

Colonial Crossings: Prostitution, Disease and the Boundaries of Empire during the Philippine-American War

by Paul Kramer

Major Owen Sweet was in trouble. The prostitutes from Japan had been both a necessary evil and a pragmatic good, he explained to his superiors; in any case, they had been dictated by unfortunate circumstance. Four months into the United States' war against the Philippine Republic, the 23rd Infantry had taken control of Jolo, in the southern islands, from Spanish forces, and his troops had quickly succumbed to what he called "the lax moral conditions incident to the Philippines and Oriental countries generally." A "personal" investigation had exposed a veritable festival of vice: gambling houses, grog shops, saloons, and "several resorts of prostitution" inhabited by Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino "immoral women." Sweet feared that a spark might fly out of this chaotic mix that could touch off a second, Muslim-American conflict that the U. S. military could not afford. By his own account, he had sought to impose order on this moral unruliness, a "system of attrition" consisting of raids and closures and the expulsion of nearly all local sex workers.²⁹ But Sweet had been called to task for not going far enough. He had allowed about thirty Japanese prostitutes to remain in Jolo, where he mandated their regular, compulsory venereal inspection to protect American soldiers from disease; in the process he had given explicit government sanction to the "social evil." In Jolo, as elsewhere, it turned out that moral empire and military—hygienic empire could not easily be squared, and Sweet had chosen.

His choice had been controversial, and that controversy can illuminate both its particular moment and the cultural history of U.S. global power more broadly. At base it was about bodies: the bodies of Asian women and U.S. soldiers in the Philippines, on the one hand, and the "body" of U.S. empire, on the other. This second kind of body was strictly metaphorical. Or was it? As Americans in the metropole learned that U.S. military authorities like Sweet had been regulating commercial sex in the interest of venereal control—a policy successfully barred from the United States by "social purity" reformers to that point almost without exception—many made sense of this disclosure by linking together the two types of bodies: the meanings of colonialism for the American "body politic" could be read from the fortunes of U.S. soldiers' bodies in the Philippines. Particularly in the hands of colonialism's skeptics and critics, regulated prostitution in the Philippines came to symbolize colonialism's nefarious impact on the metropole: a medical technique aimed at preventing contagion, it would promote other, and perhaps more sinister, "contaminations."

While reformers agreed that something stank at the intersection of military occupation, commercialized sex, and its medical regulation, they tracked the smell to diverging roots. Was the problem that the U.S. military in the Philippines was sanctioning prostitution (as social purity campaigners maintained), or that its efforts were attached to and symbolic of an illegitimate invasion (as anti-colonialists argued)? Was the problem racial in that it conceded to and sanitized colonial “miscegenation,” or that it undermined national exceptionalist pretensions by rendering the United States more “European”? Or was the problem merely that regulated prostitution in the Philippines was visible, raising questions about America’s moral image in the world?

The U.S. military-colonial regulation of prostitution threatened to sunder two related sets of imagined barriers. The first insulated the United States from Europe; for American social purity reformers, the regulation of prostitution was—along with imperialism, statism, and sexual license—closely associated with European societies. Not for nothing was it known as the “continental system.” The sudden revelation that U.S. military authorities in the Philippines were, for the first time, also practicing regulation on a large scale prompted fears about the weakening of American moral exceptionalism. The second barrier shielded metropole from colony; coupled to American hopes for the stabilizing export of U.S. institutions to the new colonies were anxieties about the unanticipated and unwelcome “reactions” that might flow the other way, blowbacks that could include corrupting venereal disease, immoral methods for controlling it, and race-mixing.³⁰ Along both axes, regulated prostitution represented a dangerous colonial crossing that broke through the protective enclosures that Americans had hoped to raise around themselves, even as they ventured out into “the world.”

Approached in this way, the history of U.S. military invasion, prostitution, and venereal disease control during the Philippine-American War provides one window onto the cultural history of U.S. imperial boundaries: of how Americans marked the place where the United States ended and the rest of the world began and how they made sense of their inability to completely control the processes that flowed across that elusive line. To talk about the bodies of U.S. soldiers and the hazards that sapped their force and purity was also to talk about the body of U.S. empire at a moment when that body’s limits, constitution, and vulnerabilities were being hotly disputed. The rhetorical-presence of Filipinos’ bodies as sources of threat—and absence when it came to questions of sexual violence and vulnerability to disease—also said much about that imperial body’s contours and occlusions. This examination of the body politics of empire, then, illuminates a history both of U.S. military-imperial disease control in a colonial setting and of the way that gendered and racialized fears of sexual contagion expressed and gave shape to deeper anxieties about the permeability of a globalizing United States.³¹

By the time Sweet sat down to defend himself, the coerced medical inspection of female sex workers had become a core element of municipal policy, sanitary strategy, and moral reform throughout the globe: First developed in continental Europe, its most varied projections were in the British Empire, where the Contagious Diseases Acts (CD Acts) empowered police officers in select districts to arrest prostitutes, subject them to venereal examination, and incarcerate the infected in “lock hospitals.” Wherever practiced, regulated prostitution employed a double standard by not requiring the inspection and arrest of men. In its institutional imagination, women’s bodies unleashed infection to which men were vulnerable but which they somehow did not transmit either to women or to each other.³²

As regulation spread, so too did movements aimed at its abolition, especially in the Anglo-American world. As Ian Tyrrell has shown, these efforts brought together evangelical Christians, feminists, and suffragists who assaulted the state’s toleration of vice for distinct and overlapping reasons. As regulation moved on imperial channels, organizations such as the World Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WWCTU) and International Federation for the Abolition of the State Regulation of Vice mobilized an Anglo-American, and self-consciously “Anglo-Saxon,” constituency to oppose it. The high point of Anglo-American cooperation along these lines was reached when two Americans played a key role in scandalizing India’s CD Acts, which were abolished eleven years after their repeal in the British metropole. In this cooperation, however, the Americans did not tire of pointing out that, apart from a few notable—and fleeting—municipal experiments, as in St. Louis, the United States had managed to remain “pure” of regulated vice.³³

The U.S. military occupation of Manila in August 1898 permitted another, secondary occupation: what one startled commentator called a “cosmopolitan harlotry” entered the city from innumerable ports of call, chasing presumed sexual demand.³⁴ The largest numbers of prostitutes from abroad were Japanese, their numbers multiplying by nearly fifteen times during the first six years of the occupation. But more shocking to U.S. military authorities were prostitutes of European descent, including Russians, Austrians, Italians, Spaniards, Australians, and Americans.³⁵ The vast majority of Manila’s sex workers, however, were Filipinas, many of them displaced from the countryside by rising rents, export agriculture, or Spanish repression and coerced into prostitution.³⁶

The inspection regime was instituted in the context of a perceived medical crisis. By October there were three hundred U.S. soldiers in the hospital for venereal disease, specifically syphilis and gonorrhea, and fifty operations had been conducted. Without reserve troops, and fearing that disease might leave military efforts “seriously crippled,” Provost Marshal General Robert Hughes felt compelled to “jealously guard the man behind the gun.” The problem was

that while the military Board of Health and police had made “strenuous efforts” to keep out foreign prostitutes, it was nearly impossible to locate “native females of bad character” and “prevent communication between them and our soldiers.” For a peseta, a “native” brought “the female” to “any designated locality” to meet a client, a transaction preventable only by “making prisoners of the females.”³⁷

Some medical officers lamented these encounters in their own right, apart from an explicit disease context; many believed Filipinos to be inherently diseased (venereally and otherwise), making miscegenation both the sign and trigger of physical and moral “degeneration” among white American soldiers. For some, contracting venereal disease and sex with “native women” constituted related forms of bodily treason, the potential denial of one’s physical constitution to the state.

In assembling their regulatory system, U.S. military—medical officers traveled a path of least resistance, continuing and modifying local practices initiated by Spain. A system had been put into effect in Manila by Spanish authorities in the late 1880s; a decade later, just prior to the collapse of Spanish rule, it enforced the mandatory registration of brothels and the inspection, incarceration, and treatment of infected women.³⁸ The U.S. regime drew on this Spanish framework (including its funding by compulsory fees and penalties paid by sex workers), but there were also differences: examinations now took place weekly rather than biweekly, and U.S. inspectors were not ordered to counsel prostitutes against their trade (although some would do so on their own). In a relatively straightforward case of what I have elsewhere called transimperial borrowing, U.S. officials self-consciously inherited and adapted policies from the very empire they were deposing rather than imported policy models from neighboring empires, U.S. colonies, or the U.S. metropole.³⁹ While “the regulations of Honolulu and St. Louis on prostitution” were on file, army surgeon and board member Charles Lynch noted, “no changes were deemed necessary in the methods pursued.”⁴⁰

By November 1898, just under three months into the occupation, the Bureau of Municipal Inspection, as it was called, was well under construction. The board also established a “womans [sic] hospital” for prostitutes found to be diseased in a Wing of the San Lazaro leper hospital and turned a former vaccination center into an “office of inspection,” where women free of venereal disease were given certificates and from which infected women were taken to the hospital by the police. Manila’s police force was tasked with visiting “every known house of prostitution” at least once a week to check certificates and, in the case of a lapse in inspection, to close it “until every inmate has been properly examined.”⁴¹

As elsewhere, the system’s first principle was the female prostitute as the perpetual and exclusive source of contagion. In colonial contexts this assumption was often intertwined with racialized medical theories that cast colonized peoples

as reservoirs of dangerous tropical disease.⁴² The U.S. Army's inspections in the Philippines were, at first, no different, with heightened concern for the health of its soldiers unaccompanied by mandatory systems to inspect them. Such inspections were thought to be (as indeed they were) intrusive, humiliating, demoralizing, and dishonoring; sex workers apparently had no such honor to lose.

Over the next two and a half years the inspection program became more systematized and intensive. It incorporated some functions formerly exercised by the police, employing a "native physician (Spanish)" to visit brothels, hiring a "lay inspector" as his assistant, and replacing weekly certificates with "inspection books."⁴³ The fee for exams was set at \$1 Mexican if performed at the hospital, twice that if done in brothels; fees were placed on a racial sliding scale, doubled for white women. The exams themselves cost an estimated 47 cents per woman. Between mid-1899 and early 1901 the Bureau turned an impressive 23 percent profit.⁴⁴

In early March 1901 the examination system was reorganized and placed under the Board of Health, a complex agency charged with numerous sanitary and health-related tasks. This reassignment may have been undertaken in response to erupting scandal. It may also have been related to broader public health concerns; when bubonic plague struck Manila in January 1900, the board had inspected all brothels, "as it was believed that plague might spread from such foci." Whatever the rationale, the new system was whiter in personnel. The board hired an American physician "who does the work of the two former native physicians," assigning him an American orderly and lay inspector, both "excellent men."⁴⁵

The new regime was also more forceful. Just two months into the shift, it was incarcerating 86 percent more women than previously; it had registered 115 percent more. It aspired halfheartedly to broaden its coverage to include soldiers and teamsters employed by the quarter-master, "among whom there is much venereal disease." It also enlisted the help of church women who spoke Spanish or Tagalog, and who were "not afraid of moral contamination from these prostitutes," to attempt to set the women on the true path. (For Lynch, Filipinas were especially reformable, having sunk to prostitution "through necessity" and not, as with American, European, and Japanese women, as a matter of hard-core professionalism.)⁴⁶

Inspectors, however, ran into myriad problems of enforcement as sex workers resisted medical inspection. In an attempt to "dissociate their minds from the idea that the hospital is a prison," the institution began to offer treatment for women's "other complaints"; while few women initially availed themselves, military hygienists remained confident that they would, "as there is no other place where they can obtain good treatment."⁴⁷ The biggest challenges involved identification.

First, how were U.S. medical authorities to recognize a brothel? The imposition of inspection fees meant that new, uninspected brothels would likely proliferate on the outskirts of surveyed districts; bribery virtually assured they would spring up inside the system itself. In May 1900, Dr. Ira Brown, president of the Board of Health, suggested that a strictly bounded red-light district be formed, in which only prostitutes could reside and to which they would be confined; such women could not be allowed to “mingle with outside society.” This would help respectable Manila residents insulate themselves from vice and prospective clients clearly identify brothels. In the latter category, some men “suffering from acute alcoholism” had mistakenly “entered respectable houses located near those occupied by prostitutes.”⁴⁸

The thorniest predicaments of identification occurred, however, when it came to individuals. While U.S. military-medical authorities tended to depict the “vicious woman” as an unchanging type, they also knew that the category of “prostitute” phased off uneasily into the general population. When faced with an insufficient number of sex workers, Brown noted with dismay, “the enterprising women send out to a neighbor and ask her to come in and help out”; this enlistee was “not regularly in the business,” escaped inspection, and, it was believed, spread disease.⁴⁹ But it was also challenging to identify even those women who were formally registered. For over a year certificates and inspection books had carried only names and identification numbers. But just as they often avoided surveillance and its costs, Manila’s sex workers soon developed a vigorous trade in up-to-date, disease-free inspection documents. It is unclear exactly how the exchange functioned, but subterfuges were met with a technological response. In 1900 inspectors were ordered to photograph individual women and place one copy of their photograph on an index card for reference and another on their inspection book “so that one woman cannot substitute examination or book for another.”⁵⁰

While its most elaborate manifestation was in Manila, smaller-scale efforts at regulation were also undertaken in provincial cities, a process enabled by the decentralized nature of the U.S. command. The extent of these practices remains hard to assess, but the case of Jolo, where we began, suggests their variable and contextual character, operating as they did with a wide range of resources and subject to diverse political pressures. In Jolo, Sweet had aimed at the “elimination” of “native women” who were, as one second lieutenant put it, “according to common report almost universally affected with venereal disease.”⁵¹ But other sex workers were more or less invited in. Major B. B. Pratt recalled that shortly after the U.S. occupation, he was informed that “some Japanese women (prostitutes)” then in North Borneo wished to land at Jolo. After “considering the subject carefully,” Pratt had permitted them entry. When they settled on “one of the principal streets,” however, he directed them to relocate “near the outskirts in the vicinity of the walls”; they subsequently moved into four houses, one of them designated as a hospital, on a “back street” of the city.⁵²

While both Pratt and Sweet later denied the charge of “licensing,” the Jolo brothels were in many ways projects of state. Patrols stationed near them were ordered to segregate them racially, “to allow no persons but soldiers to enter the premises.”⁵³ U.S. soldiers were prohibited from entering the brothel during inspections, if they were found diseased, or after the playing of taps, “except by written pass signed by the Company commander.”⁵⁴ The brothels were also inspected once a month. The Japanese women were forbidden “to advertise themselves by parading in the streets,” made to submit to weekly medical inspection by a U.S. Army surgeon, and, if found diseased, confined to the hospital.⁵⁵ Some American observers saw the system as a success because of its virtual invisibility. One lieutenant marveled that “any lady could have lived there the whole time” of the U.S. occupation and “never have known that such places existed.”⁵⁶ When disorder broke out, it was due to the U.S. soldiers, “fighting and breaking furniture,” stealing from the women and assaulting them.⁵⁷

The decision to let the Japanese prostitutes into Jolo had been driven in large measure by military concerns, specifically by a sense of the urgent need to direct U.S. soldiers’ sexual aggressions away from the surrounding Muslim population. According to Captain C. E. Hampton, “The report was by Sulu women that some of the soldiers had made improper advances to them.”⁵⁸ This was an extremely flammable situation, as the 23rd Infantry was charged precisely with preventing a local outbreak of hostilities that might drain U.S. forces away from the ongoing struggle against the Philippine Republic. Furthermore, as Hampton discovered through an “intimate investigation,” prostitution was “practically unknown” in Jolo, and any “interference, however slight,” with Muslim women would be “resented in the hottest and most savage manner.”⁵⁹ In this light the admission and inspection of the Japanese prostitutes was credited with having prevented not only the spread of venereal disease but the start of another war. The “toleration” of the brothels had, according to one captain, “not only promoted the health and contentment of the enlisted men” but “avoided unfortunate complications” with Muslims outside the walled town, where “our men would undoubtedly have gone in violation of orders.”⁶⁰

While U.S. military-medical authorities did not worry themselves over the fact, the Philippine-American War accelerated the spread of venereal disease in the rural Filipino population throughout the archipelago. While Americans generally assumed that U.S. forces had acquired disease only from their sexual encounters in the Islands, army doctors themselves conceded that large numbers of troops had left North America infected. According to Ken De Bevoise, seventeen out of every one thousand candidates for enlistment had been rejected on these grounds; venereal disease rates had risen during training as brothels sprang up around U.S. bases. While women in the Philippines would be incarcerated when identified with symptoms of venereal disease, soldiers found infected at the Presidio in San Francisco had been given medicine and returned

to duty. An army official who traveled with one of the first regiments to depart, in mid—1898, reported that 480 of the unit’s approximately 1,300 men had been “registered for venereal disease” prior to their departure.⁶¹

This rate rose again following the landing of U.S. troops in Manila. And the rapid dispersal of U.S. soldiers into the Philippine countryside after 1900, given the accompanying destruction of rural resources and massive dislocation and starvation of Filipinos that ensued, provided ideal conditions for the explosive spread of venereal disease. Guerrilla war meant close social contact between U.S. soldiers and Filipinos in garrisoned towns. Survival strategies among uprooted rural families in the Philippines included sending daughters to towns and cities in search of work. By shattering material livelihoods, the U.S. invasion not only generated demand for sexual laborers but spurred their supply. In larger towns, brothels were established to serve U.S. garrisons, becoming dense in disease vectors. In smaller centers “a transient class of native women” traveled “from one post to another.”⁶² Few Americans registered the possibility that Filipinas might contract disease from U.S. soldiers, although Major F. A. Meacham of the Manila Board of Health observed in mid—1901 that syphilis was “spreading among the native population of these islands,” with results that he believed would tragically repeat “the history of this disease among primitive peoples.”⁶³

The Manila inspection system apparently went entirely undetected in the metropolitan United States for its first two years of operation, a sign of the army’s care in masking it, the logistical difficulties of trans-Pacific communication, and, possibly, the success of U.S. Army censorship. What made this inattention surprising was the growing presence of Protestant missionaries in the Islands. They had, according to the missionary Charles Briggs, “long looked wistfully toward Manila”—the seat of overseas Spanish Catholicism—and “prayed the more earnestly that the everlasting doors might be lifted up there and let the King of Glory come in.” The American victory at Manila Bay had been read as “a summons to enter the field”; by mid-1901 six denominations had divided the archipelago into “comity zones.”⁶⁴ Given their zeal, it was striking that the missionaries allowed “regulated vice” to make headway; they may have possessed limited information as newcomers, or perhaps state-sanctioned prostitution failed to stand out against such an immense canvas of sin.

Nonetheless it may well have been a local missionary who tipped off reform journalists, setting loose the avalanche that followed. On June 27, 1900, William B. Johnson, a correspondent for the *Chicago New Voice*, a prohibition newspaper, filed a heated, sensationalist report, the details of which echoed, with further distortion, through the social purity, suffrage, and anticolonialist presses over the next two years.⁶⁵ The piece began ominously, with Johnson’s visit to Manila’s First Reserve Hospital, where a

head surgeon had anonymously informed him of over three thousand cases of venereal disease among soldiers, about one sixth of those on the sick list. An American editor took Johnson to the cemetery at Malate, where, he said, more of “our boys” had been sent “through bad women and drink than through the bullets of the Filipinos.” Behind these stark realities stood a governmental machinery of vice. Through “newspapermen, police reports and officials,” Johnson had learned there were about two hundred “licensed houses of prostitution” in the city, containing about six hundred prostitutes “under direct control of the military authorities, who represent American ‘Christian’ civilization here.” While inflammatory in tone, Johnson accurately described the examination and incarceration system. When he asked why hospitalized women were “compelled to pay their way,” he had been told that it was “official business” and of “no concern to the public.”

As would other reformers, Johnson depicted regulation, along with the sexual markets he saw flourishing under its protection, as both Europeanizing and Orientalizing, both cartographies evoking despotism and license. And so he found it particularly disturbing how “thoroughly American” the “whole situation” had become. The red-light district of Sampaloc was a “concrete revel of ‘American civilization’ “; there was hardly a brothel that was not “decorated with American flags,” an adornment he had observed both “inside and out.” To emphasize his point about the “official” character of Manila prostitution, Johnson included in his exposé two photographs he had taken at two separate sites, each captioned “Licensed House of Prostitution in Sampaloc [sic] District, Manila.” The boldface message that accompanied these descriptions—“Who Will Haul this Flag Down?”—was a deliberate provocation. Proponents of colonialism were at that same moment accusing anticolonialists of desiring to “haul down the flag” in the Philippines: the withdrawal of imperial prestige, honor, masculinity, and sovereignty. Johnson’s ironic commentary threw this flag patriotism back on itself: the “flag” of empire had come with another, more sordid one.

Following this exposure, the problem of “regulated vice” in the Philippines was taken up by an eclectic array of reformers. Details from the Johnson report—cited, plagiarized, paraphrased, and reproduced with varying degrees of accuracy—soon appeared beneath indignant head—lines in the social purity, suffrage, and anticolonialist presses. Each of these groups had its own agenda to advance and coalition to build; accordingly each took up the issue differently, prioritizing and linking in divergent ways questions of war, militarism, empire, prostitution, immorality, disease, and racial purity. Ultimately the combined force of their criticisms compelled the War Department and U.S. Army to reform—although not, as we will see, to eliminate—the system.

First and foremost among the critics were social purity reformers defined by their decades—long struggle against “regulated vice.” Organizations like the

American Purity Alliance (APA) and Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) circulated the Johnson report and mobilized petitions and letter-writing campaigns. Their critiques were consistent with earlier drives against "regulated vice" in Europe and its colonies, which centered on what might be called an erotic theory of the state: the "social evil" was enabled and encouraged by the state's protection, linking "license" (as state sanction) to "license" (as unregulated sexual expression). The state's approval of vice, in other words, denied individuals the character-building privilege of repressing themselves.

Even prior to Johnson's revelations, American purity reformers had viewed the acquisition of U.S. colonies in the Caribbean Pacific and Asia through the lens of European (and especially British) empire, darkly prophesying that the United States, once exceptional, would soon immerse itself in the fouling waters of both vice and its European-style regulation. Two months into the invasion, Dr. O. Edward Janney, future APA president, wrote, "We may be reasonably sure that the same problems as to the morality of the soldiers and the degradation of womanhood will stare us in the face as disturb the English people in reference to their army in India."⁶⁶ That same month Mariana W. Chapman wrote, "It will be a shameful record for our army to make, if we repeat East Indian conditions in relation to the native women... The Filipinos may combine for us all the unfortunate situations in which Great Britain has found herself in India and Hong Kong."⁶⁷

If one thing distinguished American purity reformers from their British counterparts, it was that they saw "empire" as a departure for the United States, which in turn encouraged them to cast "regulated vice" as the odious spawn of a fledgling colonialism. This formula crossed earlier social purity logic with republican antimilitarism: colonies meant standing armies, standing armies meant prostitutes, and prostitutes meant officers' attempts to regulate "vice" in the interests of disease control. As one American clergyman wrote of Barbados, "Social and sexual demoralization is one of the conditions incident to militarism."⁶⁸ This approach relied upon a geography of moral restraint: the farther armies were projected from the metropole, the farther they were from "restraining home influences" that were the proper, nonstate means for regulating vice. "The social evil and other iniquities find congenial environment," wrote Sergeant Oscar Fowler, just back from Manila, "in an atmosphere of a militarism existing far from the seat of the home government."⁶⁹

While social purity reformers on occasion expressed concern for the morality—still less frequently, for the health—of colonized peoples, they were most preoccupied with imperial soldiers and the society to which they would return. Aaron Powell, the APA president, feared that "some of the soldiers and sailors, without moral restraint, and contaminated in their new environment," would arrive home and "in turn also contaminate our home population."⁷⁰ On

another occasion he quoted Lord George Hamilton, secretary of state for India, who opposed regulation for its “domestic” implications, medical and nonmedical. Under regulation, Hamilton had warned, British soldiers returned to the metropole “bringing with them the debasing sentiments and habits acquired during their Indian training” and “infecting our industrial communities with a moral pestilence more destructive of the national stamina” than venereal disease itself.⁷¹

From this angle, “regulated vice” in the colonies not only promoted the spread of disease outward from the colonies but was itself a kind of “contagion.” In the Philippine context, it was thought to move in two different but related directions. The first ran from Europe to the United States; if regulation was a natural offshoot of militarism, it was also (as was militarism itself) closely associated with Europeans. For this reason, adopting it meant endangering the Virtuous “body” of the exceptional American nation. But the contagion of regulation also oozed from colony to metropole. Social purity advocates feared that the colonies would wedge open the United States for regulation more generally. A September 1900 APA memorial sent to President McKinley emphasized the risk of the “enactment of a similar regulation system by State Legislatures, incited by the example of the [national] government.”⁷²

While American social purity reformers saw Europe as a source of corruption, they also turned to British precedents for inspiration. Alongside the successful repeal of the British CD Acts in both the metropole and India, they enlisted the stern April 1898 order by Lord Wolseley, commander in chief of the British Army, instructing his officers that the proper way to prevent their soldiers from becoming “permanently disfigured and incapacitated” by sinful living was to lecture them on the “disastrous effects of giving way to habits of intemperance and immorality.”⁷³ Wolseley noticeably failed to mention the regulation of prostitution and was therefore seen to oppose it. Unsurprisingly social purity activists forwarded Wolseley’s order to the War Department; here their understandings of sex, morality, and the state were being voiced by the commander of the world’s most powerful army.

Although social purity advocates most ardently claimed “regulated vice” as their concern, it was also taken up in a secondary way by the suffragists with whom they were closely allied. It was a commonplace of social purity thinking that woman suffrage was critical to the defeat of regulation. When it came to colonialism, woman suffragists were divided, according to Kristin Hoganson. Like their British feminist counterparts, some saw in empire an opportunity to assert white women’s political power over and above that of racialized colonial subjects. Others, far fewer in number, made common cause with the Philippine struggle for independence and condemned patriarchy as “domestic imperialism.” Potential alliances between suffragists and anticolonialists were undercut not only

by suffragists' imperial hopes but by anticolonialists' patriarchal prerogatives: while some anticolonialists supported woman suffrage, most criticized colonial empire on explicitly masculinist grounds of national "honor."⁷⁴ Like the attacks of social purity reformers, those of suffragists stressed that colonial regulation was the predictable result of an all—male electorate. Also similar to social purity activists, theirs was a global politics that was uncommitted on the question of colonialism "itself"; whether regulation was incidental to colonialism or an essential feature of it, the elimination of "regulated Vice" under women's influence would enhance the U. S. moral empire.

Concerns such as these prompted the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) to pass a resolution, "adopted by a unanimous vote" and submitted to McKinley, in the wake of Johnson's exposé. It "earnestly protested" the introduction of what it called the "European system of State regulation of Vice" into Manila on three grounds: it was "contrary to good morals," appearing to give "official sanction" to vice before "both our soldiers and the natives"; it applied a double standard by failing to mandate venereal exams for "vicious men"; and it was ineffective and currently being abandoned elsewhere. "The United States should not adopt a method that Europe is discarding," it read, nor "introduce in our foreign dependencies a system that would not be tolerated at home."⁷⁵ The following February, the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association submitted its own five-point resolution to the president. While sharing NAWSA's preoccupations with moral messages and double standards, it also called regulation "an insult to womanhood" and expressed concern that it "breeds a moral and physical degeneration that will avenge itself upon our American society when these soldiers shall have been recalled to their native country."⁷⁶

Anticolonialists (or "anti-imperialists," in the terms of the day) also turned "regulated vice" to their own purposes, although less consistently than either social purity reformers or suffragists. Anticolonialist argumentation was as wide—ranging as the strange political bedfellows—liberal Republicans, white supremacist Democrats, organized labor—it brought into alliance. Among their other concerns, anticolonialists condemned the impact of "militarism" on republican institutions and the risk of "mongrelization" that colonialism posed to the U.S. body politic. Many of these fears hinged on notions of "corruption": the decay of republican virtue before imperial tyranny and arrogance; the sinister influence of "trusts" in pressing for overseas conquests; the scams promoted by distant, "carpet-bagging" officials in the new colonies; the degradation of individual white bodies through miscegenation and of a collective, national white body through potential colonial immigration and labor competition.⁷⁷ As reports of high sickness rates among U.S. soldiers surfaced in the United States, disease proved an irresistible metaphor that condensed and concretized these various images of corruption. One before-and-after cartoon showed Uncle Sam prior to "his wish

for expansion” in a condition of robust “Prosperity,” overlooking smoke—belching factories; afterward he is figured as an invalid; confined to looking out a window at closed industrial plants, ill and emasculated.⁷⁸

It was through these broader discourses of disease as “corruption” that concerns with “regulated vice” entered anticolonialist polemic. The most vivid example was Edward Atkinson’s 1899 pamphlet “The Hell of War and Its Penalties,” which took on the topic of colonial venereal disease with a specificity and indelicacy unknown in the social purity press.⁷⁹ Atkinson approached his theme, as did others, through the British imperial experience. According to an “English gentleman” Atkinson had met, half of British troops in Hong Kong were infected, and while there might be a cure, “this disease works corruption of the blood to the third and fourth generation, ending in degeneracy.” The moral and medical lessons for the United States, then deploying its own forces in Asia, were clear enough. Notably Atkinson made no mention of either prostitution or its regulation as modes of disease transfer; colonialism and venereal contagion were, on their own, inseparable processes of bodily and political decay.

The state’s first response to spiraling accusation was denial. With apparently sincere bewilderment, War Department officials barraged with correspondence and petitions responded that they had no knowledge of the regulation program. In October 1900, for example, the acting secretary of war informed the WCTU’s president, “So far as this Department is advised no such conditions obtain as set forth in your letter.” He also promised that General Arthur MacArthur had been instructed “to investigate the subject fully, and to make full report on the subject matter of your resolutions.”⁸⁰ The War Department found itself particularly vulnerable to criticism of this kind as officials sought the passage of the Army Reorganization Bill’s command and staff reforms. Secretary of War Elihu Root complained to William Howard Taft, head of the second Philippine Commission, that “yellow journal hypocrites, posing as fanatics,” had “created an impression among millions of good people that we have turned Manila into a veritable hell”; letters had inundated the War Department “by the thousands.”⁸¹

Eager to sideline moral objections to the Army Reorganization Bill, Root requested a full accounting from Taft, while the army sent a similar request to MacArthur. It was a sign of ongoing civilian-military clashes that their answers diverged in their degree of disclosure. MacArthur’s was a terse, telegraphic denial: “Houses of prostitution are not licensed, protected or encouraged.”⁸² Taft emphasized regulation’s ability to “maintain effectiveness of army” by “subject[ing] known loose women to certificated examination.” He argued for situational context: the policy was “better than futile attempts at total suppression in oriental city of 300,000, producing greater evil.” He also distanced himself: regulation was an “army police measure outside our jurisdiction; military necessity.”⁸³

By the early months of 1901 the War Department had decided to openly admit and defend inspection. MacArthur's carefully worded report was issued on February 4 (seven months after Johnson's article) and was printed for mass circulation "in view of the very considerable number of... protests."⁸⁴ He accused regulation's critics of being "misled as to the facts" and of failing to consider "the disturbed conditions incident to military occupation and the state of war here prevailing." Prostitutes were not "licensed" in the Philippines, and, he boasted, many had been deported. He dedicated only four sentences to the US. military's venereal examination of prostitutes, placing it alongside other "sanitary regulations" needed in the tropics. It was a sign of his embattled position that he did not defend regulation by invoking principle but by surrounding the army's dilemma with protective layers of exception. Regulation had been adopted at an exceptional moment: the wartime government had been "necessarily one of emergency." It had been the outgrowth of an exceptional situation: Manila, as the army's chief entry and departure point, had housed sixty—five thousand soldiers "in the prime of life" and "remotely removed from the restraining influences that might be exercised over them by their home surroundings." In its exercise of regulation the United States was—somehow—proving itself to be an exceptional colonial power: Manila's condition was "remarkable in view of the general lack of moral tone pervading the seaports of the East." "No city in America and Europe," he declared, "certainly none in Asia, can today vie with Manila in the good order and morality which have resulted from the practical measures adopted." Ultimately MacArthur threw down the gauntlet, inviting the army's critics to investigate Manila's "social conditions" but insisting they do so in comparison with other "Asiatic" cities or American ones of comparable size.

The antiregulation movement hit a standstill by mid-1901. Social purity, suffrage, and anticolonialist petitioning had achieved a public admission from the army, but progress had halted there. Early in 1902, however, the Washington-based suffragist and social purity reformer Margaret Dye Ellis embraced a dramatic new tactic. At two suffrage meetings she circulated what she claimed was the "official registration book issued by the US. authorities" to a "child prostitute" with the name "Maria de La Cruz" (which reformers were careful to translate). According to the suffrage press, the book contained inspection records and a photograph, "the portrait of a girl seemingly about twelve years old, with a childlike face and big, pathetic dark eyes." In February 1902 Ellis apparently left copies of "this dreadful little book" with every member of the Committee on the Philippines; suffrage editors claimed that "circulars left at the homes of the Congressmen fell into the hands of their wives and stirred them to womanly indignation."⁸⁵ Copies of the booklet were widely distributed within social purity networks and set loose a renewed flood of letters to the War Department.

Over the next two months Root and President Theodore Roosevelt appeared to dramatically reverse course, moving from the defensive admission of regulation to its forthright condemnation. In March 1902 critics at last got an American version of the Wolseley order (the British commander in chief's call for sexual self-restraint), issued by the president himself. Roosevelt's approach to disease prevention was identical to Wolseley's, and some of his statements were directly cribbed. The only "efficient" way to control venereal infection was "to diminish the vice which is the cause of these diseases"; this could be accomplished only through a sexually restrained and self-disciplined masculinity, which U.S. officers must inculcate in their soldiers.⁸⁶ Roosevelt's order was hailed by social purity reformers as a "stinging rebuke" to the army's "European method."⁸⁷ Writing in July the APA's president expressed his hope that it would come to "apply equally well to the soldiers at home, and equally, also, to people at home who are not soldiers?"⁸⁸

Meanwhile local resistance by sex workers, which frustrated inspectors, in combination with activist pressures in the metropolitan United States, had led to a dramatic alteration in the way venereal inspection was carried out in the Philippines: U.S. soldiers would now be formally subject to regular exams. While this had been done earlier in places like 1010, it was made general policy on May 21, 1901, with MacArthur's General Order No. 101.⁸⁹ Medical officers were directed to make a "thorough physical inspection" of enlisted men twice a month, with "constitutional and local evidence of venereal infection... especially sought for." The men "must be stripped" for these exams, and those with syphilis, or "incapacitated" due to other venereal diseases, were to be sent to the hospital. At the same time, with the "aid of local municipal authorities," the inspection of women was to continue in areas where "infectious disease prevails in the command."

By mid-1901 it appeared that "regulated vice" as reformers had understood it had ceased to exist. In reality Root had discovered through Ellis the key to ending the dispute: making regulation invisible. Johnson's images of flag-draped brothels had been seized upon by antiregulationists precisely because they had captured colonial regulation in an arresting form while seeming to resolve ambiguities over the state's actual role in sexual commerce: the flag as seal of approval. In reply, military officials had attempted to paper over the system with technical distinctions; MacArthur had claimed, for example, that prostitution was not "licensed, protected or encouraged," a statement that, the social purity activist Wilbur Crafts noted bitterly, may have been true "in a Pickwickian sense" since Manila prostitutes were "only certified and superintended."⁹⁰

Ultimately the star-spangled bordello's success as a symbol was registered most by Roosevelt's effort to erase it. In mid-March 1902 he requested information from Manila authorities about the use of flags in brothels with the

aim of curtailing it.⁹¹ He received word that Manila's chief of police had already acted, ordering all precinct commanders "to strictly prohibit the flying of flags or the painting of flags on any of the houses of ill-repute."⁹² Where reformers made regulation a symbol for what was wrong with colonial empire, hauling down U.S. flags from brothels was a small price to pay for not having to haul them down from the Philippines as a whole.

The other way to render regulation invisible was to do away with the system's other physical artifacts, such as inspection booklets. On February 19 Root cabled Luke Wright, governor-general of the Philippines, advising that "no fees be charged" to inspected prostitutes and "no certificates of examination given." In terms of material traces, if not otherwise, there would be no more Marias de La Cruz. Medical officers could "keep their own records of names, descriptions, residences, and dates of examination," and in this way the program could continue "without the liability of a misunderstanding and the charge of maintaining a system of licensed prostitution."⁹³ Social purity advocates noted the fact that regulation had continued, even if the double standard had been surmounted. An October 1902 report, titled "More Trouble in Manila," contrasted Roosevelt's "admirable preachment" with the ongoing "tacit toleration" of prostitution in Manila.⁹⁴ But antiregulation protest directed at the U.S. military in the Philippines, if it never died out completely, declined precipitously.

Why the end of outrage? It had something to do with the character of social purity lobbying. Ellis, for example, had apparently agreed to end her agitation in exchange for Roosevelt's "preachment." In April, Clarence Edwards, chief of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, confirmed the agreement with Ellis herself, expressing his understanding that WCTU activists "now realized and appreciated that much misinformation from prejudiced sources had gone abroad on this subject" and openly admitting the continued inspection of women, now without fees or certificates.⁹⁵ The price that social purity reformers had paid for the image of victory, it turned out, was failure to abolish the regulation of prostitution in the Philippines. But there were other factors too. Roosevelt had declared an "end" to the Philippine-American War preemptively on July 4, 1902; to the extent that critics had tied their attacks to "militarism," and "militarism" to the conduct of war, the declaration (which failed to bring Filipino resistance to a close) undercut them. And regulation became more slippery as it was reassigned from military to civilian authorities. It was no longer a "national" policy carried out by the army—a main source of criticism—but a "municipal" policy undertaken by specific city governments. Regulation in the Philippines was no longer a national—imperial target like the Contagious Diseases Act but a kind of St. Louis in Southeast Asia, far less subject to pressures from the metropolitan United States.

Regulation came to occupy an increasingly important place in U.S. military practice in the years prior to World War I. The Jolo example, which involved the venereal examination of both women and men, appears to have circulated widely in the Philippines, as well as among military—medical educators. As early as 1901 Captain Edward Munson of the Army Medical Department celebrated the experiment of regulation in the Philippines, particularly in 1010, where venereal diseases were “notably free from the complications so frequently observed in other parts of the Philippines.”⁹⁶ According to Colonel L. M. Maus of the Medical Corps, the venereal inspection of U.S. troops, first carried out in the Philippines under MacArthur’s 1901 orders, had become standard practice at “a large number of Army posts” where soldiers had returned from the Islands.⁹⁷ General Order No. 17, issued in May 1912, applied MacArthur’s Philippine inspection order to the U.S. Army as a whole, although the specifics of enforcement were printed in a “confidential circular” to avoid “adverse criticism.”⁹⁸

Crusaders against regulated vice in the Philippines were not mistaken in their prediction that where U.S. troops circled the globe, commercialized sex, and state efforts to regulate it, would quickly follow. Coiled together during the Philippine-American War, histories of military occupation, sexual labor, disease control, and moral politics would continue to be enmeshed across the “American century.” Military-sexual complexes that secured male soldiers’ sexual access to women would proliferate from Puerto Rico to Hawai’i and from South Korea to Vietnam, with U.S. military policies or “status of forces” agreements between the United States and “host” states often insulating soldiers engaged in violence or crime against local women from meaningful justice. A critical awareness of the character and costs of these arrangements would dog empire’s steps, particularly under the impetus of anticolonial and feminist movements concerned—as late—Victorian activists had been, for the most part, unconcerned—with their impact on the women subjected to them.⁹⁹

Nor were the early twentieth-century reformers wrong about the colonial crossings they had prophesied and feared. At least in the shape of the regular venereal inspection of soldiers—and in other ways they failed to anticipate—the U.S. colonial experience had migrated back to the metropole, even as it was transmuted in the process. Military-medical officials had set out to inspect prostitutes in the Philippines and had ended up examining both them and the U.S. Army as a whole. The intervening scandal had resulted from both the unprecedented character of the regulation experiment in the Philippines and the watchfulness of the American social purity movement, to be sure, but it gained traction—and ultimately resulted in a deluge of angry mail to the War Department—because indignation at U.S. military regulation could be made to mesh with Americans’ anxious reflections about what kind of society and polity the United States would be once it was capable of projecting its power halfway around the world. The susceptibility of U.S. soldiers’ bodies to disease became

particularly charged in such a context. The question of what strategies were permissible in order to protect them—and whether the exclusive coercion and arrest of infected women belonged among them—became closely tied to questions of the United States’ own sovereignty and purity in a globalized world. To many, crossings of disease through the protective outer limits of the body became linked imaginatively to the transit of practices and institutions across imperial boundaries.

The reformers’ opposition to colonial regulation did not, in the end, abolish regulation in the Philippines, but it did have decisive effects, and not just for U.S. military hygiene. It taught the Islands’ new rulers some important lessons about how best an empire might be secured and extended: change the topic, concede to critics, pull down the flags, and, where possible, keep your empire disembodied. The sinister axiom that had informed their efforts to insulate themselves from an empire they could not fully contain—so deeply held that it was advanced without comment—had a long path stretching behind it and ahead of it. Some bodies mattered more than others.

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Endnotes

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