

Honor in the Dust: Theodore Roosevelt, War in the Philippines, and the Rise and Fall of America's Imperial Dream

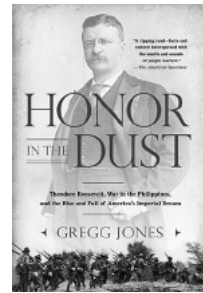
By Gregg Jones

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America went to war in 1898 for a noble cause—to lift the yoke of Spanish colonial oppression from the peoples of Cuba and the Philippines. Although ill-equipped for expeditionary warfare, the United States Army, Navy, and fledgling Marine Corps, managed in short order to deploy forces sufficiently capable of securing victories in both the Caribbean island and distant archipelago in the Pacific. Flush with the spoils of its easy victories, the United States quickly installed a compliant government in the Philippines, with the objective of developing the former Spanish colony into a distant outpost from where parochial national interests could be looked after. Filipino nationalists, led by Emilio Aguinaldo, objected to the replacement of one colonial power with another, sparking an insurgency that spread throughout the islands. Years of counterinsurgency warfare followed, during which time American values were sorely tested as allegations of torture and brutality toward enemy soldiers and the civilian population who supported them became a daily staple of reporting in the newspapers of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. American honor, so highly trumpeted at the onset of the war, became mired in the dust of discouragement and disappointment as victory in the war against the insurgents proved elusive.

Gregg Jones's account of America's well-intentioned, but ill-fated, experiment with colonialism is told in a narrative style that reminds the reader of the author's roots as a journalist. There is much in the story that appeals to these sometimes prurient instincts, such as the prologue, which begins with a vivid description of US troops using a form of interrogation euphemistically referred to as "the water cure" on a suspected insurgent. From the outset it is clear that Jones finds many parallels between the War in the Philippines and America's experiences in later wars in general, and the Global War on Terror in particular.

For many readers this will be an introduction to a forgotten chapter in our nation's history. The book begins with an overview of events leading to the outbreak of war; fighting in Cuba, to include an account of Roosevelt's Rough Riders and Kettle Hill; and Dewey's defeat of the Spanish navy in Manila Bay. With the onset of a counterinsurgency campaign, the narrative gathers a momentum that carries through the rest of the book. How American values fell victim to the charges that would tarnish the nation's honor is the question Jones finds morbidly interesting. In short, at the tactical level of war, the answer lies with badly trained and poorly led troops confronting an unfamiliar style of warfare and resorting to brutal tactics, including torture, in their efforts to defeat the insurgents. At the strategic level, the explanations are far more complex, involving a moral struggle over American values and interests. The fighting in the Philippines leads to a war of ideas and values, where factions within Congress, the press, and interest groups



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collectively known as Imperialists and Anti-Imperialists, debate the wisdom, legitimacy, and morality of a minor war in a distant land.

Jones finds all this fascinating and his enthusiasm for the subject infuses the narrative. His accounts of soldiers and marines burning villages, shooting unarmed insurgents, and torturing suspects for information crackle with an energy common to investigative journalism. Is he, the reader is given to wonder from time to time, commenting on some aspect of the counterinsurgency effort in the Philippines, or none too subtly inviting us to consider our recent experiences in the Global War on Terror, with its allegations of water boarding, civilian casualties and collateral damages, and the untidy and seemingly open-ended commitment to an endeavor of an uncertain and perhaps unwise outcome? Intended or not, one finds in *Honor in the Dust* familiar parallels with America's experiences in Vietnam, Somali, Iraq, and Afghanistan. They all started so well and ended so badly. Why did we not know better? Haven't we been there before?

For many readers this will be their first encounter with the history of this period, which is an unfortunate commentary on so many levels. For most, this will inform them on an obscure chapter of American history. Military readers with more than casual interest in counterinsurgency would do well to look to the expert on this period. Professor Brian Linn's *The Philippine War, 1899-1902* is without doubt the best, most informed, and balanced account of America's effort to subdue the Philippine insurgents. Linn's account of the fighting is sophisticated, nuanced, and brimming with insights on counterinsurgency warfare.

As the subtitle suggests, there is more to this book than a discussion of the war itself. Theodore Roosevelt, whose rise to national prominence catches fire on the notoriety he gained for his heroic exploits in Cuba, transformed success on the battlefield into success in politics. When the assassination of William McKinley catapulted him into the White House, T.R. was left to grapple with the untidy, unconventional war he had helped create. Domestic politics, and the struggle between the Imperialists and the Anti-Imperialists, dominates the last quarter of the book. Among the many interesting characters who shape the debate are Senators Albert Beveridge, Indiana, who gives voice to the Imperialists, and Massachusetts Senator George Frisbie Hoar for the Anti-Imperialists, a member of Roosevelt's own political party who asserted that acquisition of territory by force of arms "has been the ruin of empires and republics of former times," and, moreover, was "forbidden to us by our Constitution, by our political principles, by every lesson of our own and of all history." One need only reflect briefly on the US war against Mexico to see the wind in his argument, though few at the time bothered to do so. The "yellow press" sorted out those for and against the war, and those for and against the factions. Roosevelt eventually tired of the war, but had to be led to an "honorable exit," for which he was indebted to his brilliant Secretary of War, Elihu Root. For much of the material on Roosevelt, Jones looks to the work of Edmund Morris. Rightly, he recommends that readers with a taste for more on Roosevelt's soldier exploits, as well as his direction of the war, his battles with Congress, and the opponents of imperialism, look to Morris's three-volume biography on the twenty-sixth president.

If there is a disappointment with this book it is with the missed opportunity to introduce the reader to the transformational changes that took place within the Army as a result of the war. Two legacies of the Philippine War are with us today. Intent on reducing the influence and authorities of the Commanding General of the Army, Nelson Miles, with whom Roosevelt was at odds over the handling of reports of “torture, summary executions, and other extreme actions by US soldiers in the Philippines,” the President transformed the Army’s senior general officer from a Commanding General to Chief of Staff to the Secretary of War. Jones glosses too quickly over this bit of bureaucratic maneuvering and fails to see its significance. The second missed opportunity is particularly glaring to this reviewer as Jones makes no mention of the creation of the Army War College as a direct result of the shortcomings in preparing for, executing, and ending the Philippine War. Secretary of War Root was dismayed that the superb Union Army of 1865, capable of fighting distributed, long-duration operations, over vast distances, had simply dissolved in the decades after the Civil War, taking with it the hard-learned insights and lessons so painfully acquired during the war. Root, determined not to repeat the errors of the past where knowledge and experience was allowed to evaporate, ordered the establishment of the Army War College, where professional officers would meet and discuss what he referred to as the three great problems of war—command, strategy, and the conduct of military operations—three subjects that still form the basis of the War College curriculum. Moreover, it is from Elihu Root that the Army War College received its motto, “Not to promote war, but to preserve peace.” The scarring experiences of the Philippine War shaped Root’s views, and those in turn shaped the Army War College.

Jones can be forgiven for overlooking these opportunities. *Honor in the Dust* is a readable, interesting, entertaining, and cautionary account of yet another of America’s forgotten wars. As such, I recommend it.