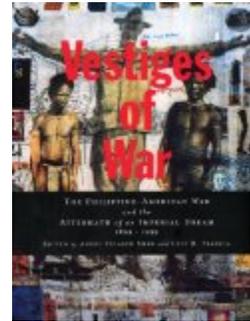


Angel Velasco Shaw, Luis H. Francia, eds. *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream, 1899-1999*. New York: New York University Press, 2002. xxviii + 468 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-9791-4; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-9790-7.

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Published on H-Amstyd (April, 2004)



## Imperial Amnesia and the Act of Recovery

### Imperial Amnesia and the Act of Recovery

Standard American history texts rarely neglect to mention the so-called “Splendid Little War” with Spain, in which American forces were victorious, the destruction of the battleship USS *Maine* was “avenged” and American honor upheld, and, for a mere twenty million dollars, the United States acquired Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines from Spain. Not recounted as vividly are the three years of fighting that went on after the Spanish-American War, as Filipino insurgents under General Emilio Aguinaldo lashed out against the newly established American presence. Aguinaldo, who had led the Filipino guerrillas against Spain, had expected that upon the defeat of Spain, the United States would ensure independence for the Philippines. Instead, domination of the Philippines by a foreign power simply changed hands.

Furious, Aguinaldo led an ill-fated revolt against American rule. When the Philippine-American war ended in April of 1902, the United States’s new role as a world power with interests and responsibilities in Asia and the Pacific was official.

More significant, in the eyes of the editors of and contributors to *Vestiges of War*, is the fact that American imperial interests and actions at this time inexorably tied together the fates of the Philippines and the United States. As Angel Velasco Shaw points out in her introductory essay in *Vestiges*, since the American takeover of

the Philippines, citizens of the two nations have migrated back and forth continuously. Exposed to American influence and American values, many Filipinos left their homeland to pursue the “American Dream” in the United States. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century Filipinos, unlike other Asians, were allowed special immigration privileges to the United States, where, upon arrival, they found that they were denied many other privileges, including that of American citizenship.

Shaw’s co-editor Luis H. Francia argues that the Philippine-American War, as the initial leap of the United States into the Asia/Pacific region, was the precursor of much of U.S. foreign policy in the following century. A related suggestion—that this war and American interest in acquiring the Philippines marked the beginnings of American expansionism and imperialism—appears as a theme throughout several of the essays in this book. This is a suggestion, I think, many North Americans would disagree with. Surely Mexicans, Canadians, and Native Americans can attest to American expansionism as a factor guiding U.S. policy already during the nineteenth century. Imperialism is still imperialism, even if the object of one’s imperial intentions is on the same continent.

Still, the acquisition of territory as far away as the Philippines caused a new sense of direction in American expansionism, as well as a sense of disquiet and alarm in at least a few Americans, including Mark Twain, whose warnings about the dangers of American imperialism,

written during the war with the Philippines, are included in *Vestiges*.

This is not an objective book, and its editors are the first to admit this. *Vestiges of War* begins with the premise that the U.S. occupation of the Philippines was wrong, and none of the contributors seem to disagree. The collected works in this volume come together quite effectively to convince the reader that the United States has succeeded in existing in a comfortable state of denial, of convenient forgetfulness, regarding the true nature of its relationship with the Philippines. They range from Mark Twain's 1901 essay questioning America's imperialist ambitions (which is accompanied by Jim Zwick's essay detailing how Twain's anti-imperialist views and opposition to American intervention in the Philippines were suppressed), to Daniel Boone Schirmer's provocative article arguing that the racist element that was key in shaping American policy towards the Philippines at the turn of the century has continued to be a factor in U.S. foreign policy under the most recent four U.S. administrations, to thoughtful (and thought-provoking) writings by Filipino-Americans who still today wrestle with the nature of the "special relationship" and its implications for their own personal sense of identity.

But, as Francia points out, U.S. imperialist intentions and actions, including the brutal realities of the Philippine-American War, are largely and deliberately forgotten in favor of a mainstream version of U.S. history that prefers to uphold a myth of the United States as a "freedom-defending giant" (p. xxiii). This historical amnesia is shared by many Filipinos, who have accepted a benevolent interpretation of U.S. involvement in their history, have managed to forget the unpleasantness, and have been taught to remember the United States not as an invader or oppressor but as a liberator. This liberator myth, of course, was reinforced by the joint U.S.-Philippine defense against the Japanese invaders in World War II, and cemented by the image of General Douglas MacArthur fulfilling his promise to return to the embattled Philippines. (Ironically, as Reynaldo C. Ileto's essay on historical forgetfulness reminds us, the man regarded as the "savior" of the Philippines in WWII happened to be the son of General Arthur MacArthur, the man who led the "invaders and destroyers of 1900" into the Philippines [p. 13].)

That the shared history between America and the Philippines is often described as a "special relationship" suggests a benevolent and mutually beneficial situation, but in reality, the relationship has tended to be one-sided

and based on the military and strategic interests of the United States. It is Filipino national consciousness that has suffered the most, according to many of the contributors to this book. As part of a nation that has all but erased the Philippine-American War from its collective memory, how does a Filipino American find his or her own identity?

*Vestiges of War* is a massive and oversized volume with such a richness of illustrations that one could be tempted to leave it atop the coffee table for casual perusing. The outgrowth of a 1999 conference at New York University, it is a truly interdisciplinary study that incorporates photographs, a timeline, and historic maps, and draws from art, poetry, plays, and film. The collected essays, both written and "visual," and other materials are neatly organized into major themes, starting from the time when the Philippines first appeared as an "object of colonial desire" of the United States, and tracing the continuing Filipino-American relationship in the century since the United States's acquisition of and victory over the Philippines: the "aftermath" that affects both Filipinos and Americans to this day.

The recent demand on the part of the Philippine government for the withdrawal of U.S. military bases from their territory suggests a hopeful step in the evolution of a relationship that is no longer shaped first and foremost by U.S. military needs. However, in her introductory essay, Shaw includes a postscript written shortly after September 11th, 2001, and the United States's bombing of Afghanistan, in which she reflects on this new stretch of the American Tentacles and the possibility that the war on terrorism will involve the Philippines—that it might "resurface as a strategic location" for U.S. operations, as it was during World War II (p. xvii). Certainly, as the United States repeats its self-stated agenda as "liberator" of other nations, this time Iraq, an examination of U.S. involvement in the Philippines and its aftermath is worthy of consideration.

It is the rich variety of sources, the many ways of expressing the dilemma and duality of the "special relationship," that is the strength of this volume. For example, the section on "The Cultural Fall-out" of American involvement in the Philippines includes Eric Gamalinda's essay on the effect of the "special relationship" on literature and language, Doreen G. Fernandez's article on "Food and War," and Nick Deocampo's excellent discussion of "the complicit role cinema played in America's empire building" (p. 228) through a series of little-known films produced at Thomas Alva Edison's film studio dur-

ing, and about, the Philippine-American War.

Contributions by non-Filipino authors, including a Mexican American, a Korean American, and a Vietnamese American, who reflect on their own status in, and in relation to, America, drive home the fact that the af-

termath of America's "imperial dreams" affects all Americans. This book is an earnest attempt at an antidote to our collective and self-imposed amnesia about American involvement in the Philippines. Borrowing a phrase used by one of the book's contributors, John Kuo Wei Tchen, *Vestiges* is part of the "obstinate act of recovery" (p. 437).

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**Citation:** Aldona Sendzikas. Review of Shaw, Angel Velasco; Francia, Luis H., eds., *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream, 1899-1999*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. April, 2004.

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