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NOW THAT THE war is over in Iraq, America is finding out how unwieldy is the task of rebuilding a nation torn asunder by war and decades-long rule of a terrifying despot. If reshaping Iraq is anything like the United States' first attempt at creating an empire, America's patience and honor will be strained to the breaking point.

As our experience in the Philippines near the dawn of the 20th century reminds us, nation building can be a tricky mess filled with miscommunications, misunderstandings, miscalculations and out-and-out mistakes. In today's glare of round-the-clock media coverage, every step will undergo intense scrutiny and debate.

Over a century ago before there was a country called Iraq, the United States made its first attempt to mold a foreign country with a different set of values and cultural context into the American image. The experiment with the Philippines resulted in a bloody war that cost thousands of lives and the loss of America's innocence.

The war on terrorism has brought us full circle with one of our most loyal allies. This week, President Bush feted Philippines President Gloria Arroyo with a state dinner and promised more military aid in her fight against the Abu Sayyaf terrorists, Muslim separatists and communist insurgents.

President Bush's desire to establish a democratic government in Iraq could take years. He wants Iraq to be a beachhead for democracy, which he hopes

will spread to the rest of the Arab world. But if our experience in the Philippines is any indication, it will take more than shipping over a crateload of American government textbooks to create the cultural mindset and institutions that allow American-style democracy to flourish.

A war was needed

At the end of the 19th Century the era of empire building was winding down. Drawing from its experience with Great Britain and heeding George Washington's warning, the United States resisted the temptation to embroil itself in foreign affairs and was the only major world power that hadn't embarked on building colonies around the world.

Much like the present, the economy was in the doldrums and there was a lot of domestic pressure from business and media for the United States to get continue its Manifest Destiny overseas. But by then, the world had been pretty much divided up among the European powers.

Spain was just barely holding on to its far-flung holdings, clinging to them with the assistance of the Catholic Church. With holdings like Cuba and Puerto Rico near the U.S. mainland, Spain looked like easy pickings for those who wanted an American empire.

The explosion that ripped open the USS Maine anchored in Havana's harbor, gave America the perfect excuse to declare war. Congress and the media cried: Remember the Maine. There was likely nothing more to remember than a faulty boiler -- but America blamed a Spanish mine.

In shades of the Gulf of Tonkin incident that got us embroiled in Vietnam and even the attack on Pearl Harbor that threw us into World War II, the cause of the Maine's explosion killing 260 sailors is still questioned by conspiracy buffs.

Some historians theorize, the ship was blown up deliberately to push America into a war with Spain, a country on the downslide of its power and influence. It is important to remember this strategy of drawing us into war because it will be used again in just a few months.

Egged on by a vociferous press led by Hearst and Pulitzer newspapers, on April 25, 1898, the United States declared war on Spain.

While most of America's attention focused on the fighting that ensued in Cuba, what with Teddy Roosevelt and his Roughriders charging up San Juan Hill and all, another front over 13,000 miles away in Manila Bay was playing itself out with unforeseen consequences for the United States.

Ungoing revolution

Before Commodore George Dewey and his gunship diplomacy arrived in the Philippines, Spain had been fighting off the independence-minded Filipinos from Day 1 when Ferdinand Magellan was killed by a Muslim chieftain, Lapulapu, in 1520. Throughout Spanish rule, there had been over 30 insurrections by Filipinos. In 1896, spurred by the firing squad execution of national hero Jose Rizal, a revolt was led by Emilio Aguinaldo that was quashed in 1897.

By the following year, however, Spain could not kill the Filipinos' desire for freedom. By the time Dewey arrived, Spanish soldiers had been driven back to their last stronghold. Much like the conclusion of the American revolutionary war when George Washington and the French fleet surrounded the British, the Spaniards were besieged by the Filipino nationalists on land and the allied American fleet on water.

Dewey and the U.S. Pacific fleet were anchored in Hong Kong when America declared war on Spain on May 1. The Americans sailed to Manila to find the trapped Spaniards holding off the Filipinos.

The Americans easily defeated the Spanish ship in the Battle of Manila Bay. Twelve days later, the United States ferried Filipino leader Aguinaldo back to the Philippines from his exile in Hong Kong. Aguinaldo, who Americans encouraged to lead the Filipino revolt with the belief that the United States would support Philippine independence.

On June 12, 1898 in June of 1898, with the Spaniards still encircled, Filipino nationalists declared their independence after 400 years of Spanish colonial rule. Asia's first republic was born -- led by President Aguinaldo and his congress.

When it became clear to Spain that it was going to lose its war and its most valuable colony in Asia, rather than admit defeat at the hands of the poorly armed "indios" of the Philippines, Spain sought to save its honor by secretly negotiating terms with the Americans.

Spanish and American leaders agreed to stage a mock battle. On Aug. 13, the Americans fired a few shots. Filipino forces who tried to join in the "attack" were told to keep out of it. The Spanish then "surrendered" to the Americans.

The Treaty of Paris ending the Spanish American War was signed in December of 1898.

For \$20 million the United States gained control of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Wake Island, Guam, and the Philippines. Cuba was granted independence but the Philippines were not.

The treaty sparked bitter debate in the United States, which led to the establishment of the Anti-Imperialist League that included Andrew Carnegie, Grover Cleveland, Samuel Gompers and William Jennings Bryan.

Mark Twain emerged as its most outspoken leader.

Of the conflict in the Philippines, Twain wrote:

"We have pacified some thousands of the islanders and buried them, destroyed their fields, burned their villages, and turned their widows and orphans out of doors.

"The White Man's Burden has been sung," he wrote. "Who will sing the Brown Man's?"

Meanwhile, President William McKinley, sounding eerily like President Bush, told the American people of a dream he had that convinced him that it was God's will for the United States to help Filipinos learn democracy and embrace Christianity, even though most Filipinos were already Catholic.

But his dream did little to change the anti-imperialist sentiment. A few days before a vote in the Senate, it looked like the Treaty of Paris would not be approved.

Remember the Maine

Now is the time to remember the Maine and the suspicious explosion that sparked the Spanish-American War. A pattern emerges.

McKinley gave orders to his generals in the Philippines to commence hostilities a few days before the vote was supposed to occur on Feb. 6.

On Feb. 4, Americans fired on their former allies. That night, an American soldier with an itchy trigger finger was ordered to patrol in the no-man's-zone that acted as a buffer between the Filipinos and Americans. Private William Grayson described what happened:

"I yelled, 'Halt!' ... The man moved. I challenged him with another 'Halt.' Then he immediately shouted 'Halto' to me. Well I thought the best thing to do was shoot him. He dropped. Then two Filipinos sprang out of the gateway about 15 feet from us. I called 'Halt' and Miller fired and dropped one. I saw that another was left. Well I think I got my second Filipino that time."

The next morning President Aguinaldo immediately sought peace with the Americans but Gen. Elwell Otis would have none of it, insisting the war must continue "to its grim end."

U.S. newspapers headlined the event as "Insurgents attack Manila." The next day, U.S. senators, filled with patriotic fervor, ratified the Treaty of Paris.

Thus, America's first empire was born amidst racism, betrayal and deceit and an encounter that could have been a result of a blundering patrol or it could have been a set-up with the inevitable tragic results. Remember the Maine, indeed.

America quickly learned that ruling an empire was no easy task. The Filipino revolutionaries still surrounding Manila, found themselves battling the Americans.

Dewey's warships, still in Manila Bay, fired their cannons at Filipino positions. The barrage was intense.

Superior American firepower forced the Filipinos to retreat from the major cities but the fighting was more fierce than expected.

By the summer, more time than the entire Spanish-American War, American troops had only conquered 30 miles north and south of Manila.

Traditional warfare was costly to the Filipinos and like Saddam Hussein's

feyadeen and the outgunned Vietcong, Aguinaldo was forced to resort to guerrilla tactics -- hit-and-run then slide into hiding among the civilian populace.

Combating the guerrillas left American troops weary and frustrated. The tropical heat and malaria was taking its toll. The fighting grew increasingly bloody and brutal. Atrocities were committed.

In October of 1901, U.S. Brig. Gen. Jacob H. Smith was put in charge of the "pacification" of Samar Island. In response to one of the few Filipino battle victories where Filipinos disguised as women attacked off-guard U.S. forces with bolos. Smith's orders were: "I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn, the more you kill and burn the better you will please me. I want all persons killed who are capable of bearing arms in actual hostilities against the United States."

When one of his officers asked for clarification, Smith specified that everyone 10 years of age or older should be killed. It is estimated that as many as 50,000 Filipinos died from the ensuing campaign of extermination and devastation on Samar.

By the time the war officially ended in 1902, 5,000 Americans and an estimated 20,000 Filipino soldiers had lost their lives. Civilian deaths numbered around 200,000.

Filipinos continued to fight for their independence until 1913.

Ominously, among the last vestiges of resistance occurred on Jolo, the Abu Sayyaf stronghold and where Philippine troops and their American advisers will concentrate their forces.

The Tausug people on Jolo have long memories and still tell of the slaughter of their forefathers at the hands of the Americans. They proudly claim that

the Colt .45 was invented to stop the Tausugs, who were ferocious fighters.

The hit-and-run guerrilla tactics learned by fighting the Americans served the Filipinos well when they resisted the Japanese occupation of the islands during World War II and is still being employed by the Philippines' die-hard communist New Peoples Army, separatists Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Abu Sayyaf.

American military strategists, used what they learned -- such as search-and-destroy and hamletting -- in Vietnam a half-century later.

Road to democracy

American history books used to attach a paragraph of the conflict between the United States and the Philippines to its chapter on the Spanish-American War, labeling it the Philippine Insurrection. From the Filipino point of view, it is part of their war for independence. Only recently have U.S. textbooks come to call it the Philippine-American War.

In referring to the two colonial periods in their history, Filipino historians like to joke that the Philippines spent 400 years in a convent and 40 years in Hollywood

During the gestation period for the Philippine republic, English was used as the primary language in education and politics, Western values were reinforced with a cadre of American teachers who built on and strengthened the educational system first established by Spain and the Catholic church. In 1946, the United States granted the Philippines the independence Filipinos originally sought in 1898.

The Philippines -- with a strong educational system, its bicameral legislature, executive branch and judicial system -- is often hailed as America's showcase of democracy. But as we witnessed in the rise and fall

dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the 1970s and 1980s, the grinding poverty of many of its population and the ongoing insurgencies, it is a fragile one.

When Marcos fell and Corazon Aquino was elected president, she was asked how she dealt with all the political infighting, protests and clamor that threatened her administration. The U.S.-educated Aquino responded, "That's the sound of democracy."

America's leaders are learning anew that nation building is no easy task. It is naive to believe that American-style democracy could be easily plopped onto a foreign land with centuries-old customs, religions and age-old tribal rivalries. It could take years, perhaps decades, to make those institutional and cultural changes.

Remember, from the Declaration of Independence to the Constitution, it took the United States 11 years -- with a war along the way -- to establish the guideposts to a democracy the world had never seen before.

Even then, the United States still had to amend that charter with the Bill of Rights, fight another war among ourselves, and we are still struggling to live up to that dream.

If the United States and its allies are to succeed in transforming Iraq into a strong republic, it requires America to recall its first awkward attempt at establishing an empire and the lessons learned along the way, among which are respect, humility and patience.

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