, Little Brown Brother gained momentum with the politicization of the war, as publishers sought critical, historical perspectives on U.S. empire. The book—carrying its more critical subtitle—was reissued in the Philippines in 1968 and 1971 by Erewhon, by Kraus

Reprint in New York in 1970, and most recently by Oxford University Press in 1991.

*Little Brown Brother* was well-received in both popular and scholarly venues. In 1961, *The New York Times* listed *Little Brown Brother* as one of "100 Outstanding Books for Summer Reading," and as one of the 250 most important books of the year.[15] On its literary merits as an historical work, *Little Brown Brother* was awarded the Francis Parkman Prize by the Society of American Historians in 1962. While generally positive in their assessments, reviewers were not, however, uniformly impressed. Several emphasized Wolff's rescue from oblivion of a war that had been, in the words of R. F. Husband, "overshadowed by two world wars and international distress."[16] There was wide, favorable agreement on what British historian D. W. Brogan called Wolff's "lively pen."[17] David Marquand, for example, praised Wolff's "great narrative skill" and "splendidly ironic style."[18] Readers differed, however, on Wolff's "objectivity." For Brogan, Wolff did "not inspire much con•dence in his judgment or in his accuracy."[19] Other readers, however, found Wolff's approach appropriately balanced. Wolff made "no concealment of his belief that the taking of the Philippines was 'a moral wrong,'" noted H. W. Baehr, but he had "no personal devils" and did "not stack the deck against the United States, either in his description of military events or in discussing the political aspects of the question."[20] Carlos Romulo criticized Wolff's neglect of sources like the Philippine Insurgent Records, but praised the work for its sympathy for the Philippine Revolution. "This book authoritatively and objectively vindicates the Filipinos in the Philippine-American War," he wrote.[21]

Despite its many recognized strengths, the sharp limits of Wolff's book are also plain to the contemporary reader. Its lack of any citation apparatus beyond the bibliography—most frustrating for the scholar—is not its most significant weakness. Rather, in many ways *Little Brown Brother* fails to qualify as a "decolonized" history at all, or if so, only in relation to the thoroughgoing imperialist accounts that had come before. Relying almost exclusively on primary documents by Americans, Wolff's account of the Philippine Revolution is crude. In the absence of sources on Filipinos' ideologies, he represents the revolt as "instinctual," a reflexive response to Spanish "enslavement." The Revolution's central institution is "the murderous Katipunan"; its leader, Andrés Bonifacio, is "a demagogue and advocate of pure violence."[22] The reader smells a strong whiff of Orientalism in his representation of Filipino leaders; while a U.S. leader like General Elwell Otis is ignorant, self-deluded, and insufficiently aggressive, Emilio Aguinaldo is "[s]tubborn, resentful, fanatic, and clever."[23] Wolff's descriptions of Philippine animists and Muslims, while they occupy a small part of his book, are not "decolonized" at all, but are completely congruent with the perspectives of U.S. military commanders and colonial officials: Negritos are "stunted in size

and brain power" and "all" Muslim males of Mindanao are "religious fanatics."[24] On occasion, Wolff's sweeping rhetoric gets in the way of precision; attempting to maximize critical targets for himself, he can also contradict himself, as when he condemns Otis' censorship of foreign correspondents, then turns on Otis' critics, rationalizing censorship as a military necessity.[25] Wolff's denunciation of some anti-imperialist tactics is somewhat puzzling, as when he attacks Edward Atkinson for urging U.S. soldiers in the Islands not to fight, calling his propaganda "ruinous for morale—perhaps even traitorous."[26] Wolff also has a soft spot for what he calls the "altruism" of the civilian colonial regime that took power under William Howard Taft toward the end of the war, calling it "a novelty in the colonial history of western world" on the basis of what he himself concedes was "only a set of promises."[27]

The struggle to "decolonize" the history of the Philippine-American War continues, but Leon Wolff's *Little Brown Brother* occupies a crucial place in the history of that enterprise. While the book has been superseded analytically by more recent research on the Philippine-American War, especially Stuart Creighton Miller's 1982 *"Benevolent Assimilation,"* Wolff's boldness, wit and literary flair are likely to remain unmatched.[28] It was his accomplishment to dredge the full trenches of American forgetting for a once and future war that eerily evokes our own moment. At a time when the United States is engaged in another war on behalf of "civilization" whose exceptional character is said to place it beyond the realm of international law, whose rigors are said to necessitate torture and prisoner abuse, and whose successful conclusion in "victory" is said to be both imminent and impossible, we may never have needed the skeptical, irreverent spirit of Leon Wolff's *Little Brown Brother* more.

—Baltimore, Maryland, December 8, 2005

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Kramer is Associate Professor at the Department of History, Vanderbilt University. He may be reached at http://www.vanderbilt.edu/historydept/kramer.html or paulkrameronline.com