

An Unconventional War: The Philippine Insurrection, 1899

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When Aguinaldo found out that his army could not stem the American advance in northern Luzon by frontal resistance, he [gave] orders to all subordinate commanders to engage in guerrilla warfare. As a result, American casualties doubled.

—Carlos Quirino¹

THE U.S. ARMY made an arduous journey from conducting predominantly conventional battles during the American Civil War to conducting unconventional operations during the Philippine Insurrection in 1899. The Philippines' guerrilla warfare environment, with its distinct language, society, and culture, created new challenges for the U.S. Army. While adhering to U.S. strategy, several officers developed alternative measures with which to combat unconventional circumstances during the Philippine Campaign. After several failed undertakings, the techniques eventually evolved into an unconventional warfare modus operandi that current U.S. military doctrine recognizes.²

What must an army accomplish to shift from conventional to unconventional warfare? In 1899 in the Philippines, the Army had to change its tactics and weaponry, incorporate native constabulary forces, and develop pacification techniques and procedures.³

Changing tactics because of lessons learned and the discovery of new principles of warfare transformed an essentially 19th-century Napoleonic army into a flexible, lethal force.⁴ New, smaller scale joint operations demonstrated a change in tactics, with the Army using weaponry in ways for which it had not been designed.

The Army evolved a set of military laws similar to current doctrine's rules of engagement to govern its operations. Constabulary operations using local indigenous populations in military and civil contexts strengthened the Army's position to respond to unorthodox guerrilla attacks, and pacification programs introduced infrastructure-rebuilding programs with an emphasis on education and governmental reform.⁵

Transforming the Army to counter unconventional threats required changes in tactics. When hostilities

began in the Philippines, the Army had limited experience with alternative tactics to counter unconventional formations. The Army's institutional knowledge of irregular or guerrilla warfare developed from experiences gained during skirmishes and small-scale operations in the Civil War. This knowledge was limited, however, because it only included experiences in combat operations against soldiers from similar cultures, with similar personalities and beliefs, and sometimes even from the same families. Combat in the Philippines did not include any of these similarities. American soldiers faced new complexities.⁶

Civil War tactics focused on drill, linear formations, en masse offensive maneuvers, and fixed fortifications, all plausible for conventional wars but not well suited for unconventional scenarios. The traditional tactical guidelines changed. Massed formations became small patrols, and security measures and decentralized command responsibilities became much more important. Soldiers embraced new techniques to address doctrinal deficiencies, and the new tactics proved successful in an unconventional war.⁷

In the Philippine theater, combined arms transformed the existing parochial systems of artillery, infantry, and cavalry formations into small units with increased mobility. The cavalry turned in its horses for pack mules because mules could carry artillery pieces through rugged terrain. When feasible, the U.S. Navy participated in Army attacks on enemy encampments through preparatory bombardments, as in the Samar Campaign. New formations and new uses of weapons developed in response to unconventional threats.⁸

Soldiers increasingly used basic-issue rifles and emphasized good marksmanship. By exercising strict target discipline, soldiers engaged guerrillas from longer distances in relative safety. In an unusual use of weapons in the conventional arsenal, soldiers used the shotgun as the weapon of choice in close-quarters operations. Guerrillas preferred close-quarters combat because they typically did not have the marksmanship skills to use these weapons in the proper way. These events foreshadowed developments in Vietnam and Operation Iraqi Freedom,

when another generation of Army soldiers found new uses for existing weaponry.⁹

The Samar Campaign highlights the extremely brutal methods of unconventional warfare. The Samar region of the Philippines is home to the infamous Moros who to this day conduct kidnapping and terrorist activities against conventionally armed and trained Philippine government forces. During the 1899 Philippine Insurrection, a few dozen Moro laborers entered a U.S. military compound carrying bolos (short broadswords) concealed inside coffins containing the corpses of children. The guerrillas attacked the isolated U.S. outpost as its defenders sat down to breakfast and killed over three-fourths of them. The guerrillas used ruses and close quarter attacks to successfully negate the Army's advantage in advanced weaponry and marksmanship.¹⁰

In retribution, U.S. soldiers committed atrocities against the guerrillas, including summary executions and the infamous "water cure," a method of interrogation in which a captive was held down and water forced down his throat until he provided the information sought. Although prisoners usually "talked" during these sessions, they often died as a result of damage to their internal organs. The guerrillas did not take long to reciprocate, using Punjabi sticks and booby traps. These tactics were intended to demoralize U.S. Army soldiers and had significant effects on the theater of operations.¹¹

Some techniques the Army used in this unconventional war demonstrated the need to remain within the guidelines of the laws of war, but the laws of war were in their infancy. The Army learned two lessons: the U.S. soldier will persevere, but strict adherence to discipline and the rules of war must apply in future conflicts.¹²

The Army also learned to use the native population in ancillary roles, which gained notoriety in the Philippines. Army leaders recruited personnel from the local population, predominantly for intelligence, scouting, and spying, and to learn about the unfamiliar culture, language, and social systems.¹³ The Army addressed some native concerns with pacification operations, similar to those Special Forces and Marine Expeditionary Forces use today, where their application can reduce hostilities and increase the chance of successful negotiations to end conflicts.

Pacification operations were crucial to success in unconventional operations in the Philippines. Commanders and junior leaders were involved in governmental, administrative, and collaborative activities with noncombatants. Soldiers acted as representatives of the United States and helped noncombatants enhance their position through activities such as building community infrastructure. These new pacification methods proved enormously significant and

evolved into the components of present-day peacekeeping operations. Building schools and bringing literacy to the Philippines was a positive act for future American and Philippine relations.¹⁴

Unconventional warfare initially stymied traditional operations. The initial failures and setbacks in combating this relatively new threat changed U.S. Army doctrine. The rationale for these shifts developed through new techniques born in the most brutal of circumstances.¹⁵

Tactical changes in an unconventional situation led to new applications of the principles of war, including new uses for weapons such as shotguns. Soldiers also learned to abide by the laws of war and set more humane boundaries for future military operations to mitigate extreme cruelty. Work with the local population countered the enemy's use of terrorism by employing culturally, religiously, and socially acceptable methods of pacification.¹⁶ The Army's 1899 Philippine Campaign led to important doctrine for irregular warfare.¹⁷ Nonetheless, continued investigation and evaluation can complement existing doctrine and prove useful in unconventional warfare situations. **MR**

NOTES

1. Carlos Quirino, *Filipinos at War* (Philippines: Vera-Reyes, Inc., 1981), 146.
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3. Glenn, 134, 143, 190, 242.
4. *Ibid.*; Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 86-90, 152, 189-91.
5. Russell Roth, *Muddy Glory: America's 'Indian Wars' in the Philippines, 1899-1935* (West Hanover, MA: The Christopher Publishing House, 1981), 84; Birtle, 44-48; 119-82.
6. Henry W. Halleck, *Elements of Military Art and Science: Course of Instruction in Strategy, Fortification, and Tactics of Battles* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1862), 184-86; Birtle, 39-47.
7. Griffith, 99-115; Halleck, 61, 114-34; Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, *Attack and Die: Civil War Tactics and the Southern Heritage* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 66; Birtle, 60-139.
8. William W. Hartzog, *American Military Heritage* (Washington, DC: Army Center of Military History, 1998), 104; John K. Herr and Edward D. Wallace, *The Story of the U.S. Cavalry: 1775-1942* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1953), 223-30; Ian Drury and Tony Gibbons, *The Civil War Military Machine: Weapons and Tactics of the Union and Confederate Armed Forces* (New York: Smithsonian Publishing, 1993), 182-96; Michael D. Haydock, "Marine Scapegoat in the Philippine Insurrection," *Military History* (February 2002): 46-52.
9. Roth, 29; Haydock, 46-52.
10. Haydock, 46, 48; Patrick J. Chase, "Twenty Army Infantry Regiments Served Both in Vietnam and in America's First Southeast Asian War," *Vietnam* (August 2002): 12-14; Marietta Barron, "The Letters of a U.S. Soldier Reflect the Savagery of the Philippine Insurrection," *Military History* (June 2000): 78.
11. Quirino, 172; Barron, 81-83.
12. Roth; *Annual Report of the Lieutenant General Commanding the Army*, Annual Reports of the War Department, part 7 (Washington, DC: 16 June 1900), 273-76.
13. Annual Report, 288, 358.
14. Brian Aldridge, *Drive Them Until They Drop and Then Civilize Them* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 1993), 144; Birtle, 122-25; 161-163.
15. David S. Woolman, "Fighting Islam's Fierce Moro Warriors," *Military History* (April 2002): 34-40.
16. Birtle, 101; Gates, 84-86, 156-78.
17. Jessup, Jr., and Coakley, 209.

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