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“Benevolent Assimilation”

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Book Reviews

"BENEVOLENT ASSIMILATION." THE AMERICAN CONQUEST OF THE PHILIPPINES, 1899-1903. By Stuart Creighton Miller. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982. xii, 340 pages.

The title and subtitle of this book are quite misleading. Though referring to events in the Philippines, it is rather a history of reactions in the United States to the American conquest of the Philippines. More accurate a description of it would be the sentence on the dust-jacket: "Using the words of many of the key American actors, from generals and presidents to soldiers in the field, Stuart Creighton Miller tells the story of the war and how it changed America's sense of innocence." It is basically the history of Americans rather than of Filipinos.

Over the past decade or two books and articles on this theme have proliferated in the United States, partly at least as a reflection of the issues of the Vietnamese war. (Miller, however, though pointing out resemblances in a brief epilogue, sees far greater dissimilarities than analogies between these two controversial episodes in American history). Books and articles by Beisner, Schirmer, Welch, and numerous others have discussed in one form or another the American Anti-Imperialist movement, the arguments raised for and against American retention of the Philippines, and reactions to the Filipino-American war.

Though disagreeing on certain points with his predecessors in the field, it is hard to say that Miller has raised any new issues for those familiar with the literature. He does point out the uselessness of the terms "imperialist" and "anti-imperialist" to describe the attitudes and motivations of most of the leading protagonists of either side and shows the common social strata from which they came. But the dominant elite perception of the superiority of Anglo-Saxon civilization could lead some to advocate the extension of the benefits of this civilization to an inferior people, while from that same perception others rejected the acquisition of the Philippines lest the white Anglo-Saxon character of America be contaminated by the inclusion of inferior colored races.

Miller considers American business to have been less enthusiastic for the acquisition than is often said, but he also documents the desire of many anti-imperialist businessmen for a less formal empire — one in which American business could achieve the benefits of free trade without the burden of having to administer a colony. Nonetheless, he rejects — correctly in my opinion — the interpretation given by some historians, particularly Marxists, for this phenomenon, which reads back into the beginning of the twentieth century the type of economic neocolonialism characteristic of the period since independence.

He likewise amply documents the crude racism of the ordinary American soldier — and of many officers — as well as the widespread atrocities and use of torture during the commands of MacArthur and Chaffee. All this is, of course, well-known to historians of the period, both Filipino and American. What Miller does provide is a plethora of documentation from the most varied sources — newspapers of varied tendencies, letters of soldiers (mostly as they appeared in the press), as well as official government reports and congressional hearings. The amount of documentation is impressive, at times even overwhelming in its repetitiveness. Unfortunately, little effort is made to assess the reliability of these various sources, all of which are certainly filled with errors or worse, including government documents. To what extent did the anonymous letters appearing in some newspapers represent factual sources and genuine opinion, and to what extent were they merely concoctions of various interested parties? Given the censorship imposed by the military in Manila, especially Otis, most newspapers tended to print whatever sensational rumors agreeing with their own editorial policy which managed to slip through the censorship. More careful analysis of the sources in the light of present-day knowledge is sorely lacking. This would mean more attention to what has been published about what actually happened in the war.

Though, given the purpose of the book, in spite of its title, one could not expect a detailed account of the war itself, Miller's treatment of those parts of the war which he does discuss leaves much to be desired as far as accuracy is concerned. Gross errors make the reviewer wonder with what care the large number of scholarly books cited in the bibliography were actually read. In spite of a footnote referring to Zaide's exhaustive treatment of the point, Miller states blandly the very opposite of Zaide's conclusion, asserting that the Katipunan "was betrayed in the confessional by a priest" (p. 33) (by which he presumably means that the existence of the Katipunan was revealed in the confessional to a priest, who later made it known to others, a hoary antifriar chestnut for which there is no foundation in fact). On the same page Miller cites the supposed thesis of Iletto's *Pasyon and Revolution* in such a way as to make it unintelligible, and in any case irrelevant to the subject of Miller's book. Basic facts of Philippine history

are carelessly handled. Rizal's execution is placed in 1895; Baldomero (repeatedly spelled as Baldmero) is made the brother of Emilio; Otis and MacArthur are repeatedly referred to as "governor-general" of the Philippines; the American chaplain Fr. William McKinnon is constantly referred to as "bishop of Manila," and to Felipe Agoncillo is attributed an imaginary journey to Rome to protest this imaginary appointment. (Significantly, the standard biography of McKinnon does not appear in the bibliography.) McKinley is said to have made the apostolic delegate, Archbishop Chappelle [sic] "an unofficial advisor on the Philippines," an assertion belied by the openly hostile relations between Chappelle and Taft in Manila. Spanish, Filipino, and even American names are constantly misspelled, sometimes to the point of unintelligibility, another sign of the uncritical use of contemporary newspapers with their garbled reports. Canovas becomes Casanovas (p. 10); Mascardo (p. 171) is rendered as Mescardo, together with an unknown Filipino general named "Lucon," while the American bishop John J. Keane becomes Keene. Ignorance of Catholic terminology as well as uncalled-for sarcasm has Pope Leo XIII giving "*ex-cathedra* approval" (p. 118) for American taking of the Philippines and sending "*ex-cathedra* blessings" (p. 138) on American conquest. It is stated (p. 199) that in Samar Lukban retreated into the interior, "leaving behind a well-organized network of Filipino priests and officials loyal to him and the Republic." Though it is true that most of the Filipino clergy were loyal to the Republic, and that many of them were systematically tortured by the Americans for being such, their relations with anticlerical Lukban were such that all but two priests of advanced age left the island in late 1899 in protest against Lukban's anti-Catholic acts and his abuse of the Church and robbery of Church funds.

For those unfamiliar with the wide selection of writings on the anti-imperialist movement the book will be useful for understanding the ideals, attitudes, and prejudices which prevailed in American society at the turn of the century. For the Filipino-American war itself, the book is far from adequate, and often misleading or simply erroneous. What value it has is for the study of American history, not that of the Philippines, or even of the American presence in the Philippines.

John N. Schumacher, S.J.

LE DEFİ MONDIAL. By Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber. Paris: Arthime Fayard, 1980. 477 pages.

In the 8 December 1980 issue of *Newsweek* magazine the book *Le Defi Mondial* by Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber was reviewed. The reviewer ends his account with the words "What Servan-Schreiber has done is to state the 'challenge' clearly. The solution has yet to be formed."