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COMMENTARY

Confusing Occupation With Liberation

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Bush's claim that the U.S. freed Filipinos strains the truth, bodes ill for Iraq and probably sets Mark Twain spinning.



By Amy Kaplan

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"Why, we have gotten into a mess, a quagmire from which each fresh step renders the difficulty of extrication immensely greater. I'm sure I wish I could see what we were getting out of it, and all it means to us as a nation."

Someone could have said this about Iraq today or about Vietnam 35 years ago. But in fact it was Mark Twain who said it a century ago about the American occupation of the Philippines.

I was reminded of that quote when I heard President Bush, in a speech Saturday before the Philippine Congress, refer to our history in that country as a "model" for establishing democracy in Iraq. Alluding to the 1898 Spanish-American War, he said, "America is proud of its part in the great story of the Filipino people. Together our soldiers liberated the Philippines from colonial rule."

Twain would have laughed with outrage at this stretch of the truth, which obscures a shameful chapter of this story. What Bush called liberation, Twain decried as a bloody campaign against the Philippine struggle for independence, a campaign that would usher in five decades of occupation by the United States.

In the years leading up to the Philippine war, Twain, the outspoken vice president of the Anti-Imperialist League, believed that once Spanish rule ended, the Philippines would achieve their independence: "It was not to be a government according to our ideas, but a government that represented the feeling of the majority of the Filipinos, a government according to Filipino ideas."

Instead, the U.S. annexed the Philippines in 1899 and waged a brutal war to enforce its rule across the archipelago. Nearly 5,000 American soldiers died, and historians estimate that 250,000 Filipinos perished — 20,000 were killed in combat and the vast majority died from disease and starvation. The U.S. Army burned villages and fields, massacred civilians and herded the residents of entire provinces into concentration camps.

The U.S. justified this inhumane treatment by calling Filipinos uncivilized and incapable of governing themselves. American soldiers in the Philippines, many of whom had fought Indian wars in the U.S. West, were the first to use the racist appellation "gook," which gained notoriety during the Vietnam War.

Many distinguished Americans across the political spectrum joined Twain in protest of this war, including Grover Cleveland, Jane Addams, Samuel Gompers, Andrew Carnegie, William James and W.E.B. Du Bois. When the Senate conducted hearings in 1902 on atrocities, American soldiers testified about the killing of prisoners and torturing of civilians.

Although the war officially ended with the declaration of U.S. sovereignty in 1902, there was ongoing resistance to the occupation. In one incident, U.S. troops massacred at least 900 Muslim women, children and men in 1906 on the southern island of Jolo. Today, U.S. military advisors are being sent to that region, where the Bush administration and that of Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo see only terrorists but where residents remember tales of the brutal occupation of a century ago.

If the story of democracy in the Philippines is a model for Iraq today, how ironic that the president of the United States, more than 100 years after the end of "hostilities," found it too dangerous to stay the night. Filipino protesters in the streets of Manila last week have a very different interpretation of this history. Bush must be reading revisionist historians who point to the war in the Philippines as a model for waging war in the 21st century. He might be better off reading Twain, whom Laura Bush praised as "one of America's most important storytellers," and one who wrote eloquently about the meaning of freedom.

In a famous essay, "To the Person Sitting in Darkness," Twain imagined a benighted citizen of the Philippines trying to understand how liberation could turn into its opposite. The person sitting in darkness muses, "There must be two Americas: one that sets the captive free, and one that takes a once-captive's new freedom away from him, and picks a quarrel with him with nothing to found it on; then kills him to get his land."

Which of these two Americas would Mark Twain see at work today in the occupation of Iraq?

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