The Philippine-American War (or Philippine Insurrection), following the larger Spanish-American War (1898), brought into collision American political and economic ambitions with the aspirations of Filipino nationalists to establish a Philippine Republic. The conflict in the Philippines began on February 4, 1899 with the Battle of Manila when the Republican Army, under Emilio Aguinaldo, clashed with the US 8th Corps, under the command of Major General Wesley Merritt, in the capital suburbs. The two armies had jointly laid siege to Spanish-occupied Manila the year before, but the partnership effectively ended after Merritt’s corps entered the Walled City on August 13, 1898 under a secret agreement brokered between US representatives and the Spanish garrison. The armies were settled into opposing lines until Private William Grayson of the 1st Nebraska shot at a Filipino patrol in February 1899, sparking the Philippine-American War. It would drag on for another three years before President Theodore Roosevelt declared victory in July 1902.

The Philippine-American War represented a significant triumph for an army that did not have a codified counterinsurgency doctrine and lacked familiarity with the region. American strengths in organization, leadership, logistics, and equipment contributed strongly to their success in the Philippines. However, it was the political and social movements in the United States and Philippines that developed during the late nineteenth century which provided the conditions that made war probable, sustained it through its most intense years, and ultimately made achieving a political solution more feasible for the United States with a relatively small military commitment.

Aguinaldo and his supporters, mostly landed elites, were part of an indigenous movement for autonomy from Spanish authority known as the Katipunan. The movement had developed during the nineteenth century after Spanish elites harshly repressed indigenous demands for liberalization of the colonial order in the Philippines. The Katipuneros spoke with the rhetoric of liberal revolution, but the movement’s leaders were strongly conservative in their vision. Their ambition was to replace the previous Spanish colonial elite with themselves. As a consequence, they never saw guerilla warfare as anything more than a means to their end and not as a viable strategy for protracted war. Revolutionary warfare that energized the masses would be far too great a threat to their own standing to contemplate. The Katipuneros were unwilling to fully embrace the strategy that offered the best hope of exhausting their enemy’s will to win and exploiting the limitations of US manpower.

In contrast, the American will to win was relatively resilient despite an active anti-imperialist lobby. US naval-power advocates saw the Philippines as a natural extension of American strength across the Pacific and necessary for the prosperity of the nation. Some Progressives saw in the Philippines an opportunity for the United States to extend the benefits of American civilization to a colonial population. These agendas and others collectively lent the US war effort in the Philippines a determined and crusading character that Aguinaldo did not appreciate when he invested his hopes for victory in the fragility of American political will. Anti-imperialist press and politicians questioned US prerogatives in the Philippines, but reports of atrocities and occasional tactical defeats were insufficient to compel President William McKinley to withdraw from the islands or to lose his bid for reelection in 1900.
The relative balance of wills and its significance was less obvious in 1899. American material strength in the Philippines remained relatively low. Major General Elwell S. Otis, Merritt's successor, had only 10,946 soldiers with which to cow the Republican Army and enforce American authority over seven million Filipinos scattered across 115,026 square miles of islands. The Republican Army numbered between fifteen thousand and forty thousand hardy peasant infantry. Despite the handicap, Otis exploited his army's strengths against the weaknesses of Aguinaldo's Republican forces. He was deemed by some to be bookish and irascible, but Otis proved to be a shrewd strategist and competent manager. American soldiers were competent marksmen, adept at open-order tactics, equipped with effective Krag-Jörgenson rifles after 1899, generally well led, and had ample logistical support. Despite Aguinaldo's ambitions, the Republican Army had none of those qualities. It remained an ill-trained conscript force armed with insufficient quantities of modern rifles and ammunition of poor quality. The Filipino army was beset with petty rivalries and a paucity of competent generals. Aguinaldo's decision to pursue a conventional strategy of decisive battles only magnified these disparities to Otis's benefit.

The insurgency was rescued from complete destruction in 1899 by Otis's manpower problems, the onset of the summer monsoon season, and the difficulties of terrain. The Republican Army's reprieve ended when American reinforcements began arriving in September. The additional manpower had been authorized by the US Congress on March 2, 1899 when it passed the Army Act, which provided for the raising of 35,000 US Volunteers and a temporary augmentation of 37,000 to the regular army's pre-war authorization of 28,000. By November, Aguinaldo abandoned any pretense to conventional warfare and directed his generals to independently continue the struggle through guerilla warfare. By February 1900, the United States had secured control over all the major population centers, and the war entered into its final phase.

With the apparent disintegration of the Republican Army, Otis emphasized promoting the benefits of good government under American authority as a means for winning over the Filipinos and securing the political future of the Philippines. He recognized the need for coercive military measures to complete the defeat of Aguinaldo's army, but he underestimated the pervasiveness of the guerilla threat as he relinquished command to Major General Arthur MacArthur in May 1900.

Under MacArthur's command, the army transitioned from a general strategy of benevolence to one of chastisement as the guerilla problem persisted. This shift in American strategy first began among the junior officers. Lieutenants and captains operating at the local level developed the beginnings of a new counterinsurgency strategy by responding to the specific threats they faced and involving themselves in civil governance. They also made Filipino auxiliaries important contributors to their operations over the objections of some senior officers. MacArthur would supervise the dramatic expansion of the indigenous scout contingent to 5,500 men by June 1901. However, the most decisive and controversial factors in crippling the guerillas were population control, a policy of forced relocation euphemistically referred to as "reconcentration" by American officers, and the destruction of civilian infrastructure, which the insurgents relied upon for succor. Both methods produced malnutrition and outbreaks of disease in the affected local populations. Some insurgent leaders attempted to establish sources of supply independent of the towns, but American patrols and natural disasters conspired to undermine those efforts.

The capture of Lieutenant General Mariano Trías, Aguinaldo's trusted commander over southern Luzon, in April 1901 and of Aguinaldo himself in March dealt decisive blows to insurgent morale. Here, the
conservatism of the Filipino insurgents and the ability of the American leaders to understand and exploit that conservatism proved crucial. The Americans offered terms that left the social station of Katipuneros intact so long as they proved their loyalty to US authority in Manila. After McKinley secured reelection in 1900, cooperation with Americans became very appealing to many of the insurgent leaders. Aguinaldo and Trías legitimized what many insurgent leaders were already contemplating when they each issued their calls to lay down arms and surrender.

The consequent decline in violence across most of the Philippines encouraged American leaders to assume that Filipino resistance would quickly end. The McKinley administration seized upon the political opportunity for changing the look of American imperialism and established civilian rule over the Philippines under William H. Taft and the Philippine Commission on July 4, 1901. However, substantial antipathy toward the US occupation persisted. To the south of Luzon, banditry, millenarian sects, recalcitrant insurgents, and Moro tribes sustained an environment of dangerous civil discord and violence throughout the Visayas and southern islands of Moroland.

![American soldiers on maneuvers during the Philippine-American War, 1899. Perely Fremont Rockett/Corbis.](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/philippine_american_war_1899_1902)

The American struggle with Moro tribes for control of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago was distinct both for its duration and for the authority ceded to the US army as the principal agent of pacification and governance. The southern islands were organized under the Commission as Moro Province and included 36,500 square miles of mountain and jungle terrain. Governed by datus, or tribal chieftains, Mindanao and the Sulu islands had largely escaped significant Spanish influence outside of a few coastal towns. The end of the Philippine Insurrection in July 1902 left Moro Province as the only remaining region under military governorship.

To govern the province, the US army supplied several notable officers as military governors: Leonard Wood (1903–1906), Tasker H. Bliss (1906–1909), and John J. Pershing (1909–1913). As a captain, Pershing had been posted to Mindanao as a garrison commander before Wood's governorship and established a conciliatory relationship with the datus. In contrast to Pershing's deference to indigenous tradition and autonomy, Wood executed the expanded mandate given him by the Commission with...
bullheaded tenacity. The Commission and Roosevelt had tasked Wood in August 1903 with incorporating Moro Province into the political system under Manila along with the rest of the archipelago. However, in pursuing that end, Wood ignored the advice of veteran officers and expressed little sympathy for the perspective of datus. A few of the chieftains elected to resist the American intrusion with violence, and their war with the Americans came to define the standard narrative of the pacification of Moroland and the Philippines as a whole.

The battles against rebellious datus rank as the most severe of the struggle for control of the Philippines. The sanguineous character of the campaign had much to do with the mode and means of warfare used by the Moro tribes. More than with Aguinaldo’s army, the Moros suffered from a deficiency in modern arms. Mostly armed with swords and obsolete cannons, the tribesmen readily retreated within their earthen fortifications when confronted with American expeditions. The forts, known as cottas, were formidable infantry obstacles but also vulnerable to the effects of modern long-range artillery and mortars. Once besieged, the Moros lacked an effective response to the constant shelling and to the superior small-unit tactics of the US army and their indigenous auxiliaries. Moro tenacity led to pitched battles where the entire fortress garrison would be annihilated in a desperate fight to the last. The savagery of the fighting in one such battle called into question the wisdom of Wood’s aggressive policies and resulted in his transfer to command of the Philippines Division in 1906. The province remained comparatively peaceful until 1911, when Pershing decided to disarm the Moro tribes. The policy provoked two outbreaks of rebellion on Jolo Island. At Bud Dajo, Pershing ended the confrontation by negotiation and siege with only twelve Moros killed. The second battle at Bud Bagsak was far bloodier. Over a thousand Moro tribesmen held out in the citadel until overwhelmed by Philippine Scouts on June 15, 1913. Pershing’s victory ended the need for military governorship in Moro Province. The threat of rebellious datus had been removed, and the Filipino auxiliaries had proven themselves as capable of maintaining order. In 1914, the province transitioned to civilian rule for the first time under US authority.

The opinions expressed in this essay are strictly those of the author and do not reflect the policy or position of the Department of Defense, the US Army, or the United States Military Academy at West Point.

SEE ALSO: Aguinaldo, General Emilio (1869–1964); Guerilla warfare; Pershing, General John J. (1860–1948); Roosevelt, Theodore (1858–1919).

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