Policing the Imperial Periphery: The Philippine-American War and the Origins of U.S. Global Surveillance

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Alfred William McCoy
university of wisconsin-madison

Abstract

Using a methodology that inserts the current controversy over NSA surveillance into its historical context, this essay traces the origins of U.S. internal security back to America’s emergence as a global power circa 1898. In the succeeding century, Washington’s information infrastructure advanced through three technological regimes: first, the manual during the Philippine War (1898–1907); next, the computerized in the Vietnam War (1963–75); and, recently, the robotic in Afghanistan and Iraq (2001–14). While these military missions have skirted defeat if not disaster, the information infrastructure, as if driven by some in-built engineering, has advanced to higher levels of data management and coercive capacity. With costs for conventional military occupations now becoming prohibitive, the U.S. will likely deploy, circa 2020, its evolving robotic regime—with a triple-canopy aerospace shield, advanced cyberwarfare, and digital surveillance—to envelop the earth in an electronic grid capable of blinding entire armies on the battlefield or atomizing a single insurgent in field or favela.
The Philippine-American War deserves the attention of both students and teachers for several reasons. First, it was a longer and more costly conflict than the previous war with Spain. The Philippine-American War should be taught as part of a larger unit on United States imperialism in the period from 1890 to 1914. In a typical United States history course, the activities in this unit would be preceded by study of American industrialization in the nineteenth century, the politics of the Gilded Age, the causes of American expansionism, and the events of the Spanish-American War. If we seize the Philippines to go and become an imperialist power, we'll no longer have our freedoms.”

Cover of meeting held in Chicago by the American Anti-Imperialist League. We use cookies to make interactions with our website easy and meaningful, to better understand the use of our services, and to tailor advertising. For further information, including about cookie settings, please read our Cookie Policy. By continuing to use this site, you consent to the use of cookies. Importantly, McCoy highlights how those novel intelligence devices and technologies “travelled” from the Philippines to Europe, where they would be deployed on the battlefields of World War I, and then “back home” to the US, where they were put to use to suppress the socialist workers’ movement (ibid.: 24).

Tropicalizing Surveillance. Conference Paper. Full-text available. American imperialism is the term for a policy aimed at extending the political, economic, and cultural control of the United States government over areas beyond its boundaries. The Philippine-American War ensued, with extensive damage and death, ultimately resulting in the defeat of the Philippine Republic. According to scholars such as Gavan McCormack and E. San Juan, the American counterinsurgency resulted in genocide. Yet a century later, as the US empire engages in a new period of global expansion, Rome is once more a distant but essential mirror for American elites. Now, with military mobilisation on an exceptional scale after September 2001, the United States is openly affirming and parading its imperial power.