

JOHN M. GATES, THE U.S. ARMY AND IRREGULAR WARFARE, CHAPTER ONE  
WRITING THE HISTORY OF CONTROVERSIAL EVENTS

War is fascinating as well as appalling, and despite my abhorrence of the violence and destruction that is the essence of warfare I have been studying it in one context or another virtually my entire adult life. In the course of that study, I developed an interest in irregular warfare, particularly in the context of revolution. This work brings together in one place some of the results of the teaching, research, and writing I have done in the field over more than thirty years.

In 1986 I had the opportunity to give a series of six lectures at Obirin College in suburban Tokyo. Those lectures and the published papers and research on which the lectures were based provide the core of this work. Some editing has been done on the previously published essays for stylistic reasons or to avoid repetition. Footnotes and a few textual references have also been added to draw the reader's attention to relevant works of particular merit published after the research for each essay was completed. In addition, a few alterations resulted from shifts in my own interpretive views over time. Finally, I have included a short introduction before many of the essays to provide some insight into the circumstances in which each was originally written or published.

The underlying theme of these collected essays is the changing nature of contemporary warfare and, in particular, the significant changes evident in revolutionary war. The focus is a contrast between two American wars. In the first, which began in the Philippines in 1899, a small army of American professionals, augmented by volunteers and Filipino auxiliaries, defeated the forces of the Philippine Revolution under Emilio Aguinaldo. In the second, the starting point of which can still be debated, a much larger American military force of immense power fought against communist revolutionaries in Indochina, with the greatest period of American involvement coming in the late 1960s. These two case studies, and the contrasts between them, form the basis for a critique of a number of conclusions that have become ingrained in American thinking about past and present military affairs.

Many of the lectures and articles contained in this work were originally aimed at one of two very different audiences. I wrote some with my professional colleagues in history and the social sciences in mind; I hoped that others would be read by individuals within and outside of the military who might at some point be responsible for decision making within the arena of foreign and military affairs. From as early as I can remember, I have viewed history as an applied study, in which the adoption or rejection of the conclusions and interpretations of historians can have significant consequences for institutions and the people who direct them. What one concludes about the past, sometimes even the terms one uses to describe it, can help or hinder people in their attempts to define and deal with the problems of the present. To ignore the relevant, applied dimension of history in favor of more antiquarian interests may well be safer for the scholars involved, but at times it may also represent scholarly behavior that borders on the socially irresponsible.[\[1\]](#)

The U. S. Army has a long history of fighting against irregulars in a variety of situations and places. In the course of the 19th century, for example, it engaged a variety of Indian groups from Florida to the Pacific coast, as well as Mexican guerrillas, Confederate raiders, and Filipino revolutionaries. In virtually every case the army was successful, although at no time did the army's combined experience in operations against irregulars lead to the development of either doctrine or any less formal codification of the lessons learned. Nevertheless, although each campaign seemed to begin and end in virtual isolation from the army's previous experience, the army dealt successfully with each irregular enemy to accomplish whatever mission had been set for it. By the end of the century many of the members of the army's officer corps seemed particularly well

prepared to engage in the difficult task of pacifying the Philippines. This late-19th century experience of the army is the point of focus for Part I of the study which follows (Chapters 2-4).

In Vietnam, over a half century later, a very different army with a very different officer corps fought a campaign that proved even more frustrating than that in the Philippines. The contrast between the army's campaign in the Philippines and that in Vietnam is striking, and one can learn much more about irregular warfare in the 20th century by focusing on the differences, as is done in Chapter 5, than by the facile comparisons that have often dominated the literature. American forces in Indochina were incredibly well endowed with equipment, and the logistical support they received was truly amazing, particularly given the vast distance between the field of battle and the base of supply in the United States. The American military in Southeast Asia was equally well endowed with the tools of its trade. Both the technological complexity and the firepower of its weapons would have strained the imaginations of its counterpart decades before in the Philippines. In the end, however, the American military did not succeed in Vietnam. It proved incapable of achieving the national goal of establishing a stable, non-communist government in the South despite its success in destroying both regular and irregular units of the enemy's military forces. Part II of this study (Chapters 5-8) focuses on the Indochina War and, in particular, on some of the misconceptions that have made understanding it so difficult.

Part III (Chapters 9 and 10) represents an attempt to place the army's experience with irregular warfare into a broader historical context that will be useful for readers looking to the future as well as the past. Warfare of all types has changed significantly over time, and the changes in revolutionary warfare outlined in Chapter 9 help to explain the tendency toward stalemate or, at the very least, the increase in the level of destruction preceding the victory of one side over the other in revolutionary conflicts such as that in Vietnam or Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, given the politicization of much of the thinking on topics relating to revolutionary and other forms of irregular warfare, arriving at an understanding of the phenomenon is extremely difficult. Self-serving, ultimately self-deceiving concepts and terminology mislead both civilians and the military. The deception is particularly apparent in much of the writing about terrorism, in which terrorists are often defined more by their goals than by their actions. The problems with such an approach are the focus of Chapter 10. The final section of the book (Chapters 11 and 12) comments on the broader problems associated with conceptual confusion, not only as it applies to irregular warfare, but also as it concerns nuclear deterrence and the nature of war itself.

Controversy is at the heart of modern war. War would not take place if the disputes between two sides holding opposing views were resolved peacefully instead, and writing about such controversial events presents certain dangers for the historians who engage in it. From start to finish, a war, virtually any war, raises a number of questions that often remain undecided long after the fighting has ended, even long after all the participants who survived the war have died. People debate the origins of the conflict and the justice of each party's respective cause. They engage in various disputes over the nature of the war, the relative merits of the participants and their leaders, and a host of other topics capable of engaging the passion as well as the intellect of authors and readers alike.

The subjects treated in this book are no exception. Both the war in the Philippines and that in Vietnam were highly controversial at the time they were fought, and they have remained the subject of intense debate. Although a tendency has existed in much historical writing to strive for consensus in interpretation, all historical debate can not be resolved by the synthesis of antagonistic views. Some conclusions are not compatible with the data, while others are, and one responsibility of the historian is to identify interpretations that fail the test when subjected to critical analysis. Although historical truth may never be more than tentative, it still exists in the sense that certain conclusions fit the facts better than others.

The fit between an interpretation and the data behind it is often less important than what individuals want to believe. For that reason alone readers will find conclusions that are controversial in virtually

every chapter of this book, but that is to be expected given the nature of the subject matter. Criticism of historical acts and actors is criticism of people who often have both the desire and the ability to defend themselves. They respond by writing their own version of history or, in the case of censorship, by repressing versions they dislike.

As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn told a *Time* interviewer in 1989, "Some people distort things consciously, others just don't take the trouble to check their sources."<sup>[2]</sup> Solzhenitsyn was speaking of journalists, but he might well have been talking about many of the people who have written about the war in the Philippines or Vietnam. In the chapters that follow, I have tried very hard to avoid distortion, but I know that continuing controversy is inherent in writing about the topics covered here.

The experience of Capt. John R. M. Taylor provides an excellent example of the difficulties one may face in writing the history of a controversial conflict. During the war in the Philippines, Taylor had been detailed to receive and translate documents captured from the Filipino revolutionaries. In 1901 he was transferred to Washington to work in the Bureau of Insular Affairs. There he proposed to write "a history of the relations of the United States with the Philippines,"<sup>[3]</sup> and after gaining official approval he began work on his project in 1902. By 1906 Taylor's two volume history, with three volumes of accompanying documents, had been set in galleys. At that point, however, Secretary of War William Howard Taft decided to defer publication. He did not want Taylor's history published on the eve of a congressional election, believing that Taylor's defense of the army would rekindle political issues that had just begun to subside.

Reluctant to abandon the project, General Clarence Edwards, chief of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, initiated a second attempt to publish the work in 1909, only to have publication again deferred by Taft, then President-elect, who had his secretary write Edwards to say that he was "quite willing not to have the matter published" if the general thought best.<sup>[4]</sup> By that point both Taft and Edwards had received a long and extremely critical letter about Taylor's history from James A. LeRoy, an independent scholar to whom Edwards had sent the first two volumes for review. LeRoy had been Taft's secretary in the Philippines and was working on his own history at the time he reviewed what Taylor had written. LeRoy was emphatic in his view that Taylor's work "should not be published as it is."<sup>[5]</sup> The Bureau then abandoned Taylor's project, and its five volumes remained unpublished until 1968, when the U. S. National Archives made a microfilm copy available. Three years later a private foundation in the Philippines funded the printing of a limited edition of Taylor's work.

Capt. Taylor paid a severe penalty for his attempt to write the history of a highly controversial event. A victim of political censorship, he died never knowing how important his work would become to a future generation of scholars. Unfortunately, authors in the employ of government are not the only people to suffer censorship when writing about controversial subjects. Rejection by journal or book editors can also be a form of censorship when the reasons for rejection are political rather than scholarly.

In 1971, when I attempted to publish a manuscript contrasting the war in Vietnam with that in the Philippines I found my efforts frustrated by such partisan responses. Several liberal, anti-war referees and editors did not find my view of the Philippine campaign sufficiently critical of the army and the United States, while referees and editors with a more pro-war or conservative orientation found my comments on the American effort in Vietnam too critical. My favorite rejection, written the same day my manuscript arrived at the journal and dated June 30, 1972, said "the President's news conference of last evening could, I hope, further reduce interest in the type of article you have written." As was the case with Capt. Taylor's work, my manuscript was eventually published in the Philippines.<sup>[6]</sup>

Historians writing about controversial topics often face other hazards as well. When emotions and individual reputations are involved, controversies can get heated, as I learned on more than one occasion. In 1981, for example, I had the temerity to write *The New York Review of Books* to note

that Gore Vidal had grossly overestimated the number of Filipino deaths during the Philippine-American War. The figure of 3,000,000 dead claimed by Vidal was preposterous, and the source that he cited had actually listed the number of dead as 300,000. To my surprise, Vidal proceeded to place the blame for his error on "either" the authors or the publishers of a book he had once reviewed for having "added an extra naught," demonstrating in the process that his actual source was not the one he had cited. He attempted to dismiss my criticism by implying that I was a military apologist of some sort because I had presented a paper at a U. S. Air Force Academy history symposium. No matter how many Filipinos had actually been killed, Vidal seemed determined to stick to his conclusion that "our policy in the Philippines was genocide," asserting that "if we had to kill the entire population we would have done so."<sup>[7]</sup> In a second round of the correspondence Vidal accused me of being "disingenuous--to use a tactful word" and a peddler of "neo-manifest destiny nonsense."<sup>[8]</sup> Obviously a thick skin is helpful when one becomes involved in historical controversy. In such situations the degree to which bias triumphs over logic and data may only be exceeded by the venom unleashed when errors are revealed.

If we are to understand history, however, we must face the facts and allow the data to influence our thinking. Many of the chapters included in this book have as their primary goal the destruction of flawed conclusions by the presentation of well-documented facts in logical order. When new or better information can be used to demonstrate errors in what I have written, my work should obviously be revised. Over the years I have altered my own thinking on various points to make it consistent with new data. All I ask here is that my readers be willing to do the same.

<sup>[1]</sup> For an articulate presentation of the argument regarding the importance of relevance see Howard Zinn, "Knowledge as a Form of Power" and "What is Radical History" in *The Politics of History* (Boston, 1970), 5-14 & 35-55.

<sup>[2]</sup> "Russia's Prophet In Exile," *Time* (July 24, 1989), 60.

<sup>[3]</sup> John T. Farrell, "An Abandoned Approach to Philippine History: John R. M. Taylor and the Philippine Insurrection Records," *The Catholic Historical Review*, 39 (January, 1954), 391.

<sup>[4]</sup> William W. Carpenter to Edwards, January 21, 1909, Records of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, 2291-58, U.S. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>[5]</sup> James A. LeRoy to Edwards, January 12, 1909, William Howard Taft Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. For an overview of the 1908-1909 decision see John M. Gates, "The Official Historian and the Well-Placed Critic: James A. LeRoy's Assessment of John R. M. Taylor's *The Philippine Insurrection Against the United States*," *The Public Historian*, 7 (Summer 1985), 57-67 and Farrell, 397-404.

<sup>[6]</sup> John M. Gates, "The Philippines and Vietnam: Another False Analogy," *Asian Studies*, 10 (1972), 64-76.

<sup>[7]</sup> *The New York Review of Books* (December 17, 1981), 69. The paper presented at the Air Force Academy symposium to which Vidal referred is included here as Ch. 3, and readers can judge for themselves the validity of Vidal's criticism.

<sup>[8]</sup> *Ibid.* (March 4, 1982), 44.