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Image Versus Reality: A Colonialist History

PAUL A. RODELL

IN OUR IMAGE: AMERICA'S EMPIRE IN THE PHILIPPINES. By Stanley Karnow. New York: Random House, 1989. 494 pages.

IN OUR IMAGE: THE UNITED STATES AND THE PHILIPPINES. A film documentary history produced by the Philippine Project in association with KCET/Los Angeles, 1989.

This impressively produced, though seriously flawed, new book and its accompanying three-part documentary film series, that aired in the United States over the Public Broadcasting System, was, perhaps, an inevitable multimedia event. The dramatic 1986 EDSA Revolution focused world attention on the amazing "People Power" phenomenon surrounding its demure and grieving, but determined and struggling, widow leader who became an instant international celebrity best known as "Cory." In fact, since Corazon Aquino's unprecedented ascension to power there has been a small rush of hastily produced journalistic eyewitness accounts that convey the tension and exhilaration of those fateful days. Sadly, most of these books present little more in the way of analysis than a recounting of the Marcos regime's well known excesses. The contemporary Philippine political scene is, therefore, an internationally significant story waiting to be recounted by a credible area "expert" who could communicate to an American audience a deeper understanding of the forces that comprise the Philippines' historically shaped social-political milieu which ultimately contributed to Ferdinand Marcos' downfall.

STRENGTHS AND MINOR ERRORS

Stanley Karnow is an established journalist with years of experience in Southeast Asia and numerous contacts in Manila. Furthermore, he has an existing track record with his book *Vietnam: A History* that served as companion to the excellent PBS documentary film series, "Vietnam: A Television History." It would seem that Stanley Karnow might be such an "expert." Yet, Karnow's current work is based on more than his general knowledge and personal contacts. The book's bibliographical essay shows an acquaintance

with a number of significant works on Philippine and American history and it is clear that Karnow consulted a number of scholars and actual historical participants. The Preface lists as well eight research assistants whose combined efforts undoubtably contributed greatly to the book. Added to his wealth of information is Karnow's bright and engaging writing style and his basic sympathy for the Filipino people that appears unaffected by any narrow ideologically motivated political consideration.

The result of this combination of personal knowledge, social-historical information and literary skill is a lengthy study of the Philippines that is highly informative for the general American reader, even if Philippine scholars will not find new information or insights. Karnow's work begins with an introductory chapter that describes the complex Philippine-American relationship within the author's analytic framework, about which much more will be said shortly. Then, in his succeeding fourteen chapters, Karnow describes and analyzes the origins and development of that relationship beginning with the preceding Spanish period and the new American imperial power's conquest of the country and its imposition of colonial rule. He continues his detailed story through the difficult years of the Second World War and the heavily American-influenced postwar period down to a concluding chapter on the present post-EDSA Revolution days.

Despite the author's qualifications and the efforts of his research staff, the book contains a number of minor mistakes that indicate a serious lack of scholarly expertise. At one point, a "zarzuela" is referred to as a "Spanish music hall" (p. 19) and both Bulacan and Nueva Ecija are located in "eastern Luzon" (pp. 158 and 178). The island of Mindoro is wrongly categorized as being part of the Visayas, and the town of Mamburao should be noted as the capital of its "Occidental" province and not of the whole island (p. 229). The road to Baguio was made by cutting along the sides of mountains rather than through mountain jungles (p. 215). Meanwhile, educator Alejandro Roces is credited with being an historian (p. 17), Teodoro Kalaw is merely a "popular polemicist" (p. 201), Ateneo English professor Doreen Fernandez is a "cultural anthropologist" (p. 17) and Carmen Guerrero Nakpil is repeatedly called Carmen Nakpil Guerrero (pp. xi, 17 and 309). Karnow also claims that the Spanish friars learned local dialects rather than teaching Filipinos the Castilian language so the natives would not get "uppity" (p. 18). The University of Santo Tomas internment camp for civilian prisoners of war was not "a Spanish vestige from the seventeenth century" or "an array of mildewed buildings set in a weedy campus" (p. 305). Rather, the prison camp was in the new UST campus built during the American colonial regime. Karnow claims that Henry L. Stimson mediated a rebellion in Nicaragua in response to a plea from President Coolidge (p. 251). In fact, Stimson did not just "mediate" a rebellion; as American Secretary of State he oversaw the creation of the Nicaraguan National Guard (Vietnamization Central American style) whose soldiers assassinated nationalist leader Augusto Sandino and which became the power base of Anastasio Somoza's lengthy family dictatorship. And finally, the book contains a number of typos, the most embarrassing of which is a reference to the "Surigago" Strait (p. 313).

COLONIALIST ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

Yet these minor errors are not the problem alluded to in the first sentence of this review. Rather, Karnow's fundamental problem, that weakens his otherwise welcome and massive effort, is his colonialist analytic framework that denigrates Philippine culture and the Filipinos' role in the history of their own country. Karnow might claim that this criticism is not fair since he himself states in his preface that his book "... is not a history of the Philippines as much as it is the story of America's only major colonial experience" (p. xi). However, Karnow also states that his book addresses three basic questions: 1) what propelled the United States toward the Philippines, 2) what the American colonizers actually did, and 3) what is the legacy of American rule. Had Karnow limited his work to the first two questions the present critique would be irrelevant, but the addition of the third question changes the focus of the book and opens its author to criticism. Once Karnow expands his scope to include an evaluation of the legacy of American rule he must also extend his analysis to the hermeneutics of the Phil-Am relationship. An interpretation of the dynamics between these two countries requires that sufficient and accurate attention be paid to the Filipino portion of the equation and that the interpreter go beyond traditional colonialist and "Manila-centric" historical analyses. In fact, Karnow does neither.

COLONIALIST CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

Despite introducing Filipino cultural aspects such as *hiya*, *utang na loob*, and the socially important phenomenon of *compadrazgo* relationships, Karnow actually uses these cultural characteristics in a way that depreciates the Filipino capacity to establish and maintain a well ordered and, in a Western/American sense, egalitarian society. Karnow states that the American rulers did not restructure the Philippine social-economic order and that the former native elites who achieved their superiority during the Spanish colonial period were allowed to continue to dominate Philippine society. Filipino politicians built local power bases upon the social reciprocity of *compadrazgo* and on the indebtedness of *utang na loob* which led ultimately and logically to the rise of Ferdinand Marcos and the imposition of Martial Law. This same elite also controlled the country's land and natural resources which also led ultimately and logically to today's shocking social-economic imbalances that threaten to undermine the nation's political stability.

Karnow implants these doubts about inherent Filipino cultural capabilities while mentioning, but not explaining, that it was in the interest of the American colonizers to coopt the local elite just as it had been for the earlier Spaniards. In fact, from the beginning, American economic and political interests insured continued Filipino elite rule and actively discouraged fundamental social-economic change. Even when exploring the United States' colonial rulership and American postwar policies Karnow does not provide a sufficient answer to his second question that asks what the American colonizers actually did. For Karnow to imply that the Philippines' current problems are the logical result of its own societal faults is disingenuous.

Karnow's abuse of these Philippine cultural characteristics also prevents a deeper analysis of the Philippine-American relationship. For example he ignores the possibility that Filipino dealings with the United States might be better understood as a function of the country's dependency on the much larger country. Filipino political leaders seek American approval not simply because of mutual good feelings and the familiarity of a shared past, which are of course real factors, but because American support is essential for holding power. Filipinos were outraged that Japan received more postwar economic assistance than did their country, not simply because they felt neglected by their big American *compadre* "Uncle Sam," but because they needed money to put the country back together and because they had vivid memories of Japanese wartime cruelty.

Ironically, it seems that Karnow himself might feel the influence of *utang na loob* in his own analysis of the Japanese occupation. When discussing the issue of wartime collaboration with the Japanese, Karnow is especially hard on Benigno Aquino, Sr. who, he claims, was "chauvinistic" and an "apologist." At the same time, however, he also notes that both Benigno Aquino, Sr. and his father before him always had been extremely nationalistic and anti-American. It would appear that the Aquino men of the Revolutionary era and of World War II were very consistent in their opinions of and actions toward the United States. Could it be that Karnow believes that the Aquinos are "*walang hiya*" and should have felt "*utang*" to America?

COLONIALIST HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Unfortunately, Karnow's discussion of the United States' legacy tells only part of the story because of the author's emphasis on the American actors. The "Cast of Principal Characters" appendix, for example, lists only 50 Filipinos compared to 101 Americans. This numerical imbalance is reflective of the book's textural emphasis so that with the exception of his description of the Filipino *compadrazgo* system, Karnow's history does not extend beyond that colonial context. Colonial rulers such as Governor-General William Taft and neocolonial movers and shakers such as General Douglas MacArthur and CIA kingmaker Edward Lansdale are emphasized while only those Filipino leaders who dealt directly with their American superiors are discussed to any extent.

Beyond simple quantitative emphasis, Karnow's analytic framework also contains a distinct qualitative bias. Philippine national leaders are presented either as colonial creations or as confined by American-established parameters. For instance, Karnow's discussion of Corazon Aquino's victory presents the role of American officials so prominently that the strength of the People Power movement and the anti-Marcos elite opposition is obscured. Karnow's colonialist perspective even prevents him from understanding how critical it was for Filipinos to reach a definitive answer to the question of who ordered Aquino's assassination. He says, "Equally incomprehensible in the years ahead was the futile quest for the brains behind the plot" (p. 404). Even the Philippine Communist Party is described as if it is little more than a reaction to the Marcos administration's excesses (p. 406) and no mention is made that the CCP

has always given equal blame to "U.S. Imperialism and Neocolonialism" for the country's situation.

The book's colonialist perspective is presented most graphically in discussing wartime events. For example, Karnow's interpretation of official American dealings with General Aguinaldo leaves little doubt as to the author's prejudices, but there are interesting, and convenient, inconsistencies in his narrative that call into serious question his belief that the United States' conquest of the country was an "accident" of history. For example, American representatives Rounseville Wildman in Hong Kong and Howard Bray and Spencer Pratt in Singapore are described as being something akin to freebooters with consular rank since they really looked out for their own business interests first. Furthermore, they were unschooled in diplomacy and had little, if any, guidance from Washington. Karnow tells us that the United States could not find competent representatives and had to be content with accepting whoever was on hand. This, then, is offered as a reason why Aguinaldo was so deceived by what these American officials told him, i.e. the officials were incompetent and uninformed. On the other hand, Karnow shows that the American consul in Manila, Oscar Williams, was very competent, informed on the issues and assigned specific tasks. He also made detailed reports to his superiors. Similarly, Admiral Dewey is alternately said to be too experienced and disciplined to have misled Aguinaldo with a "firm guarantee" of American support for the Philippine cause, but also to tend to "babble" his thoughts without regard for repercussions. Instead of accepting the obvious implications of his narrative, Karnow blames Aguinaldo for filtering Dewey's remarks "through the prism of his own dreams" (p. 114).

Karnow presents a graphically detailed description of the 26 September 1901 early morning surprise attack by Filipino revolutionary forces on American troops in Balangiga, Samar, which American reports promptly termed a "massacre." Although only fifty American soldiers died in the attack, Karnow notes that this incident was responsible for the "ferocity" of American troops who then laid waste to Batangas province and who later "raped" Samar. The American public's disgust with the behavior of their troops is mentioned, as is the subsequent "admonishment" of General Jacob Smith for ordering the massacre of Samar's civilian population, but American military atrocities in Batangas and Samar (as well as those in many other provinces) are not described in the same graphic manner as is the attack of Filipino troops on enemy soldiers (pp. 187-194).

Karnow does an excellent job exposing MacArthur's incompetence during the first hours of Japan's December 8 attack, and puncturing the myth that the defense of Bataan delayed the Japanese takeover of Southeast Asia. He then shifts his narrative to the brutal Death March of Filipino and American soldiers from Bataan to their prisoner of war camps in Tarlac and the internment of American civilians in the University of Santo Tomas compound. Karnow shows his readers how these unfortunate prisoners suffered, but tells us very little about the wartime tribulations of the general Filipino population. The sensitive collaboration question is rehashed with very little empathy for those Filipinos who joined the Japanese conquerors (cf. comments above on Karnow's

analysis of Benigno Aquino, Sr.). Instead, Karnow makes the amazing claim that today's "endemic venality and corruption . . . is largely a legacy of the ethical degradation of that period." The obvious implication of this blanket statement (even granting, for the sake of argument, that the Philippines is actually burdened with endemic venality and corruption as Karnow claims) is that Filipinos must have some inherent weakness that keeps them from regaining their prewar ethical standards. If the peoples of many other countries endured harsh wartime occupations without suffering the permanent debasement of their morality, what is wrong with Filipinos?

A COLONIALIST CRITIQUE OF AMERICAN RULERSHIP

Despite acknowledging some very real American faults such as the excessive economic and military demands that had to be fulfilled if the Philippines were to receive postwar recovery assistance, Karnow's colonial analytic framework finds the American colonial track record to be generally benign and ultimately beneficial to the country. There are only musings in his analysis of some greater faults. One of these musings is that the United States was actually too benign a colonizer. In support of this conclusion he notes that independence was granted without a fight, and even faster than some prominent Filipino political leaders wanted: America's easy granting of independence to the Philippines "deflated the elan of their earlier nationalism" (p. 16). Karnow then speculates that if American colonial rule had been oppressive, the Filipino people would have galvanized themselves into a more cohesive national unit. (When looking around the "third world," however, one cannot help but wonder exactly which former colonial nations benefited from cruel treatment). On the other hand, Karnow also believes that since the United States decided to stay in the Philippines to help the country mature and to teach the natives democracy, the American regime ultimately failed because it did not go far enough in transforming the country. American colonizers with their missionary zeal were noble reformers, as their efforts in mass education proved, but they did not root out the colony's social-economic structure and its cultural norms and mores and supplant these with a thoroughly American cultural model.

PROBLEM OF SOURCES

Karnow's analytic limitations seem to have shaped his work and to have been reinforced symbiotically by his sources. His "Notes on Sources" reveals that when in Manila, Karnow only utilized the American Historical Collection and frequented the Solidaridad bookstore while ignoring such other rich sources as the National Library, the University of the Philippines Filipiniana Collection, the Ateneo's Rizal Library and the Philippine National Archives. Karnow cites as well American expatriates and religious scholars in Manila and has consulted some of the country's leading academics. However, although he acknowledges the existence of some of the more radical Philippine nationalist academics such as Renato Constantino, their works have been largely ignored within the context of his analytic framework. In the United States, special

mention is made of the Cellar Bookstore and its owners, but the vibrant Philippine left's exile community is not even mentioned. It would seem that Karnow limited the scope of his sources even as he limited the scope of his analytic framework.

Obvious omissions from Karnow's discussion of sources are some recent and important titles in Philippine local history by American and Filipino scholars. When combined with the author's colonialist analytic parameter the resulting study could only have a Manila-centric "Great Leader" focus that fails to answer Karnow's third question. Of course Karnow himself notes that the Philippines was not remade completely "In Our Image," but he also details the extensive American influence on the country while it was a formal colony and how that influence has continued to the present. Yet, because Karnow does not expand his focus beyond metropolitan elites, he cannot determine the degree to which Americanization has or has not permeated the Philippines at the provincial, municipal, and even barrio levels. In effect, the author's analytic and source limitations mean that this book is little more than a Manila-based journalist's impressions with some carefully added historical and academic brocade that will not threaten colonialist preconceptions.

THE DOCUMENTARY FILM SERIES

After reading the book one would expect a film series with a different emphasis than what Karnow and his associates produced. In fact, only the first and half of the second of the three parts closely parallel the original historical text. In contrast, while only the last three chapters of the book (some seventy-seven pages in length) deal with recent events and contemporary affairs, much of the second segment of the film series and all of the third were used to cover events of the last few years. In effect, there seems to have been a deliberate decision to emphasize current events, perhaps to cater to a television audience, rather than to offer fully developed historical narration such as that prepared for the book's readership. Despite this emphasis on contemporary events, however, Karnow's colonialist analysis is repeated, and even intensified in the film series.

In its opening segment the story of America's conquest of the Philippines is told from the American vantage point, complete with an interview of an elderly American woman who thought it terrible that American men had to endure Philippine heat, mud and mosquitos. The Balangiga "massacre" is given great play, the Thomasites are prominently featured, and America's psychological-cultural impact is made real to the viewer through interviews with Jose Diokno, Emmanuel Pelaez and Doreen Fernandez. The remainder of the first part then rushes through the American colonial period, the Second World War and the exuberant liberation of the country by MacArthur's forces. Karnow, who wrote the film script, provided the narration and conducted the interviews, is harsh once again with MacArthur who, he notes, had no interest in instituting postwar reforms in the Philippines as he later did in Japan. Instead, MacArthur only wanted to restore American and Filipino elite influence to its former strength and glory.

The second part of the series continues to detail the country's postwar political-economic condition with special emphasis on the Hukbalahap rebellion. Karnow's analysis has obviously benefited from Benedict Kerkvliet's work on former Huk peasant members in Central Luzon, as well as from interviews with Luis Taruc. The film also utilizes the story of Huk supremo Taruc's surrender to introduce Benigno Aquino, Jr., then a young newspaper reporter. The American emphasis resurfaces with a detailed narrative of the CIA-engineered rise of Ramon Magsaysay and interviews with former agents Alger Ellis, Charles Morin and Joseph Smith. Of the three, Smith is the most revealing when he admits that he himself:

... felt this was the American century and I felt that rather unabashedly ... We did have a missionary feeling so we had a certain arrogance. I think that there is no question about that. "[But, in this instance the CIA]" ... was on the side of the angels.

After firmly establishing the United States' importance in the Philippines' postwar political life to its American audience, the film introduces freshman Congressman Ferdinand Marcos. Immediately after flashes of the youthful Marcos family, the film shifts to Marcos' later Presidential Aide Adrian Cristobal who talks about the early Marcos presidency. With Aquino and Marcos already discussed, the only major remaining factor in contemporary Philippine affairs in the Philippine left, which Francisco Nemenzo, Jr. introduces in his interview along with supporting statements from Fernandez, Cristobal and Fr. Edicio de la Torre. Once all of the players are in place, the documentary cuts to former United States Ambassador Henry Byroade who claims he always thought that Marcos' declaration of martial law was a mistake. The remainder of part two centers on the Marcos regime's corruption and the contrasting Aquino opposition, exile, return and assassination.

The final segment of the film series is left to cover the well-known events leading to Marcos' downfall with a, by now expectedly, heavy emphasis on the American role. Former Ambassador Stephen Bosworth makes the incredible claim that he had sufficient foresight about Marcos' "snap election" to know in advance that such an electoral exercise would force Marcos to cheat so much that his credibility would be called into question in Washington as well as in Manila. Part three then turns to post-EDSA Revolution social-economic conditions in urban squatter communities and in the countryside by showing poor peasants in Central Luzon and NPA insurgents in Negros. It also devotes substantial discussion to the uncertain future of America's huge military bases which are threatened by the demands of Philippine nationalism. The film ends with author/bookstore owner F. Sionil Jose saying that the Philippines has to find its own soul and that the country can ill afford chasing after an alien American image for itself. Karnow would doubtless agree, but such a Filipino search for identity will not profit from his colonialist book and documentary film series.