

Ministry of National Defence
PORTUGUESE COMMISSION OF MILITARY HISTORY

ACTA 2024

*The role of the military in political transitions:
from the 18th century to the present day*

XLIX International Congress of Military History

1 - 6 September 2024, Lisbon

Volume I





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Published by:

Portuguese Commission of Military History

Av. Ilha da Madeira, n.º 1, Room 332

1400-204 Lisboa - Portugal

Coordinator and editor: Jorge Silva Rocha, PhD

Book Cover Design: Jorge Silva Rocha

Book cover images: Alfredo Cunha (*front*) and Eduardo Gageiro (*back*)

ISBN: 978-989-8593-31-3

DOI for this volume: <https://doi.org/10.56092/GDSK9438>

Printed in Portugal by Rainho & Neves - Artes Gráficas

THE U.S. MILITARY INTERVENTION AND ADMINISTRATION IN CUBA AND THE PHILIPPINES, 1898 – 1905

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Abstract

The period from 1898 to 1905 marked a transformative chapter in U.S. foreign policy, as the nation emerged as a global power through military interventions and subsequent administrations in Cuba and the Philippines. Following the Spanish-American War, these efforts aimed to reshape former Spanish colonies in alignment with American ideals and strategic objectives. This secondary-source-based article examines the nature, challenges, and consequences of U.S. military administrations in Cuba and the Philippines during this pivotal era, shedding light on their enduring legacies and the debates they ignited concerning imperialism, governance, responsibility-to-protect (R2P), and national sovereignty.

Keywords: Military occupation. Military administration. Humanitarian intervention. R2P. Spanish-American War.

Introduction

The period from 1898 to 1905 stands as a watershed moment in the history of U.S. foreign policy, marking the nation's transition from a regional power to a global actor.

This transformative era was characterized by the U.S. decisive military interventions in Cuba and the Philippines, following its victory in the Spanish-American War. These interventions not only signified America's entry onto the world stage but also reflected a broader evolution in its approach to international relations, underpinned by a combination of strategic ambitions, economic interests, and ideological motivations.

At the heart of this transformation were the military administrations established in Cuba and the Philippines after their liberation from Spanish rule. While justified on the grounds of fostering stability, modernization, and eventual self-governance, these occupations revealed the complexities and contradictions of America's role as an emerging imperial power. In practice, the U.S. sought to reshape these territories in accordance with its ideals of governance, economic organization, and cultural superiority, leading to a blend of reform and control that often sparked local resistance and international scrutiny.

The U.S. intervention in Cuba was framed as a liberation effort, aiding the Cuban people in their long-standing struggle for independence from Spain.⁽¹⁾ Yet, the subsequent military administration, lasting from 1898 to 1902, was defined by a delicate balancing act: preparing Cuba for nominal independence while ensuring continued American influence through mechanisms such as the Platt Amendment. In contrast, the U.S. presence in the Philippines unfolded along a far more contentious trajectory. Initially welcomed as allies by Filipino revolutionaries, the United States quickly became an occupying power, leading to the bloody Philippine-American War (1899–1902) and a prolonged period of colonial administration.

This article examines the multifaceted nature of U.S. military governance in Cuba and the Philippines, situating it within the broader context of American expansionism and the ideological currents of the late 19th century. It explores the challenges faced by U.S. administrators in implementing reforms, the resistance encountered from local populations, and the enduring legacies of these interventions on both domestic and international levels. Through a comparative lens, this study highlights the distinct experiences of Cuba and the Philippines, emphasizing the common themes of American strategic priorities and the tensions inherent in imposing governance through military occupation.

Ultimately, the period from 1898 to 1905 not only shaped the histories of Cuba and the Philippines but also had profound implications for the United States itself. The interventions revealed the opportunities and perils of wielding newfound global influence, sparking intense domestic debates over imperialism, the ethics of intervention,

1. The "Cuban Troubles," as the British might have called the numerous revolts and conflicts on the *Isla Grande*—paralleling their own "Irish Troubles"—were characterized by the Ten Years' War (1868–1878), the Little War (1879–1880), and the Cuban War of Independence, also known as the Necessary War (1895–1898). The latter conflict ultimately served as the catalyst for the Spanish-American War, often referred to as the War of 1898.

and the nation's identity as a democracy.⁽²⁾ These debates resonate to this day, offering valuable insights into the enduring complexities of power, governance, and the global role of the United States.

The Spanish-American War: Catalyst for Intervention

The War of 1898 was the catalyst for U.S. military involvement in both Cuba and the Philippines. Triggered by Cuba's struggle for independence from Spain, the conflict was driven by a blend of humanitarian concerns, economic interests, and strategic imperatives. Public outrage following the sinking of the U.S.S. *Maine* in The Havana harbor and sensationalist reporting by the American press galvanized support for intervention. The latter could be considered an R2P operation *ante litteram*. Moreover, yellow journalism and governmental opportunism indeed played a crucial role in rallying public opinion's support to wage war against the Kingdom of Spain.⁽³⁾

On 20 April 1898, President William McKinley signed a joint congressional resolution demanding Spain's withdrawal from Cuba and authorizing military action.⁽⁴⁾ This declaration formalized hostilities on April 25, extending the conflict beyond Cuba to other Spanish colonies, including the Philippines. The war ended swiftly, with the Treaty of Paris in December 1898 granting the United States control over Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, while establishing Cuba as a U.S.-protected territory pending independence.

U.S. Military Administration in Cuba (1898–1902): Command, Control, and Constitution

Establishment of Military Government

Following Spain's defeat, the U.S. established a military government in Cuba led by Major-General John R. Brooke, later succeeded by Major-General M.O. Leonard Wood. Lasting from 1898 to 1902, this administration aimed to stabilize Cuba, prepare it for independence, and safeguard American strategic and economic interests.⁽⁵⁾

2. William G. Sumner, "The Fallacy of Territorial Expansion," in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics. The Essential Essays of William Graham Sumner*, (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1992), 265–71; Oreste Foppiani, *La nascita dell'imperialismo americano, 1890–1898*, (Rome: ESS, 1998), 53–58.

3. George W. Auxier, "Middle Western Newspapers and the Spanish American War, 1895–1898," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (March 1940), 523–34; Joyce Milton, *The Yellow Kids: Foreign correspondents in the heyday of yellow journalism*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), passim; W. Joseph Campbell, "Not likely sent: The Remington-Hearst 'telegrams,'" *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, <http://academic2.american.edu/~wjc/wjc3/notlikely.html>. (All websites last consulted on 2 December 2024).

4. William McKinley, "Call for Volunteers-Spain," 20 April 1898 and 25 April 1898 <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1898/d637>.

5. <https://guides.loc.gov/world-of-1898/cuba-chronology>.

Key Objectives and Actions

The U.S. administration focused on a range of initiatives:

1. Institutional Reform: Establishing administrative agencies, reorganizing municipal governments, and drafting a constitutional framework for a future Cuban republic.
2. Public Health and Sanitation: Combatting diseases such as yellow fever through infrastructure improvements and public health campaigns.
3. Law and Order: Ensuring stability while fostering the development of local police forces.
4. Economic Reconstruction: Rehabilitating Cuba's devastated infrastructure and economy, particularly its sugar industry.

The Platt Amendment and Conditional Independence

A cornerstone of U.S. policy was the 1901 Platt Amendment,⁽⁶⁾ which guaranteed American influence over Cuban affairs post-independence. Incorporated into Cuba's constitution, it allowed U.S. intervention to maintain stability and granted the United States a lease for a naval base at Guantánamo Bay. While Cuba formally gained independence in 1902, the amendment curtailed its sovereignty and institutionalized U.S. oversight.

The Platt Amendment, attached to a U.S. Army appropriations bill, established the conditions under which the United States would conclude its military occupation of Cuba and "leave the government and control of the island of Cuba to its people." Although named after Senator Orville Platt of Connecticut, the amendment was primarily drafted by Secretary of War Elihu Root. It outlined eight conditions that the Cuban government was required to accept before U.S. forces would withdraw and sovereignty would be transferred.⁽⁷⁾

The amendment imposed significant restrictions on Cuban sovereignty. It prohibited the Cuban government from entering into international treaties that might compromise its independence or permit foreign powers to establish a military presence on the island. Furthermore, the United States retained the right to intervene in Cuban affairs to defend Cuban independence and ensure the maintenance of "a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty." Other provisions required the Cuban government to improve sanitary conditions on the island, relinquish claims to the Isle of Pines (also known as the *Isla de la Juventud*), and agree to sell or lease territory to the United States for coaling and naval stations—a clause that ultimately led to the perpetual lease of Guantánamo Bay. Finally, the amendment mandated the Cuban government to

6. Cosme de la Torriente, "The Platt Amendment," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (April 1930), 364–78.

7. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/platt-amendment>.

formalize these terms in a treaty with the United States and incorporate them into the Cuban constitution, under significant U.S. pressure.

The rationale behind the Platt Amendment was clear: the United States aimed to safeguard its substantial commercial and strategic interests in Cuba following Spain's failure to maintain order, which had prompted U.S. intervention. Although the U.S. military occupation of Cuba was intended to be temporary, American policymakers sought a mechanism to maintain long-term influence over the island. This presented a challenge, as the Teller Amendment⁽⁸⁾—embedded in the 1898 war resolution authorizing President William McKinley to act against Spain—committed the United States to granting Cuba independence once Spanish forces were expelled.

To reconcile these objectives, the McKinley administration required the Platt Amendment's provisions to be incorporated directly into the Cuban constitution. This maneuver ensured continued U.S. oversight and control in key areas, such as foreign policy and the right to intervene in Cuban affairs, while formally upholding the Teller Amendment's promise of Cuban independence. This duality allowed the United States to present itself as both liberator and guarantor of stability, even as it entrenched its influence over the newly independent nation.

General Wood, the U.S. military governor of Cuba, presented the Platt Amendment's terms to the Cuban Constitutional Convention in late 1900. Although Cuban delegates recognized that the amendment severely curtailed their country's sovereignty and initially resisted its inclusion in their constitution, the U.S. government offered economic incentives, such as a trade treaty ensuring Cuban sugar exports access to U.S. markets. After several failed attempts by the Cuban delegates to reject or revise the amendment, they ultimately yielded to U.S. pressure. On 12 June 1901, the Cuban Constitutional Convention ratified the Platt Amendment by a narrow vote of 16 to 11.

The Platt Amendment remained in effect until 1934, when both nations agreed to cancel the treaties that enforced its provisions. Despite its formal repeal, the amendment left a lasting impact, symbolizing U.S. dominance over Cuban affairs during the early 20th century.

The U.S. Military Administration in the Philippines (1898–1905): Establishing Control Amidst Resistance

The U.S. military administration in the Philippines, spanning from 1898 to 1905, marked a pivotal chapter in American imperial expansion and highlighted the complexities of governing a newly acquired colony. Following the Spanish-American War, the Treaty of Paris in December 1898 ceded the Philippines to the United States, ending over three centuries of Spanish rule. However, the transition was far from smooth, as Filipino

8. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/message-congress-relations-with-spain>.

nationalists, led by Emilio Aguinaldo y Famy, resisted American occupation, sparking the Philippine-American War (1899–1902).⁽⁹⁾

Initially, the U.S. aimed to justify its presence in the Philippines by framing it as a civilizing mission. American policymakers argued that the archipelago was unprepared for self-rule, necessitating a period of tutelage under U.S. guidance. The military government, headed by Major-General Wesley Merritt and later succeeded by Major-Generals Elwell Otis and Arthur MacArthur Jr., sought to establish order, develop infrastructure, and introduce American legal and educational systems.⁽¹⁰⁾

Despite these intentions, the military faced fierce resistance. The Philippine-American War was marked by guerrilla tactics and harsh reprisals, with atrocities committed by both sides.⁽¹¹⁾ Over 200,000 Filipino civilians perished due to violence, disease, and famine during the conflict, casting a long shadow over the United States' moral authority. To suppress the insurrection, American forces employed brutal tactics, including scorched-earth policies, the establishment of concentration camps, and summary executions. Meanwhile, Filipino guerrillas waged a relentless campaign, targeting both American troops and local collaborators.⁽¹²⁾ By the war's end, the United States had suffered the loss of approximately 4,200 troops. Ultimately, this first U.S. "dirty war" not only devastated countless local communities but also left a profound and enduring scar on Filipino-American relations, underscoring the complexities and human cost of imperial ambitions.

Concurrently, the U.S. sought to project its vision of governance. Public works projects, such as roads and bridges, were undertaken to facilitate commerce and military mobility. Education reforms introduced English as the medium of instruction, with the goal of cultivating a pro-American elite.⁽¹³⁾ Health campaigns aimed to curb diseases like cholera and smallpox, which had plagued the islands. While these measures brought

9. Murat Halstead, *The Story of the Philippines and Our New Possessions, Including the Ladrões, Hawaii, Cuba and Porto Rico* (Chicago, IL: Our Possessions Publishing Company and H.L. Barber, 1898), 110–12; Spencer Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars. A Political, Social, and Military History*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), passim.

10. Elwell S. Otis, "Annual report of Major-General E.S. Otis, U.S.V., commanding Department of the Pacific and 8th Army Corps, military governor in the Philippines Islands," in *Annual Report of the Major-General Commanding the Army*, Vol. 2, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1899), passim.

11. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/war#:~:text=U.S.%20forces%20at%20times%20burned,who%20cooperated%20with%20American%20forces.>

12. Leon Wolff, *Little Brown Brother: How the United States Purchased and Pacified the Philippine Islands at the Century's Turn*, (New York: Francis parkman Prize Edition, History Book Club, 2006), Introduction.

13. Under the military government, soldiers initially served as teachers in schools, addressing an urgent need for education in the wake of administrative restructuring. Civil and criminal courts were reestablished, including the formation of a supreme court, while local governments were organized in towns and provinces to promote stability and governance. Notably, the transition from a Civil Law system to a Common Law system marked a profound shift in the legal framework, aligning it more closely with American judicial principles. Additionally, during the early phase of military governance, prominent American Protestant missionary churches began to replace the once-dominant Spanish Catholic Church in the central and northern islands, signaling a broader cultural and religious transformation.

tangible improvements, they were often viewed by Filipinos as tools of subjugation rather than liberation.

By 1902, the conflict officially ended with the capture of Aguinaldo y Famy and the declaration of U.S. victory. Civil governance was gradually introduced, beginning with the Philippine Organic Act of 1902, which established a civilian government under Governor William Howard Taft. Nonetheless, the U.S. military retained significant influence, particularly in quelling sporadic uprisings and pacifying Muslim populations in the southern islands.⁽¹⁴⁾

The military administration in the Philippines laid the groundwork for American colonial rule but left a contentious legacy. While some infrastructure and institutional reforms benefited the islands, the brutal suppression of Filipino resistance fostered resentment and skepticism toward American intentions. This period underscored the contradictions of American imperialism—promoting democracy abroad while denying it to those under its control. The experience in the Philippines would shape future U.S. colonial policies and ignite debates about the nation’s role on the global stage.

From Collaboration to Conflict

In contrast to Cuba, the U.S. relationship with the Philippines quickly deteriorated. Initially allies against Spanish forces, American troops and Filipino revolutionaries led by Emilio Aguinaldo y Famy soon found themselves at odds over the Philippines’ future. U.S. policymakers, influenced by economic interests, strategic considerations, and notions of racial and cultural superiority, viewed the Philippines as a critical outpost in Asia, rejecting Aguinaldo’s calls for immediate independence.

Transition to Civil Government

Despite resistance, the U.S. gradually transitioned to civil administration under Governor William Howard Taft beginning in 1901. Key efforts included:

1. Infrastructure Development: Building roads, railways, and ports to modernize the archipelago.

14. The Moro Rebellion (1899–1913), often regarded as a conflict within the broader U.S.-Filipino struggle following the Spanish-American War, represents a significant yet underexamined chapter in U.S. military history. Unlike the Philippine-American War (1899–1902), which primarily involved Christianized lowland Filipinos fighting for independence, the Moro Rebellion arose among the Muslim Moro population of Mindanao, Sulu, and surrounding islands in the southern Philippines. This rebellion highlighted the unique challenges of governing and pacifying a decentralized and culturally distinct group with a long martial tradition.

When U.S. forces entered Mindanao and Sulu in 1899 to assert control, they encountered fierce resistance from the Moro population. The Moros, adept at guerrilla warfare and deeply motivated by religious and cultural convictions, employed tactics that confounded U.S. military strategies. Among these were *juramentado* attacks—suicidal charges fueled by religious zeal. Armed with traditional weapons such as the *kris* (a wavy-edged dagger) and the *kampilan* (a large single-edged blade), Moro warriors were known for their extraordinary resilience and ferocity, often continuing to fight even after sustaining life-threatening injuries.

2. Education: Establishing a public school system with English as the medium of instruction.
3. Economic Integration: Promoting trade and investment to tie the Philippines economically to the U.S.
4. Political Reforms: Introducing limited self-governance through local elections, while maintaining ultimate authority under American officials.

Comparative Analysis: Cuba and the Philippines

While both Cuba and the Philippines experienced U.S. military administration, their trajectories diverged significantly:

1. Duration: Cuba's occupation lasted only four years, culminating in nominal independence. In contrast, the Philippines remained under U.S. control until 1946.⁽¹⁵⁾
2. Legal Status: Cuba was positioned as a quasi-independent protectorate, whereas the Philippines became an outright U.S. territory.
3. Resistance: Armed resistance in the Philippines far exceeded the political opposition seen in Cuba.
4. Long-Term Influence: The Platt Amendment maintained U.S. leverage in Cuba, while the Philippines underwent decades of direct American rule.

Challenges and Controversies

The U.S. administrations in Cuba and the Philippines faced a host of challenges:

1. Balancing Military and Civil Roles: Struggles between military leaders and civilian policymakers often hindered governance.
2. Cultural and Language Barriers: American officials faced difficulties in managing diverse local populations.
3. Resistance Movements: Political opposition and armed insurgencies complicated efforts in both territories.
4. Human Rights Abuses: Allegations of atrocities in the Philippines fueled domestic and international criticism.

15. The Philippines gained independence on 4 July 1946—a date chosen to coincide with American Independence Day, creating an ironic historical parallel. This event recalls a notable exchange between Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill and President Franklin D. Roosevelt during their meeting at Placentia Bay on 14 August 1941, where they were drafting the Atlantic Charter. Churchill, along with many members of his Cabinet, was alarmed by the Charter's third point, which affirmed the right of all peoples to choose their own government. He feared this clause would embolden colonial subjects within the British Empire to demand decolonization. When Roosevelt suggested that Great Britain should grant its colonies the right to self-determination, Churchill countered by pointing out that the United States also held colonies, notably referencing the Philippines. This pointed remark underscored the complexities and tensions surrounding the Atlantic Charter's principles, particularly in relation to the colonial policies of the Allied powers. (<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/atlantic-conf>)

5. **Debates Over Imperialism:** Critics questioned the morality and legality of U.S. actions, sparking debates about the nation's emerging role as an imperial power.

Legacy and Impact

The U.S. interventions in Cuba and the Philippines left lasting legacies:

1. **Institutional Foundations:** The governance structures established under U.S. rule influenced both countries' political development.
2. **Economic Ties:** American investments shaped the economies of Cuba and the Philippines for decades.
3. **Military Presence:** Bases at Guantánamo Bay and throughout the Philippines underscored U.S. strategic interests.
4. **Foreign Policy Precedents:** These occupations shaped U.S. approaches to future interventions, from Latin America to the Middle East.
5. **National Histories:** The occupations became defining chapters in the histories of Cuba and the Philippines, influencing their identities and relations with the U.S.

Conclusion

The U.S. military administrations in Cuba and the Philippines from 1898 to 1905 were defining moments in America's emergence as a global power. These interventions, initiated in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, marked the United States' transition from a continental power to an imperial one. While the stated goals were modernization, stability, and liberation, the underlying motives often reflected American strategic and economic interests, leaving complex legacies in governance, development, and sovereignty.

In Cuba, U.S. military occupation (1898–1902) was justified as a temporary measure to prepare the island for self-governance following centuries of Spanish rule. The administration introduced reforms aimed at modernizing public health, infrastructure, and education, with notable achievements such as combating yellow fever through sanitation initiatives. However, the imposition of the Platt Amendment in 1901 significantly undermined Cuban sovereignty, granting the United States the right to intervene in Cuban affairs and lease naval bases like Guantánamo Bay. While the occupation ostensibly paved the way for Cuban independence, it entrenched a pattern of dependency and U.S. dominance that fueled resentment and shaped Cuba's political trajectory for decades.

In the Philippines, the U.S. faced a far more protracted and violent struggle. The Philippine-American War (1899–1902) erupted as Filipino revolutionaries, led by Emilio

Aguinaldo y Famy, resisted American annexation following their struggle for independence from Spain. The U.S. military administration, under leaders like Major-General Arthur MacArthur Jr. and later Justice William Howard Taft, sought to quell resistance while instituting reforms to modernize the colony. Efforts included establishing a public education system, infrastructure projects, and public health initiatives. However, these developments came at a steep cost, with widespread violence, civilian casualties, and the suppression of dissent defining the early years of American rule. The resulting tensions underscored the contradictions of imposing democracy through force and highlighted the complexities of cultural and political integration in a colonial context.

The period between 1898 and 1905 underscores the challenges and contradictions of nation-building through military occupation. While the U.S. administrations in Cuba and the Philippines aimed to introduce reforms and modern governance, they often prioritized American strategic and economic interests over genuine self-determination. This approach fostered a legacy of ambivalence: on the one hand, modernization and institutional reform; on the other, resistance, dependency, and contested sovereignty.

These experiences offer enduring lessons for contemporary debates on international intervention and imperialism. They illustrate the difficulties of reconciling ideals of liberation with the realities of power politics, as well as the unintended consequences of prioritizing external interests in the guise of altruistic governance. As such, the U.S. military administrations in Cuba and the Philippines remain pivotal case studies in the history of American foreign policy and its global repercussions.

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DOI for this text: <https://doi.org/10.56092/PCTC3805>