Pacifying the Moros:
American Military Government in the Southern Philippines, 1899-1913

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AS AMERICA's Armed Forces face the intimidating task of maintaining order and developing civil institutions in Iraq, it is useful to recall that early in the 20th century the U.S. Army had a similar mission in another Muslim land—the southern Philippines, where around 300,000 Muslims, commonly known as Moros, met the Army's efforts to establish U.S. sovereignty with great suspicion and, at times, violent resistance.

Understanding past U.S. actions in the southern Philippines is important because of the region's status as a front in the current war on terrorism. The terrorist organization Abu Sayyaf has its refuge there, and U.S. Special Forces advisers have helped the Philippines Armed Forces operate against the group. In fact, in early 2002, a joint U.S.-Philippine action on Basilan drove the Abu Sayyaf from the island, but the group remains active.[1]

The Army's experience with the Moros demonstrates how religious and cultural differences between a local people and the Americans sent to govern them can complicate efforts to bring about pacification. Still, despite these differences, the Army had considerable success in reducing Moro resistance to U.S. control, achieving success by combining a "policy of attraction" to persuade the Moros of the advantages of U.S. rule and an aggressive response to those who defied U.S. authority.

The Army and the Moros

U.S. involvement in the region began shortly after the United States acquired the Philippines from Spain following the Spanish-American War. When U.S. soldiers first arrived in 1899, they began a period of military rule over a people few Americans knew much about. The Moros made up most of the population of the Sulu Archipelago and the southern half of the large island of Mindanao.

Although the Moros belonged to 13 cultural-linguistic groups, Islam gave them a sense of common identity and often set them at odds with their Christian Filipino neighbors. The Moros' reputation as fierce fighters was well established before the U.S. Army's arrival. Moro culture encouraged young men to be courageous, to develop their skills as warriors, and to defend their honor to the death. The Spanish had never achieved much more than nominal control over them, and Spanish soldiers had rarely ventured far from fortified seacoast towns.[2]

Indirect rule. Preoccupied with defeating Filipino nationalists in the northern islands, the U.S. initially avoided any assertion of authority over the Moros that might spark resistance. Most of the functions of government continued to be carried out by the datus (local leaders), and traditional Moro laws remained in force. The Bates Agreement of 1899 gave the Sultan of Sulu governing authority in the Sulu Islands in exchange for his recognition of U.S. sovereignty.[3]

The system of indirect American rule, modeled in part on the British experience in their Asian colonies, proved satisfactory in some respects. Fighting between the Moros and U.S. forces was rare. Over time, however, the colonizers became increasingly dissatisfied with the arrangement. The Moros continued to conduct raids against each other and against Christian Filipinos and, occasionally, attacked American surveying and road-building crews.

The practice of slavery among the Moros drew condemnation from critics in the United States, who denounced the Bates Agreement for permitting its continuation. American officers serving in the southern Philippines grew frustrated with the Sultan of Sulu and other Moro leaders and began agitating for direct U.S. rule. Determined to modernize the Philippines, these officers saw Moro leaders as hostile to the values Americans hoped to nurture and as being incapable of maintaining order.[4]

Direct rule. By 1903 the U.S. Government decided to bring the Moros under direct rule. The end of major fighting between the U.S. Army and Filipino nationalists meant more troops were available for the effort. The Philippine Commission created the Moro Province (southern Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago) and placed it under the command of a military governor. The military governor acted under the general supervision of the Philippines Commission, but he had considerable authority, commanding all

(*Clockwise*) Leonard Wood circa 1898; a Moro datu in the southern Philippines; and Moro datus from Mindanao flanked by General John J. Pershing and Colonel Cornelius C. Smith, commander of the Philippine Constabulary, circa 1910-1912.

US Army

U.S. troops in the province and supervising district governors and other officials. Army officers were appointed to almost all civil positions.

Although determined to impose direct rule, the Army moved cautiously to avoid encouraging widespread Moro opposition. The U.S. Government preferred that the Army take control without the bloodshed that had characterized the recently concluded war against Filipino nationalists. The Philippine Commission announced that the United States would not interfere with tribal organization and culture, and U.S. officials made it clear they would not seek to convert the Moros to Christianity.

Although the government did not prohibit Christian missionaries from entering Moro lands, neither did it encourage them to come. To gain the support of Moro leaders, the Americans allowed the responsibility for local government to continue to rest with the datus, who became "tribal ward leaders."[5]

Benevolent assimilation. The Army also promoted the benevolent assimilation U.S. President William McKinley had set forth as a U.S. goal. The U.S. Government sought to win support for U.S. control by expanding commerce, increasing education, and improving public health in Moro lands.

The government also built roads; established schools and public markets; provided inoculations; and cleaned up cities and towns. Army officers who held civil positions in the provincial government were responsible for carrying out such improvement projects. Some used diplomacy to gain the Moros' trust. By familiarizing themselves with Moro customs and beliefs, consistently treating the Moros with respect, and emphasizing that the military government would preserve their right to practice Islam, they convinced many local leaders to accept U.S. authority.[6]

Reform and Resistance

Despite these initiatives, the U.S. campaign to exert control without warfare broke down, and fighting between Americans and Moros became more frequent. A growing number of Army officers came to believe shows of force were necessary to control the population. Many of these officers saw the Moros as fanatics who would submit only under the compulsion of superior military power. The idea of Moro fanaticism, a characteristic the Americans associated with Islam, made many officers skeptical that diplomatic efforts would bear fruit. The Army officers' sense of cultural and moral superiority added to their impatience with diplomacy. Many officers admired the Moros as warriors but deemed them inferior to Americans in almost all other respects.[7]

Advocates of a harder line against the Moros gained a sympathetic ear when the first governor of Moro Province, Major General Leonard Wood, arrived in the Philippines. A close friend of President Theodore Roosevelt and a former military governor of U.S.-occupied Cuba, Wood was a reformer by nature, and he soon decided there was much about the Moros that required reform. Under his direction, the province's legislative council voted to abolish slavery, replace the Moro legal code with one

closer to the U.S. model, and restore a Spanish-era tax known as the cedula on every adult male. Above all, Wood wanted to impose order on a Moro society he saw as lawless and chaotic.[8]

Not surprisingly, Wood's policies met with increased opposition. The elimination of slavery and the traditional legal code struck directly at the power of the datus, and some of them decided to take up arms against the Americans. Other Moros chose to resist for religious reasons. Despite assurances, they feared the Americans would eventually demand that they convert to Christianity. The cedula also created intense resentment among many Moros who saw compliance as a form of tribute to a non-Islamic government.[9]

The Moros' armed resistance took several forms. Some Moros, especially on heavily forested Mindanao, practiced guerrilla warfare, raiding U.S. encampments for weapons and setting ambushes on jungle trails. The most unnerving form of Moro resistance was the juramentado, or suicide attack. A juramentado attacker would seek to reach paradise by slaying as many nonbelievers as possible before being killed himself. Such attacks were not common, but they occurred often enough to keep the Americans on edge. Usually, however, Moro resistance was defensive in nature. A datu who refused to submit to U.S. authority would hurry with his followers into a fortified position, called a cotta, when soldiers made an appearance. Once in the cotta—a sturdy structure constructed of logs, earth, rock, and bamboo—the Moros would wave battle flags and sound war gongs to signal their defiance and hope their opponents would decide against a costly assault.[10]

The Moros had distinct disadvantages in their resistance; for example, they were outgunned by the Americans. Some Moros had managed to obtain U.S. or Spanish rifles, but more typically, Moros armed themselves with swords and spears—weapons that were effective only at close range.

The Moros were divided into tribal groups, each with its own language and customs, and further divided into clans headed by datus, who were frequently at war with each other. As in earlier fights with American Indians, Army officers used longstanding animosities among the tribes to their advantage. In going to war against a datu, the Americans often found that other datus were ready to help bring about the demise of a rival.

Punitive expeditions. One Army officer serving on Mindanao noted that Wood went after the Moros "with a rough hand." His soldiers killed hundreds of Moros and burned their houses and crops. Wood's comments on an expedition on Mindanao reflected his approach. Because the Moros of that area had been intractable for generations, he "decided to go thoroughly over the whole valley, destroying all warlike supplies, and dispersing and destroying every hostile force, and also to destroy every cota [sic] where there [was] the slightest resistance."[11] He and other officers expressed satisfaction with the results of these devastating campaigns. As a result of punishing one group of Moros, other groups that had been "lukewarm and hostile" were inclined to submit to the Americans. Wood's campaign effectively ended large-scale resistance by the Moros on Mindanao.

Although the punitive campaigns pounded many Moros into submission, they might have actually undercut the pacification effort. Moros were angered by the killing of women and children—a result of the indiscriminate firing by U.S. soldiers and the Moro practice of taking their entire families into the cottas when troops moved against them.[12] The punitive expeditions left people without homes or food, children without parents, clans without leaders, and contributed to the breakdown of the Moro social order.

Hundreds of displaced, fearful, and angry Moros gathered near Jolo's Bud Dajo volcano following an attack on several datus, illustrating how Wood's policies sometimes helped create the very disorder he wanted so badly to eliminate. By early 1906, a large group of disaffected Moros fortified the crater of the dormant volcano and refused the demands of U.S. officials that they depart. The datus were unable to persuade their followers to leave the mountain, a development the datus blamed on U.S. policies. As they pointed out, the imposition of a new legal code and the willingness of U.S. officials to overturn the datus' judicial rulings had caused an erosion of the datus' authority.[13]

After several months of negotiation, Wood lost patience with the Moros and ordered U.S. troops to Bud Dajo to "clean up the place." At the cost of 15 dead, the American force eventually overran the fiercely defended Moro positions. In the aftermath, U.S. troops found over 600 dead Moros, including women and children. Wood had ended the resistance, but at the cost of creating long-lasting Moro resentment. In addition, the Bud Dajo battle triggered an outcry from antiimperialists in America who questioned the necessity of the attack and accused Wood and his soldiers of carrying out a ruthless slaughter.[14]

Diplomacy. Wood left his position as governor in 1906 to take command of the Army's Division of the Philippines. His replacement, Brigadier General Tasker Bliss, changed U.S. policies significantly. Unlike Wood, Bliss preferred diplomacy to coercion, and he dropped Wood's practice of relying on punitive expeditions in favor of a policy that emphasized punishing individual wrongdoers. He states: "Our

effort is to make the natives understand that when one or several of their number commit an outrage, we do not seek revenge by harassing the whole countryside, but that we will go after the culprits alone and the other people will not suffer."[15]

Bliss also wanted to reduce the potential for clashes between Moros and Americans. Bliss complained about overly aggressive officers, including one whose "disposition seemed to be to kill a Moro on sight."[16] A partial solution, Bliss believed, was to use native troops (members of the Philippine Constabulary and the Army's Philippine Scouts) to do most of the patrolling and arresting. The use of natives as auxiliary troops had long been a practice of the older colonial powers. In 1903 the U.S. Government had begun recruiting Moros for service in constabulary and scout units led by U.S. officers. The new recruits adapted well to military life and, although a few deserted or turned on their officers, proved loyal to the United States.[17]

Bliss's policy of avoiding actions that provoked the Moros helped bring stability to the province, and fighting between Moros and Americans diminished. Bliss reported, "The Moros as a rule are quiet and peaceful because we interfere with them to the least possible degree."[18] The willingness of the Americans to use force—so clearly demonstrated during Wood's tenure as governor—no doubt also contributed to the relative calm. Wood, however, was not overly impressed with Bliss's performance. Privately he criticized Bliss for passivity, a view that deepened when Bliss was slow to move against a Moro who had killed a U.S. soldier.

In 1909 Bliss was replaced by Brigadier General John J. Pershing. Pershing largely adhered to the policies Bliss had put in place. Like Bliss, he assured Moro leaders that only wrongdoers would face punishment. Pershing believed, however, that he could improve on the performance of his predecessor. He thought some officers operated without sufficient restraint and that Bliss had gone too far in avoiding conflict by concentrating his troops close to their posts. He also felt Bliss had lost an opportunity to foster among the Moros a more positive attitude toward the Americans, saying, "We must branch out and let all the people in the Moro Province know there is a government which is looking after them and which proposes and intends to encourage and protect them."[19] To make the government's presence more visible, Pershing divided his forces into smaller units and distributed them around the province.

Disarmament and Bloodshed

Pershing's tenure as governor might have passed as peacefully as Bliss's had, but for his decision to disarm the population, a policy that enraged many Moros and opened a new period of conflict. The idea of disarmament had been around for some time—Bliss was one of its advocates—but higher authorities, fearful of a violent reaction by the Moros, declined to approve it. In 1911, Pershing won that approval and announced a new law requiring Moros to surrender their firearms and forbidding them to carry edged weapons. Many Moros, for whom weapons were precious possessions, refused to give them up, and fighting broke out between them and the troops sent to enforce the order.[20]

In late 1911 about 800 Moros fled to the old battleground of Bud Dajo to make a stand. Pershing's response to this development provides an illuminating contrast with that of Wood in the earlier episode on the mountain. The matter could be ended without bloodshed, Pershing maintained, if Americans were patient. He wrote, "It is not my purpose to make any grandstand play here and get a lot of soldiers killed and massacre a lot of Moros, including women and children."[21]

Pershing succeeded in dispersing the Moros on Bud Dajo with few casualties. Acting swiftly before the Moros could gather provisions or construct cottas, his soldiers surrounded the mountain to cut the Moros off from their sources of supply. Cooperative Moro leaders convinced most of the people to leave the mountain and surrender their weapons. Only 12 Moros were killed—far fewer than the 600 lost 5 years previously.[22]

Pershing's handling of another case of strong resistance resulted in much more bloodshed, however. In 1913 thousands of Moros moved to the fortified crater of Bud Bagsak in eastern Jolo to defy the disarmament policy. Pershing worked diligently to negotiate the Moros' departure, and many eventually left the mountain. However, a group of around 500 remained in their stronghold and refused to surrender their weapons. Unwilling to accept such open defiance and under pressure to end the insurgency, Pershing ordered an attack on Bud Bagsak that resulted in the deaths of almost all the Moros who were there, including as many as 50 women and children.[23]

The battle of Bud Bagsak was the last major case of Moro resistance to U.S. control. After 1913, civilians replaced Army officers in positions in the provincial government, and most U.S. soldiers withdrew. Fighting between Moros and government forces virtually ceased, in part because the disarmament policy had removed thousands of weapons from the province. Perhaps more important, the Moros became more supportive of U.S. rule as the prospects for independence for the Philippines increased; they realized that independence would probably mean their lands would fall under the control of the hated Christian Filipinos.[24]

The battles at places like Bud Dajo and Bud Bagsak long ago faded from the consciousness of

Americans—in fact, they were not much noticed by Americans even at the time. Among the Moros, however, the U.S. campaigns were of major importance. The high Moro death tolls resulting from U.S. military operations contributed to the development of an anti-U.S. sentiment that continues today. That sentiment became obvious in February 2003 when the Philippine Government announced it would participate in Operation Balikatan, a joint exercise with the United States on Jolo.

The government's announcement provoked loud condemnations from many Filipinos, including nationalists who feared the United States would use the exercise as a way to become directly involved in combat against the terrorist group Abu Sayyaf, a role they said the Philippines Constitution prohibited. Equally significant was the reaction of the residents of Jolo. A journalist visiting the island shortly after the announcement reported an outpouring of opposition to the idea of U.S. troops arriving. A banner in the island's main port read, "We will not let history repeat itself! Yankee back off." The island's radio station played traditional ballads with new lyrics: "We heard the Americans are coming and we are getting ready. We are sharpening our swords to slaughter them when they come. . . . Our ancestors are calling for revenge."[25]

In the face of growing opposition, the Philippine Government canceled the exercises on Jolo.[26] For the Moros, whose ballads and storytelling keep events of the past alive, the U.S. military's occupation a century before remains a source of ill will toward the United States.

Lessons for Today

The experience of the U.S. Army in dealing with the Moros provides possible lessons for today. First, efforts to bring about a rapid transformation of the local culture—however well-intended—often stir more resistance. The sudden U.S. imposition of decrees prohibiting slavery, imposing a head tax, overhauling the legal code, and banning weapons goaded many Moros into violent opposition. The wiser course might have been to pursue such changes incrementally. Second, the demonstrated willingness of the Army to employ force against those who resisted U.S. control discouraged opposition from the Moros, but the indiscriminate and highly aggressive use of force—as demonstrated in several of Wood's punitive campaigns—at times increased rather than diminished disorder. Third, actions that produced tangible improvements in the Moros' daily lives—such as road building and better medical care—were instrumental in increasing support for the United States. Finally, the policy of not interfering with the practice of Islam was tremendously important in winning greater acceptance of U.S. rule. The frequent U.S. disavowals of intent to convert the Moros and the decision of the government to refrain from encouraging Christian missionary activity gradually allayed such fears. ***MR***

NOTES

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