Philippine Wars and the Politics of Memory

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When Anglo-American forces invaded Iraq last year, my immediate reaction was one of déjà vu. It was the Philippines circa 1900 all over again. Of course, many commentators in the United States and the Philippines have been making comparisons between the wars in Iraq and the Philippines, albeit in contrasting ways. Among them is President George W. Bush himself, who evoked the Filipino-American past in his speech last October to the Philippine Congress. “America,” he declared, “is proud of its part in the great story of the Filipino people. Together, our soldiers liberated the Philippines from colonial rule. Together, we rescued the islands from invasion and occupation. The names of Bataan, Corregidor, Leyte, Luzon evoke the memories of shared struggle and shared loss and shared victory. Veterans of those battles are here today. I salute your courage and your service.”

In other words, America’s part in the “great story” of the Filipino people was its participation in the Filipino struggle for liberation. The lesson Bush
hammered into the heads of his seemingly enthusiastic audience of Filipino lawmakers was that the very existence of their nation-state today is due to the shared Filipino-American struggle against past tyrants and oppressors.

Bush’s speech was filled with allusions to war, since his ultimate aim was to secure Filipino participation in the “great war” against terror. A shared history of wars, he argued, makes it natural for Filipinos and Americans to conduct a “joint struggle” today against the forces of totalitarianism and other evils represented by Saddam’s Iraq and the terrorists in the southern Philippines. Ironically, however, there was a phase in the Filipino-American relationship when the Filipinos were themselves the distinct object of a preemptive attack and occupation by American forces. The image of a joint struggle, therefore, rests uncomfortably on the historical residues of a conflict that the U.S. colonial state, and to some extent its Filipino offspring, have sought to expunge from the collective memory.

In order to hook the present war into Filipino historical experience, Bush had to move back in time to the first of the Philippines’ great wars and reassert the contours of the official narrative leading to the present. He began with a tribute to José Rizal’s teachings, paraphrasing Rizal’s message that “nations win their freedom by deserving it, by loving what is just, what is good, what is great, to the point of dying for it.” This was, of course, demonstrated by Rizal’s heroic death during the war against Spain. Bush therefore began with a tribute to “the great patriot, Jose Rizal, [who] said that nations win their freedom by deserving it, by loving what is just, what is good, what is great to the point of dying for it.”

Punctuated by applause all around, Bush’s speech alluded to three wars that have cemented the common history of the United States and the Philippines. As a professional historian, however, I seem to count not three but five wars in this shared history. So what are these five past wars that maintain their ghostly presence over the nation and the Filipino-American relationship to this day? Permit me to review some key events in modern Philippine history. Sometimes we neglect the basic events and narratives that have dominated the discourses of political leaders and their audiences at critical junctures in the life of a nation. Among them, we can single out narratives of wars for their ability to organize memory and experience in socially comprehensible terms. The present war on terror, with its inbuilt justification of preemptive
strikes, is built on a narrative of past wars that we need to scrutinize thoroughly and reconstitute, if the phrase “learn from the past” is to retain any value for future generations.

The first of our Philippine wars was the war of independence from Spain—a very memorable event acknowledged by Bush himself. We all know the story: It began in 1896 when the Katipunan secret society mounted a rebellion against the Spanish authorities in the outskirts of Manila. As the Katipunan grew, this rebellion turned into a major war between a Filipino separatist movement and the government of imperial Spain. A truce was worked out in 1897, however, and Emilio Aguinaldo and his fellow nationalists went into exile in Hong Kong.

In mid-1898, Aguinaldo returned to the islands with U.S. assistance, reorganized his army, and vanquished the Spanish garrisons in Luzon. The republican government he formed, however, was refused recognition by his erstwhile ally, which proceeded to destroy it in 1899. This event, called the Philippine Insurrection then and the Filipino-American War now, is the second great war in Philippine history. It led to the deaths of between 250,000 and 600,000 Filipinos in battle as well as the collateral effects of war. It lasted much longer than the Americans had anticipated, and only officially ended with the U.S. proclamation of victory on July 4, 1902.

Unfortunately, in Bush’s speech last October, this second great war was overlooked, and most of our lawmakers, judging from their frenzied applause, seemed to have forgotten it as well. Not surprisingly, though, for when the Americans administered the Philippines from 1902 on, they made sure that this war would become largely a forgotten event. During the forty years of American rule of the islands, educated Filipinos were brought up to think that the future of their country lay in a special, permanent relationship with the United States un tarnished by memories of an original war (here used in the same sense as original sin).

The cozy Filipino-American relationship, however, was put to the test when the Japanese army arrived in the Philippines in December 1941 and attempted to purge the country of American influence. So we come to the third great war in Filipino memory, the war with Japan from 1942 to 1945. This consisted of a joint effort by Filipinos and Americans to resist Japanese
occupation. This is what Bush considered the high point of America’s participation in Philippine history.

In 1947, not long after the war with Japan ended, a rebellion by the Huks, a peasant army in Luzon led by the Communist Party, erupted. The war against the Huks and other movements led by the radical left was part of the global Cold War. This is the fourth great war in the shared Filipino-American history. Bush doesn’t call it the Cold War, but this war was present in his speech in many ways—in his allusions to free enterprise, free nations, free Iraq, the protection of religious liberty, and the triumph of democracy over totalitarianism.

So here we have three great wars mentioned in Bush’s speech, plus one that he pointedly omitted. If the three wars in Bush’s reckoning have made the Philippine nation what it is today, what difference would it make if a fourth war, the Filipino-American War, were factored in? My answer is probably too simple and naive: one cannot build a strong nation on a narrative that is flawed. Many have said this before me: we cannot indefinitely pretend that the second great war—the Filipino-American War—never happened. A national narrative without this crucial event makes us merely an appendage of empire. Bush’s speech and the vigorous applause from our senators and congressmen could only have happened because for over a century the memories of our past wars have been shaped by politics. Let me now take a closer look at those wars and the politics of memory surrounding them.

War number one—the war against Spain—is deeply etched in the collective memory. In fact, this war, which is called the Revolution of 1896 in Filipino textbooks, is recognized as the foundational event in the life of the nation-state. Without a collective memory of the first war, the present nation-state would have no meaning to its citizens.

This war is foundational because it was the first time that the term Filipino was used to refer to the inhabitants of the islands—not just the Spaniards living there but also, and most importantly, the indigenous peoples. Furthermore, the notion of a Filipino identity was given political form in the sovereign republic of 1898.

Appropriately, Filipino writers have called the intellectuals and military leaders who led the separatist war against Spain “the first Filipinos.” Most of the country’s national heroes stem from this first war: José Rizal, Apolinaro
Mabini, Andres Bonifacio, and Emilio Aguinaldo. They are remembered through their inscription in textbooks as the founding fathers of the nation. To facilitate remembering them, monuments have been built to commemorate their deeds; statues of Rizal, for example are found not just in the Philippines but also in such far-flung places as Honolulu, Madrid, Heidelberg, and Seattle. The birthdays of the heroes of 1896 have been declared national holidays; their images are inscribed on postage stamps, billboards, magazine covers, and town halls.

This is fine, except that another set of heroes has been sidelined in the process, for the way that the collective memory of the war against Spain was shaped during the twentieth century can only be understood in relation to the Filipino-American War that followed it. The first and second wars are closely intertwined, yet the first is remembered while the second is largely forgotten.

The United States became implicated in the first war when it declared war against Spain in May 1898, in what is called the Spanish-American War. Much as the anticommunist Islamic groups such as the Taliban were nurtured to fight America’s war against the Soviets in the Middle East, so were the Filipino nationalist exiles in Hong Kong and Singapore invited to be America’s allies in this other war against Spain. Commodore George Dewey, commander of the U.S. Navy’s Asiatic fleet, helped the Filipino separatists in two ways: first, by destroying the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay, and second, by bringing Aguinaldo back to the Philippines so that he could resume the first war, or revolution against Spain.

In effect, Filipinos won the war of independence from Spain with American help. I expected George Bush to mention this in his speech, but he didn’t. When he spoke of Americans liberating the Filipinos from tyranny, he was referring instead to General Douglas MacArthur’s return in 1945. Why did Bush avoid mentioning the U.S. role in the 1898 liberation of the Philippines? My feeling is that this would have forced him to bring the Filipino-American War into the picture, and this would have caused some complications for his image of a shared Filipino-American past and destiny.

The Americans were indeed welcomed in mid-1898 as the liberators of the Philippines from the tyranny of Spanish rule. One of Aguinaldo’s manifestos states this explicitly: “Wherever you see the American flag, bear in mind that
they are our redeemers.”² And why not? Both the Filipino and the American
governments in late 1898 depicted the Spanish colonial past as a dark age.
After the victory over Spain, Filipinos hoped that their nation-state would
be recognized by the Americans, who, after all, had won their independence
from the British not that long ago.

The liberators, however, had other ideas about what to do with the Fil-
ipinos. By the 1890s, the United States had recovered fully from its bloody
Civil War; its westward expansion across the continent was complete, and
so it was keen to join the family of imperial powers consisting of Britain,
France, the Netherlands, and others. The Pacific was its zone of expansion,
and the Philippine islands were to be its stepping stone—in the form of
naval coaling stations and military bases—to the establishment of trade and
influence in the Asiatic mainland. There were also profits to be made in the
exploitation of Philippine agricultural and mineral resources—not quite oil
yet, but other similarly desired substances. The United States wanted, there-
fore, to wrest control of the Philippines from tyrannical Spain and to keep it
for economic and strategic reasons. No leap of the imagination is required
to discern the parallels with the vision of a free Iraq serving as a strategic
foothold in an oil-rich but hostile environment.

Bush could not mention war number two (the Filipino-American War)
because, I suspect, this might have led to disturbing parallels between the
Philippines and Iraq after their liberation. In the case of the Philippines, the
war of resistance against the United States began in February 1899 when
American troops crossed the line separating the U.S. and Filipino armies
in Manila. During the first year of the war, the U.S. Army managed to
subdue the main Filipino defense forces in central and northern Luzon. The
following year, it concentrated on taking southern Luzon and the Visayas,
managing to control major towns by the middle of 1900. At that point,
Filipino resistance took the form of guerrilla warfare.

After General Aguinaldo was captured in April 1901 and took the oath
of allegiance to the United States, a number of his generals did likewise
and, in fact, began to assist the U.S. Army in hunting down the leaders of
the guerrilla resistance. Driven by their own political motives, a number of
prominent Filipinos who had served the fallen republic began to collaborate
with their new American overlords, prefiguring the role of former Ba’athists
in the current U.S. “pacification” drive. Nevertheless, massive guerrilla resistance continued for at least another year. By the end of 1901, in regions such as Samar, Leyte, the Ilocos, and southern Tagalog, the U.S. Army introduced all-out measures such as the reconcentration of villagers, the burning of houses and food supplies, the torture of prisoners, and search-and-destroy operations. Most of the remaining guerrilla leaders were forced to surrender owing to battle injuries, hunger, desertions by their troops, and fear of the tremendous firepower that was unleashed by the U.S. Army after and in retaliation for the surprise September 28, 1901 attack by Pulahan nationalist guerrillas (the Redshirts—a so-called fanatical sect) on a U.S. Army camp at Balangiga, Samar, that led to the massacre of fifty-five American GIs.

It takes a bit of persistent research in the archives to rescue fragments of this forgotten second war. Through research in American military records, I discovered, for example, that my wife’s grandfather Pedro Carandang became involved in the Filipino-American War when he was appointed mayor of Tanauan, Batangas, after that town was occupied by the Americans in 1900. But Mayor Carandang only served the American commanding officer during office hours. The rest of the time, when his boss was not looking, he provided the guerrilla units of General Miguel Malvar with food, money, information, and secret access to the town. When the Americans discovered this, they arrested Mayor Carandang and imprisoned him until the end of the war.

My own grandfather, Francisco Ileto, participated in the war by providing information about the Americans to his friend General Isidoro Torres, the guerrilla commander of Bulacan Province. The Americans intercepted a letter that my grandfather sent to Torres in 1900 and thus identified him as an enemy spy. This I discovered from the Philippine Insurgent Records. But I do not know whether the Americans arrested him or not.

The reason I do not know what eventually happened to my grandfather is because, remarkably, neither he nor my wife’s grandfather passed on their memories of the war to their children and grandchildren. They chose to keep such memories private and to let their children carry on in life as if the war against the United States had never happened. However, they did pass on to their children their memories of the war against Spain. They spoke freely to their children about Rizal, Bonifacio, and the Aguinaldo
who declared independence from Spain. But they kept silent about Malvar, Vicente Lukban, and the other Aguinaldo, who had called for a guerrilla war against the Americans in 1900.

How do we explain this selective transmission of the memories of the two wars? After the Americans had pronounced victory on July 4, 1902, they proceeded to reshape the collective memory of those long years of war from 1896 all the way to 1902. The aim of the politics of memory was to encourage the remembering of the war against Spain and the forgetting of the war against the United States. This was conducted through the censored press, civic rituals, and, above all, the colonial school system.

What the American colonial officials wanted Filipinos to “remember,” above all, was that the U.S. Army had come as liberators to help free the country from oppressive Spanish rule. This was true at the beginning; the Filipinos indeed hailed the Americans as their redeemers. But how could the liberators justify not recognizing the Filipino republican government? How could they justify their bloody suppression of any resistance to their takeover of the islands? How could liberators justify killing the people they were supposed to have rescued from Spanish tyranny? The other, suppressed, meaning of the coming of the Americans in 1898 was that it was just another foreign invasion, following soon after the Spanish withdrawal.

In order to combat the negative meanings and to establish the official memory of the two wars, the U.S. colonial government did the following:

First, it recognized the liberal aspirations of the leaders of the 1896 war of independence against Spain. The Americans specially promoted the ideas of the nationalist intellectual Rizal, who preferred a gradualist road to self-rule through the education of the populace. The other hero of the first war, Bonifacio, was downplayed by the government because he led a “socialistic” secret society that advocated armed struggle.

Second, the American regime recognized the aspirations of Aguinaldo and the Filipino educated class to form a republican state. However, it insisted that Filipinos in 1898 were not prepared for democracy and self-rule. As “proof” of this lack of readiness, American writings portrayed Aguinaldo as a despotic president and the masses of the people as blind followers of their local bosses. The patron-client, caciquism, and bossism paradigms of local politics originated, in fact, from the war itself and were further developed by
American officials and writers during the “pacification” period from 1902 up to at least 1912. The colonial administration and its local protégés wanted the new generation of Filipinos studying in the public schools to remember the coming of the Americans in 1898 as an act of “benevolent assimilation,” wherein the Americans would stay for as long as was needed to help prepare the Filipinos for democracy and responsible self-government. Philippine politics and its academic study followed the contours of, and mutually reinforced, this colonial project.

Third, it follows from the above that the war of resistance to U.S. occupation would be regarded as a great misunderstanding. In fact, these were the very words David Barrows, the superintendent of schools, used in his high school Philippine history textbook to describe the Filipino-American War. If only, he said, the Filipinos had fully understood the noble motives of the United States, and if only the Filipinos had accepted the fact that they were still an underdeveloped people needing to be uplifted by the superior civilization of the Americans, then they would not have resisted the U.S. occupation, and the disastrous war would not have taken place.

Fourth and finally, the American colonial regime decreed in 1902 that anyone who continued to oppose its presence would be arrested for sedition and that armed groups that attacked government forces would be treated as bandit gangs, religious fanatics, and remnants of the defeated guerrilla armies. The decade and a half after the formal end of the Filipino-American War in 1902 is, in fact, one of the most fascinating in Philippine history owing to the many “illicit” forms that memories of the revolution and continued resistance to U.S. occupation took. This was the age of armed militias, holy warriors, kidnappings, assassinations, and joint operations in the Philippines between American soldiers and newly trained native police. I could very well be referring to Iraq, of course. Owing to the official representation of these events, this period would be remembered not as a time of continued resistance to foreign occupation but as one of banditry, religious fanaticism, disorder, and dislocation.

In order to succeed in school, to become employed in the colonial civil service, and to embrace modernity introduced by the Americans, Filipinos were made to remember the Filipino-American War in the terms that the colonial administration dictated. Understandably, then, my grandfather, who came
to terms with the occupation when he was recruited as a teacher in the public school system, chose not to transmit his memories of the Filipino-American War to his children.

So as we were growing up, I got to know that my father, Rafael Ileto, had gone to West Point in 1940 and that he had been an officer in the first Filipino infantry regiment that was sent to liberate the Philippines from Japanese rule. This is part of the Ileto family memory, of course. What we never knew, until I, as a historian, discovered the pertinent documents in the U.S. archives, was that my grandfather Francisco Ileto had been a revolutionary spy against the U.S. invasion forces in 1900.

The American colonial grip over the shaping of public memories was most effective in the schools. As the English language spread, so did the official view of the past. The official management of the collective memory, however, did not fully subsume the private memories of the Filipino-American War. After all, countless Filipinos had been involved in the anti-imperial struggle; hundreds of thousands had been killed or injured. Many veterans of the Filipino-American War chose to keep alive these memories through veterans associations, patriotic societies, labor unions, and religio-political sects, just about all of which were illegal. Beneath the official cluster of memories about the two wars, we can identify such alternative modes or channels of memory.

One of the focal points of alternative memories was a veteran of the first and second wars: Artemio Ricarte. Trained as a school teacher, Ricarte was fluent in Ilocano, Tagalog, and Spanish. He became a military commander in battles against the Spaniards and rose to become a general in the war against the Americans. When the war ended, he refused to take the oath of allegiance to the United States and was imprisoned. But he managed to escape, first to Hong Kong, and then later to Yokohama. From these places of exile, Ricarte continued to keep alive memories of both wars, treating them as a continuous and unfinished event. From 1904 up to 1935, he inspired various secret societies and peasant movements that awaited his return from Japan to liberate the country from the Americans.

In order to understand the third war in our series—the Filipino-Japanese War—we need to relate it to the first two. Filipino revolutionists had always sought the help of Japan in their wars against Spain and the United States, but except for small shipments of arms, Japanese involvement in the Philippine
revolution was slight. We must remember, though, that the U.S. victory over the Filipino nationalists in 1902 was followed by Japan’s momentous victory over Russia in 1905. These two events together signal the beginning of American-Japanese rivalry for dominance in the Asia-Pacific.

The two events also signaled the beginning of American-Japanese rivalry for the attention of Filipino nationalists. For the rise of Japan as an Asian power did not escape the notice of even the new generation of Filipinos learning English in the American schools. The fact that the venerable Ricarte came to be based in Yokohama heightened among Filipino nationalists the consciousness of Japan as an alternative model of development. And so when the Japanese came to occupy the Philippines in 1942, bringing with them Ricarte, there were quite a few Filipinos who welcomed them as liberators. Understandably, there has not been enough research on this phenomenon. What is well known is that the majority of Filipinos in 1940 regarded the Japanese as invaders.

The Filipino-American joint resistance to Japanese occupation, however, did not come naturally. It was premised on the colonial construction of history propagated in the schools since 1903. According to this particular story, the Filipinos had defeated the Spanish government with American help, and the Americans had stayed in order to train the Filipinos for future self-government. Due to the institutional power of this story, by the 1930s the vast majority of Filipinos had forgotten the Filipino-American War. They saw their fate and that of the United States as intertwined. So when the Japanese forces arrived, they were resisted with great persistence, particularly in Bataan and Corregidor. Nowhere else in Southeast Asia did the locals fight so hard on behalf of their colonial rulers.

After the surrender of the Filipino-American forces, a guerrilla war of resistance continued to be waged in various parts of the archipelago. We can detect here the makings of an epic war story, and indeed this is how the period is remembered. From my perspective as a historian, however, the war with Japan was, in reality, pretty much a replay of the war with the United States forty years earlier. The fact that few, if any, dare to state this is pretty much an effect of past memory wars.

The Japanese imperial administration itself became involved in the politics of memory when it encouraged Filipinos to revisit the history of both
the first and second wars. No longer was it considered taboo to excavate memories of the Filipino-American War. Veterans of these two wars and their descendants, who had never forgotten that the Americans had come as invaders, were encouraged to speak freely about the past and to play leading roles in organizations supportive of the Japanese administration.

If we examine the backgrounds and ideas of some of the leading “collaborators” with the Japanese, we find connections with the forgotten war against United States occupation. José Laurel, president of the republic of 1943, came from the province of Batangas, a region devastated by U.S. armed operations in 1902. His father had been confined in an American concentration camp and died shortly after his release. A cousin was killed in an encounter with American troops. Claro Recto, Secretary of the Interior, remembered his mother crying while being interrogated by American officers who were hunting down his uncle, a guerrilla leader in Tayabas Province. Veteran General Emilio Aguinaldo was not playing pretend when he graced the independence ceremony in October 1943 and hailed the republic as a fulfillment of the dreams of 1898.

For these leaders of the wartime republic, there was no particular love for their Japanese sponsors, but there wasn’t much nostalgia for U.S. rule either. They remembered the war with Spain, the war with the United States, and the war with Japan as variations on the same theme: resistance to foreign domination. Their aim was to ensure the survival of the Filipino nation, which had become sandwiched in a conflict between imperial powers.

I have no doubt that had the Japanese occupation lasted longer, there would have occurred a reprogramming of public memories similar to what the Americans had accomplished. The Filipino-American War would have been resurrected from oblivion and the Americans remembered as invaders, while the Japanese would, perhaps, have come to be perceived as liberators. But this was foiled by the return of General MacArthur in 1945, which he had solemnly promised to do when he left in defeat in 1942. This moment in Philippine history, appropriately celebrated in Bush’s speech, is called the liberation.

As soon as the commonwealth government was reinstalled in Manila by the liberators, it proceeded to restore those collective memories of a shared Filipino-American past that the wartime period had begun to erode.
Typically, President Sergio Osmeña, in a 1945 speech, compared General Douglas MacArthur’s liberation of the Philippines to the time when his father, General Arthur MacArthur, entered Manila in 1898 to free the Philippines from Spanish rule. Like father, like son—both liberators of the Philippines. What Osmeña conveniently forgot was that General Douglas MacArthur had commanded the American troops who fought and defeated the Filipino republican army in 1900.

The final six months of the war with Japan were very similar to the final six months of the war with the United States forty years earlier. Homes and buildings were razed; civilians suspected of aiding the guerrillas were tortured and executed; disaster accompanied the path of the contending armies. Personal experiences of the final months of the war were, for the most part, sad and tragic. This was the ideal environment for the promotion by postwar Filipino presidents Osmeña, Manuel Roxas, and Elpidio Quirino of the official memory of the war with Japan as a time when Filipino and American soldiers fought and suffered side by side to defend the Philippines. What was the “death march” if not their common pasyón, or Christ-like suffering and death? What was Capas, the prison camp in central Luzon and destination of the “death march,” if not, said Quirino, the “calvary” of the Filipino-American forces?

The official interpretation of history propagated in public speeches, radio broadcasts, and the school system encouraged the people to remember the American colonial period as a golden age when peace and prosperity reigned: peacetime, as it was fondly called. This age of bliss was shattered when the Japanese came and plunged the country into a dark age. The darkness was only lifted when the liberator MacArthur returned. Liberation meant the recovery of a lost age of happiness under America’s tutelage. It was not difficult to establish this official rendering of the past war because it touched a chord with the countless private memories of death and destruction suffered at the hands of the Japanese army.

In this official postwar construction of the past—a crucial component of the nation-building process—again the Filipino-American War was a non-event or, at least, relegated to the fringes of politics. Not everyone, however, could obliterate this war from memory, especially since its remembering had been encouraged during the Japanese occupation. A new generation
of nationalist intellectuals had been nurtured during this wartime period—they included historians such as Teodoro Agoncillo and Renato Constantino. For them, both the war against the United States and the war against Japan were to be remembered equally.

One well-known organization that refused to forget the Filipino-American War was the Hukbalahap. Formed during the war against Japan, the Huk army saw itself as a successor of the armies that fought the Spaniards and the Americans. Its commander Luis Taruc insisted that there was a parallel between the coming of the Americans in 1898, when they “crushed a people’s movement that had come into being in the struggle against Spain,” and their return in 1945, when they tried to “crush another people’s movement that had come into being in the struggle against Japan.”

The historic role of the United States as liberator and tutor—so emotionally articulated in the speeches of presidents Roxas and Quirino, both of whom had been nurtured by the Americans—was belittled by Taruc as a sham so that the United States could “make huge profits in our country.” Only a minority, he said, saw through “the performance of the ‘independence ceremony’ that occurred on July 4, 1946.” After pseudo-independence in 1946, the Hukbalahap, led by the Communist Party, transformed itself into a national liberation army opposing U.S. imperialism and its local Filipino clients.

Thus began the fourth great war that swept the Philippines: the Cold War. But for President Bush in his keynote speech, this was just the third great war. Forgetting the Filipino-American War enabled him to bypass the bungled liberation of 1898 and to posit the 1945 liberation of the Philippines as the event that parallels or inspires the recent events of 2003. “Since the liberation of Iraq,” he declares, “we ended one of the cruelest regimes in our time. . . . And we’re helping to build a free Iraq.” But, he also noted, “democracy has its skeptics. Some say the culture of the Middle East will not sustain the institutions of democracy. The same doubts were expressed about the culture of Asia. These doubts were proven wrong nearly six decades ago, when the Republic of the Philippines became the first democratic nation in Asia. Since then, liberty has reached nearly every shore of the Western Pacific.”

Liberation by the United States, followed by its granting of independence in 1946, have made the Philippines the model for Iraq, says Bush. But what
about the turmoil following 1946? For Bush, of course, this turmoil was an effect of the Cold War, in which freedom had to be defended. Today, the Cold War has its equivalent in the war on terror.

As I stated earlier, the immediate postwar governments of Roxas and Quirino highlighted the joint struggle by Filipinos and Americans against the Japanese. This strategy was aimed at solidifying the alliance between the Philippines and the United States. It was targeted at the Huks and the communists, who, being aligned with the Soviet Union, were critical of U.S. imperialism. However, after Laurel and most of the collaborators with Japan were pardoned in 1948 and as the Cold War intensified in the 1950s, the war with Japan gradually faded from official memory. After all, Japan was a staunch Cold War ally now, and Japanese war reparations were forthcoming. Officially, the war with Japan was to be forgotten during the Cold War, although privately it continued to be remembered as a dark age by those who had lived through it—that is, my father’s generation.

The collective memory of the war against Spain certainly became a terrain of conflict during the Cold War. The anticommunist camp, including the Catholic Church hierarchy, continued to endorse the intellectual Rizal as the hero of the revolution. It championed Christianity as the light that would ward off the communist threat in Asia—a trope repeated by Bush when he reminded us of Pope John Paul II’s words of praise for our democracy, which, Bush said, was an example for others, the source of the “light” (of freedom) in this part of the world.

The radical nationalists, however, championed Bonifacio, the working-class founder of the Katipunan. President Ferdinand Marcos, briefed by intelligence sources on the link between the Bonifacio tradition and the communist movement, responded by portraying himself as another Emilio Aguinaldo (who, we recall, had ordered the execution of Bonifacio in 1897). President Fidel Ramos, a former general, naturally identified with General and then President Aguinaldo. President Joseph Estrada, portraying himself as a latter-day Bonifacio, succeeded in drawing a massive following from the poorer classes despite his lack of sincerity in this identification. Obviously, these presidents succeeded by tapping the collective memory of the war against Spain.
The real battleground for Cold War memory makers, however, was the second great war. Few veterans of that Filipino-American War were left to remind the younger generation of their experiences. The government, largely consisting of politicians and bureaucrats educated under the Americans, persisted in its official forgetting of the Filipino-American War. Even during the recent centennial celebration of the revolution in 1998, there was hardly any official mention of the violent U.S. invasion. To remember the war with the Americans would harm the Cold War alliance, the military bases agreement, the special relationship as a whole—just as the edifice of the war on terror might begin to crumble if the public were allowed to remember freely the colonial and postcolonial wars in the Middle East that have led to the present blowback.

The official view was nevertheless challenged by a vocal group of activists who struggled to restore the memory of the Filipino-American War in the public consciousness. Among them were politicians and intellectuals Claro Recto, Teodoro Agoncillo, Leon Maria Guerrero, Renato Constantino, the Muslim Cesar Majul, and even wartime collaborator President José Laurel who founded the Lyceum School to promote a pro-Filipino rather than a neocolonial understanding of the past. Some of them had served the republic during the Japanese occupation. As a result of their reeducation campaigns in the 1950s and the 1960s, more and more educated Filipinos came to learn about the suppressed history of the Filipino-American War. By the end of the 1960s, a new, youthful generation had come to understand the first and second great wars as a single, continuous event—the unfinished revolution—in whose name a number of mass actions against the government were conducted beginning in January 1970. With the Philippine-American official construction of the past crumbling all around, President Marcos, with full U.S. backing, declared martial law in September 1972.

Our brief excursion into the politics of memory surrounding four past wars should help us understand how Filipinos have come to position themselves in the present war against terror. When U.S. soldiers returned to the Philippines in the early months of 2002 to help the government pursue the antiterror war, a significant portion of the populace, led by the president, welcomed them with open arms. Kindled in their minds were memories of the Americans as their allies, and even their liberators, in the war against Japan. Only a
minority saw the return of the U.S. Army as a ghostly echo of their arrival in 1898 to occupy the Philippines by force.

Last October, President Bush cemented this perception by highlighting the common Filipino-American struggle against the Japanese as the precedent for the present war on terror. Most Filipinos, it seems, read about the wars in the Middle East and fail to see them as a mirror of their own country’s experience in 1899. They have largely forgotten the Philippines’ second great war—thus the enthusiastic applause that punctuated Bush’s address to our politicians.

Bush told his Filipino audience to take sides in the war on terror, just as during the Cold War we had to take sides. “You are either with us or against us,” he warned. Of course, the Philippines, being a poor country in need of aid, has been compelled to join the coalition of the willing. But it is not just poverty or pragmatism that has led to this. What we see are the effects of a century of manipulation or reshaping of collective memories about our past wars.

Having American troops fighting side-by-side with Filipino troops in the war on terror may bring back memories of the joint struggle against Japan, but it also entails forgetting the equally terrible Filipino-American War. Did Filipinos fight those past wars only to end up serving the empire of the day? When President Bush called on Filipinos to participate in waging war against what he termed the new totalitarian threat against civilization, he was reviving the Cold War call to all members of the “free world” to fight communism. But when in President Bush’s speech Filipinos are asked to “defend ourselves, our civilization, and the peace of the world,” isn’t this thing called civilization a proxy for something else . . . like empire?

There is something more ominous, however, about Bush’s framing of the current war in terms of civilization against terror. For he unintentionally alluded to a series of events—and a powerful sentiment informing them—that have bedeviled Philippine history ever since the Spaniards arrived in the sixteenth century. I am referring to the age-old attempts by the Spanish and American armies, the Philippine national government, and elements of the Filipino Christian population to place the Muslim areas in the south under their control and ownership, often using the trope of civilization to justify their acts. Responses from the Muslims—called Moros by
the Spaniards—have taken such forms as the raiding of Christian towns to capture slaves, armed resistance to intrusions, an intensification of their own separate identity, and secessionism.

The Moros, in fact, figured as a kind of excess in the first and second great wars we have discussed above. Having suffered defeat at the hands of the Spaniards in the 1880s, the Moros saw in the Filipino revolution against Spain a chance to extricate themselves from control by the Christian north. They overthrew the revolutionary government at Cotabato, Mindanao, and refused to join the republic of 1898. After the American invasion and the defeat of the republic, some sultans and datus (chiefs) were persuaded to sign treaties accepting the U.S. military presence, but the U.S. forces soon came to be perceived as intruders by many local chiefs and Muslim clerics. A series of unequal battles were then fought between U.S. and Moro forces from 1902 to around 1910, producing legendary American heroes like Generals John Pershing and Leonard Wood. Likewise, the war—a jihad from the Moro perspective—featured some dramatic last stands of Moro forces, such as the massacres at Bud Dajo and Bud Bagsak, where hundreds of Muslims, including women and children, perished in heavy bombardment by U.S. artillery followed by ground troops storming in with their sophisticated weapons.

Like the Filipino-American War, the bloody suppression of Moro resistance to U.S. occupation suffered the same fate at the hands of official memory makers under American rule: it was not to be established in the collective memory. On the other hand, the narratives of collaboration, abolition of slavery, democratic tutelage, and steady incorporation of the Moros into the dominantly Christian nation-state would be celebrated. This has fostered the myth of the south’s incorporation into, and belonging to, the body politic, to the extent that most Filipinos today see the eruption of violence there as a deviation from normalcy rather than as an irruption of a long tradition of resistance. All the easier it is, then, to plug the southern Philippines into the grid of America’s war on terror.

The lengthy, ongoing war in the southern Philippines, collectively called the Moro Wars, constitutes the fifth great war in Philippine history whose significance the present war on terror particularly seeks to displace. Only by remembering their five historic wars and not just three, only by resurrecting
those memories that are hidden away in the dark shadows of empire, will Filipinos begin to see that what they are being asked to do today is built upon a massive forgetting. The nation can only move forward if the Philippine Revolution, which continues to be the foundational event in nation-building discourse, is remembered in all its dimensions. This includes the pathbreaking though failed Filipino resistance from 1899 to 1902, to the establishment of today’s global empire. This includes the failure of the revolution to incorporate the Muslim south.

The real ghost that haunts today’s war is not General Douglas MacArthur’s liberation of the Philippines in 1945. As I have argued in this paper, the real past in the present is the coming of the U.S. Army in 1898 led by General Arthur MacArthur in a “liberation” episode, followed shortly thereafter by the Filipino-American War, which in turn was followed by the Moro resistance to American occupation (which we might call the “Moro-American War”). The politics of remembering and forgetting these wars is what really constitutes the much-vaunted special relationship between the United States and the Philippines. At the most overt level, this relationship is manifested in such gestures as Bush’s speech and the enthusiastic applause that punctuated almost every minute of it, in Filipino and American troops fighting side by side in counterterrorist operations in Mindanao, or even in a Filipino contingent being sent to Iraq.

I have since been told, however, that a number of Filipino lawmakers did not join in the applause, that many apparently clapped with one hand while extending the other in anticipation of the war funds that Bush had promised. Meanwhile, outside the heavily guarded congress building, protesters were demanding that the United States withdraw its troops from Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Philippines. One group, named Bayan, also called for “a public apology and reparation for war crimes committed by U.S. forces during the Philippine-American War.” Despite the power of the colonial state and its local progeny, suppressed memories of the second great war have always been just beneath the surface and will surely regain their potency as that old war’s uncanny resemblance to the present war is recognized.
Notes

The first version of this paper, titled “Wars in the Philippines: The Politics of Memory in the Shadow of Empire,” was presented at a public forum in Fukuoka City, Japan, on September 21, 2003. Substantially revised after Bush’s visit to the Philippines, it served as the keynote lecture at the annual convention of the Philippine Political Science Association, held in Davao City, Philippines, in October 2003. A third version was presented in February 2004 at a symposium in Seattle sponsored by the University of Washington’s Southeast Asia Center.

1 The text of the Bush speech is available at usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p= washfile-english&y=2003&m=October&x=20031018112610attocnicho.7477075&t=xarchives/ xarchitem.html.


3 The Quirino Way: Collection of Speeches and Addresses of Elpidio Quirino (Manila, 1955), 70–74.


5 Ibid., 274.

6 The quote originally appeared in CyberDyaryo, www.cyberdyaryo.com/statements/st2003_1009_01.html, which has since been removed from the Web. Another version can be found at www.inq7.net/brk/2003/oct/18/brkpol_7-1.htm.