Bush's Philippines model for Iraqi "democracy"

John Roberts
29 October 2003

In the course of his address to the Philippines Congress on October 18, George Bush invoked the Philippines as an example of US-sponsored "liberation" and democracy.

The US, Bush stated, was "proud of its part in the great story of the Filipino people". It had "liberated the Philippines from colonial rule" when it invaded the Spanish-held archipelago in 1898. Drawing a direct parallel with Iraq, the president told the assembled Filipino politicians: "Some say the culture of the Middle East will not sustain the institutions of democracy. The same doubts were once expressed about the culture of Asia. These doubts were proven wrong nearly six decades ago, when the Republic of the Philippines became the first democratic nation in Asia."

Notwithstanding Bush's rhetoric, the 105 years of American domination over the Philippines stands as an ominous warning of what the US ruling elite intends to accomplish in Iraq. The example of the Philippines demonstrates that, as far as Washington is concerned, a "democratic" Iraq would be nothing but a semi-colonial client state, extending unconditional support to US domination of the Middle East and facilitating unhindered exploitation of the country's resources by American corporate interests.

The Philippines came under US sway in the course of the Spanish-American war of 1898—the conflict that marked the entry of the United States onto the world stage as an imperialist power.

As in Iraq, the predatory nature of US interests in the Philippines archipelago was never far from view. The European powers had subjugated and divided up most of Asia and were already penetrating deep into China. The American industrialists, whose economic weight was expanding rapidly, risked being shut out of the region. The strategic position of the Philippines—astride the mainland of Asia—made it ideal both as a forward base for trade and for the assertion of US military power in the Pacific.

American public opinion was manipulated into believing the US war aim was to "liberate" the Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and Pacific. The invasion was preceded by a concerted press campaign demonising the Spanish for their tyrannical and brutal colonial rule. The New York newspapers *World* and *Journal*, owned by the publishing tycoons Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, played a major propaganda role, helping create the conditions for President William McKinley to declare war on Spain on April 21, 1898. McKinley seized upon the sinking of the US battleship *Maine* in Havana harbour as the pretext, although the explosion on the *Maine* was most likely caused by a spontaneous combustion in the coal bunker next to the ship's magazine.

Within a matter of months, the US had destroyed the Spanish navy in Manila Bay and the Caribbean, and landed troops on Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Once the Spanish hold on the islands was broken, America's real war aims were openly expressed. As one historian noted: "In all parts of the United States, people saw the connection between the Philippines and the potential market [of Asia]. In the West, the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce petitioned the president to keep the islands, 'with a view to strengthening our trade relations with the orient.'" (*The Transformation of American Foreign Relations, 1865-1900,* Charles S. Campbell, Harper and Row, 1976)

Under the Treaty of Paris signed on December 10, 1898, the US bought the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico from Spain for the price of $20 million—ignoring the fact that the Filipino liberation movement led by Emilio Aguinaldo had declared the country independent in June. The US also used the opportunity to annex the Pacific Islands of Hawaii and Wake Island, and the following year annexed Samoa as well.

On December 21, 1898, Washington formally annexed the Philippines as a US colony. By February 1899, open fighting had broken out between Filipino independence fighters and American troops, who were ordered to slaughter the very people they were told they had been sent to "liberate".

The outgunned Filipino forces were overcome by US military might, but conducted a determined guerilla war from November 1899 until the Americans declared victory in April 1902. The US military crushed the resistance with a campaign that knew few restraints. An estimated 200,000 Filipino civilians died as a result of famine and American reprisals, while some 69,000 Filipino fighters were killed. The US military lost 4,234 dead. Resistance to the American occupation continued among the Muslim population on the island of Mindanao until 1914.

The years of direct US rule over the archipelago were characterised by ruthless exploitation that retarded—and continues to retard—the country's economy. A policy of free trade turned the islands into a dumping ground for American manufactured goods, preventing the development of local industry. Philippines production was geared to producing raw materials for the US.

The US lost control of the Philippines to Japan from 1941 to 1945 and much of the Pacific fighting during World War II was

© World Socialist Web Site

focused on American efforts to retake their lucrative colony. In the aftermath of the war, however, with national liberation movements sweeping Asia, Washington calculated that direct rule was no longer viable.

The establishment of the Republic of the Philippines in 1946 had no anti-colonial or democratic content. It consisted of little more than a transfer of political power from the US colonial administrators to a puppet government, drawn from the pro-US, landowning Filipino elite. In this way, Washington ensured continuing US economic dominance over the islands. The constitution of the new "independent" state gave US companies "parity" with Filipino firms, exempting them from a provision that only allowed companies with 60 percent Filipino ownership to exploit the natural resources and land in the country. Moreover, the US military retained its naval base at Subic Bay and Clark air base, both of which were to become vital strategic assets during the Cold War.

For the mass of the population, independence meant virtually nothing. The lack of economic development over the preceding decades had left the vast majority dependent upon peasant agriculture to survive. The rural labourers of the Philippines became, and remain, among the poorest in South East Asia.

By comparison, a study of 108 US companies revealed that from 1956 to 1965 they invested $US79.4 million in the Philippines, yet repatriated a staggering $US386.5 million in profits. Profit rates for US firms operating in their former colony averaged 18 percent, compared with 14 percent in the US. The profit rate reached 25.2 percent in Philippines-based food manufacturing. American companies dominated industries like communications, rubber, chemicals and petroleum.

While most Filipinos lived in backwardness and poverty, the elite used the political power handed to it by the US to concentrate ever more of the country's land and wealth into their own hands. The number of landless tenant farmers grew from about 29 percent of the peasant population in 1903 to over 50 percent by 1964. By the early 1970s, it was estimated that an oligarchy of 400 families owned 90 percent of the national wealth. In exchange for US military and political support against the Filipino masses, this Philippines ruling elite functioned as a voice of the US in Asia. The Philippines supported the war against Vietnam as well as other Cold War crimes, including the 1965 coup and massacre in Indonesia.

The attitude of the US to "democracy" in the Philippines was highlighted in 1972. In response to widespread social unrest over inequality, a peasant insurrection in the countryside and pressure for an end to the parity for American companies, Washington encouraged President Ferdinand Marcos to declare martial law. The Marcos years witnessed political murders, ruthless military repression of the rural population and the labor movement, and the unchecked looting of the economy by government cronies.

The US continued to back Marcos until 1986, when the Reagan administration decided to shift its support to Corazon Aquino, the most prominent representative of the rival faction of the ruling elite, and member of one of the country's richest families. A popular uprising against Marcos was channeled, with the help of the Catholic Church and leaders of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines, into support for the supposedly more progressive layers around Aquino. Marcos was assisted by the US to flee the country, while Aquino ensured that neither the interests of the oligarchy nor the US were threatened by the change of personnel in the presidential palace.

Since the Aquino government, there has been a succession of corrupt administrations and failed military coups. The current government of President Gloria Arroyo was installed as a result of political intrigue and judicial fiat, after the elected President Joseph Estrada was ousted in January 2001, during one of the conflicts within the ruling elite.

Arroyo has earned Washington's backing for her unconditional support for the "war on terror" and her dispatch of a small number of troops to Iraq. While the US was obliged to vacate the Subic Bay and Clark bases in 1992, when the leases expired, Arroyo is facilitating a new American military presence in the country. One thousand American troops are already participating in operations against the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group on Basilan island. Arroyo's government has manouevred around the constitutional prohibitions on foreign troops operating on Philippines territory, by defining the Americans as "trainers".

Inside the Philippines, democracy continues to be a sham. It is estimated, for example, that members or cronies of the 200 wealthiest families hold 16,000 elected political positions in the country.

This is the US model for Iraq. Through its criminal invasion, its ongoing repression of the Iraqi population and its sponsoring of figures like Ahmed Chalabi, the Bush administration is attempting to forge a puppet-state that will be just as subservient to the strategic and economic interests of the US ruling elite.

There is a fundamental difference between the present, however, and the explosive emergence of the US as a world power at the beginning of the 20th century. Then, the US was just beginning its rise to the position of world hegemon, which peaked in the decades following the Second World War.

Today, the Bush administration's agenda reflects the deep-going economic and political contradictions wracking US imperialism and the mounting social and class tensions at home. Washington's justifications for the Iraq war and its claims of bringing "liberation" and "democracy" have already been exposed as lies, and the occupation of the country is rapidly deteriorating into a catastrophic and costly quagmire. At the beginning of the 21st century, this renewed eruption of militarism has placed the US ruling elite on a collision course with masses of ordinary working people—in the United States and around the world.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site