

Brown Man's Burden: A Commentary

By Bea C. Rodriguez

"The masses of the Filipino people have yet to learn the lessons of political honesty, of thrift and of self-reliance; they have yet to learn that political office is a public trust. Possibly the United States is not the best teacher of this lesson; it must be learned none the less. They have yet to learn that mutual concession, the graceful yielding of the minority to the will of the majority and respect for the rights of others are essentials of successful democracy. Not until they have developed these homely civic virtues can they expect to have an efficient self-government."

—E. W. Kemmerer, 1908

In July 2017, Philippine President Duterte asked for the United States to return the Balangiga bells to the Filipino people. Since the 1990s, the Philippine government has asked for what's rightfully theirs; but the US has repeatedly refused. The Clinton administration insisted that the bells were the property of the American government. Not losing hope, the former American colony continued to ask for the bells in 2002 and 2004. Alas, nothing happened. Finally, in 2006, three American lawmakers—Bob Filner, Dana Rohrabacher and Ed Case—urged President Bush to authorize the return of the bells. Again, nothing happened. In January 2018, two American lawmakers objected to Duterte's recent request, expressing their "deepest concerns with the human rights record" by Duterte's Philippine Drug War. In a letter, Representatives Randy Hultgren and Jim McGovern asked US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis not to provide certification for the return of the bells until the Philippine government puts an end to the extrajudicial killings.

Why is America so obstinate about keeping these bells, and why does the Philippines want them back so badly, anyway? Whatever happened to the "mutual concession" that American economist Kemmerer asserts as essential to democracy? Simply put, the bells represent a deep, egregious wound in our shared history. If you've never heard of Balangiga

Massacre of 1901, it's because none of us learned it in school; it's an event that—to this day—is not acknowledged in high school history books, both in the Philippines and the US.

The Balangiga Massacre was one of the most gruesome incidents in the historic but little-known Philippine-American War from 1899-1902. The fact is, I did not know about this war while I was growing up. So imagine my horror when I eventually found out that it actually happened, and that up to a million Filipinos died in that war.

And the fact is, none of my American friends knew about it. Imagine that, America *won* this *major* war, and they did not know about it. (Did you? Did Representatives Jultgren and McGovern?) They knew a lot about the Spanish-American War—where Filipinos fought as American allies—but not about the war that happened immediately after it, which propelled the US to become full-fledged imperialists.

The fact is, this period in our shared history has been carefully hidden until recent years, when historians began discovering the truth.

The truth is, in September 1901, two American soldiers tried to molest a Filipino girl tending to a local store in the town of Balangiga, in the island of Samar. The girl was rescued by her two brothers, who mauled the soldiers.

In retaliation, the American commander rounded up 143 male residents for forced labor. The commander also ordered his soldiers to confiscate from their houses all sharp bolos and to destroy all of their stored rice. Feeling aggrieved, the townspeople plotted to attack the U.S. army garrison.

That same month, Balangiga residents killed 48 Americans while they were eating breakfast. Twenty-eight Filipinos died in the fight. In retaliation, General Jacob H. Smith ordered that the whole island of Samar be turned into a “howling wilderness.” He said: “I want no

prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn, the more you kill and burn the better it will please me. I want all persons killed who are capable of bearing arms in actual hostilities against the United States." When asked by Major Littleton Waller what the age limit was, General "Howling Jake" Smith replied: "Ten years." To which Major Waller responded: "Persons of ten years and older are those designated as being capable of bearing arms?" General Smith confirmed it with a "Yes."

They burned down entire villages, killing more than 50,000 Filipinos, making Samar a wasteland. After the genocide, the Americans looted three bells from a burned-out Catholic town church, which they took back to the US as war booty. Today, one Balangiga bell is at Camp Red Cloud, an American base in South Korea. The other two bells are in a former American base in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

In a House Resolution passed in 2017, the Philippine Congress called for the immediate return of these bells, plus two other things: "the national condemnation by the Filipino people of the atrocities committed by US colonial forces and Gen. Smith in the Samar island that even the American people condemned as "howling wilderness"; and the public apology from the US as a colonial power that committed historical atrocities against the Filipino people as an initial measure of reparation."

Despite repeated requests since the 1990s—all of which were presented to the US in a highly civilized manner—the American government continues to keep what they stole. Is it because they know that if they return the bells, that they would be forced to issue a public apology, thereby exposing their crimes during the Philippine-American War?

In May 1902, General "Howling Jake" Smith—also nicknamed "The Monster" and "Hell Roaring Jake"—faced court-martial for his orders. Instead of being tried for murder or other war

crimes, he was tried for "conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline." He was found guilty. The sentence? President Roosevelt ordered Smith's retirement from the Army. That was it—no additional punishment, recommended by Secretary of War Elihu Root, to ease the subsequent public outcry in America. Smith did some traveling, retiring to Ohio. When he volunteered to fight in World War I, he was refused for two reasons: 1) old age; and 2) his war crimes severely tarnished the reputation of the US military.

All the Filipinos really want is some form of justice, in the form of three bells and a simple *apology*. Nothing more than that—just a recognition by the American government of what really transpired 116 years ago. In the end, all the Philippines is asking for is political honesty.

Now, even if the US never returns the Balangiga bells, would Americans really want to celebrate their government's duplicity in the Philippine-American War? In 1903, President William McKinley said in an interview:

"When I next realized that the Philippines had dropped into our laps I confess I did not know what to do with them... And one night late it came to me this way—I don't know how it was, but it came: (1) That we could not give them back to Spain—that would be cowardly and dishonorable; (2) that we could not turn them over to France and Germany—our commercial rivals in the Orient—that would be bad business and discreditable; (3) that we could not leave them to themselves—they were unfit for self-government—and they would soon have anarchy and misrule over there worse than Spain's was; and (4) that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died. And then I went to bed, and went to sleep, and slept soundly, and the next morning I sent for the chief engineer of the War Department (our map-maker), and I told him to put the Philippines on the map of the United States (pointing to a large map on the wall of his office), and there they are, and there they will stay while I am President!"

In January 1899, President McKinley proclaimed the "Benevolent Assimilation" policy, stating that they arrived in the Philippines as friends, to teach the Filipinos the art of self-government. What he actually meant, was that the US was there for business: they wanted the Philippines' strategic geographic location, as well as to create a new market for American goods.

Exactly one month after that proclamation, American soldiers started killing their supposed “little brown brothers,” and started calling them “jack-rabbits” and “niggers.” It was, as Rudyard Kipling’s 1901 poem supports, the “White Man’s Burden,” to uplift and civilize the brown savages.

In this case, the Brown Man's Burden for the past century has been the profound pain brought on by this duplicity. The Americans' former "little brown brothers" have determined that all they really need to start healing is a little political honesty. Returning the bells would be a symbolic gesture that shows American accountability, and would finally start the Brown Man's healing process. We can all learn from our mistakes, but only if we acknowledge them in the first place. Refusal to return them signifies America’s inability to admit their own egregious acts against humanity.

References

- Cabico, G. K. (2018, February 7). US solons object return of Balangiga bells to Philippines due to human rights concerns. *Philippine Star*. Retrieved from <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2018/02/07/1785490/us-solons-object-return-balangiga-bells-philippines-due-human-rights-concerns#whrppbRSQ3WTfiXt.99>
- Dumindin, A. (2006). Fil-Am War Breaks Out. *Philippine-American War: 1899-1902*. Retrieved from <http://www.filipinoamericanwar.com/filamwarbreaksout.htm>
- InterAksyon (2017, July 25). US embassy responds to Du30’s call, says it will help PH resolve

- issue on Balangiga bells. Retrieved from <http://www.interaksyon.com/us-embassy-responds-to-du30s-call-says-it-will-help-ph-resolve-issue-on-balangiga-bells/>
- Kipling, R. (1929). *The White Man's Burden: The United States & The Philippine Islands*, 1899. *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday.
- Kremmer, E.W. (1908). The progress of the Filipino people toward self-government. *Political Science Quarterly* 23(1), 47-74.
- Lacorte, G. (2015, December 4). Duterte names priest who allegedly molested him as teen. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. Retrieved from <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/744824/duterte-names-priest-who-allegedly-molested-him-as-teen>
- Melshen, P. (2008). Littleton Waller Tazewell Waller. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20080421003005/http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/lwwaller.htm>
- Miller, S. C. (1984). *Benevolent Assimilation: The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899–1903*. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/booksid=Zj6g2ag47TwC&pg=PA302&lpg=PA302&dq=schott+ordeal+samar&source=bl&ots=x2A5aOd3st&sig=dzebRpg3VV9ldvwmM5UFVD9w8v8&hl=en&sa=X&ei=dCiQUsCIKY23kAfmqYGACQ&ved=0CDYQ6AEwAg#v=snippet&q=ten&f=false>
- New York Times*. (1902, July 17). President retires General Jacob H. Smith: Philippine officer reprimanded for "Kill and Burn" order. Retrieved from <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1902/07/17/101959147.pdf>
- Republic of the Philippines House Resolution 1374: *Urging for the national condemnation of the historical injustice and atrocities under the "Howling Wilderness" military campaign committed by the American colonial forces in the island of Samar in 1901*. Retrieved from http://www.congress.gov.ph/legisdocs/basic_17/HR01374.pdf
- Rusling, J.F. (1903). Interview with President McKinley. *Christian Advocate*, 1866–1905.