The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899–1902

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office—the Office of Net Assessment—on senior government decision makers. Enter Andrew Krepinevich and Barry Watts’s excellent biography. Krepinevich and Watts are no strangers to Marshall. They were a part of what is fondly called “St. Andrew’s Prep,” the some ninety or so people who over the years have worked for Marshall. Many of them have gone on to have impacts elsewhere in government or in the private sector, identifying and discussing national-security issues with the same rigor and intellectual chops that their boss in the Office of Net Assessment brought to the job.

Krepinevich and Watts handle his story with objectivity, aiming to show his “intellectual contributions to US defense strategy.” Thus the story begins with a young Andrew Marshall, an autodidact, reading widely and voraciously in Detroit. He goes on to the University of Chicago, earning a master’s in economics. He then considers earning a PhD in statistics but instead decides, in the 1950s, to work for the then-fledgling RAND Corporation. Marshall there meets some influential people who would change his life and would help propel him into the perch he has held from 1973 to today.

It is a credit to the authors that they can craft a thorough biography about a man whose work is largely classified. In fact, only one of his assessments has ever been written at the unclassified level. But his intellectual fingerprint has been so prevalent that there is plenty to discuss. The authors go into great detail about how Marshall developed the idea of net assessment, arguing that he looked further out than others, identifying issues that might challenge American decision makers in the future. He was so prescient that the discussions many of us are having today about China’s rise were presaged by what Marshall and his office were thinking about as early as the late 1980s and into the 1990s.

Marshall left it to his subordinates to best figure out for themselves what net assessments were; he balanced intellectual guidance with demanding thoroughness. In a building where egos loom large and people posture for influence, Marshall remained out of the limelight, quietly but diligently working to identify the right questions, the ones that needed to be explored.

Marshall’s exit will leave a hole. But this excellent biography and the men and women he mentored are testaments to his impact and a reminder that we have much to do to remain competitive in the future.

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Brian McAllister Linn, professor of history and liberal arts at Texas A&M University, addresses here the war between the United States and the fledgling Philippine Republic, detailing the prolonged guerrilla struggle that followed. First published in 1989 and reprinted in 2000, Linn’s book presents the struggle between the U.S. Army and guerrillas on the island of Luzon as a series of regionalized conflicts. Eschewing a conventional campaign history,
the author argues that circumstances of culture, ethnicity, religion, and terrain made the challenges in each region unique. The book demonstrates that the Army defeated the insurgency because commanders focused their efforts on the idiosyncrasies of each district, rather than following a campaign plan handed down from headquarters in Manila. While this flexible and decentralized approach may not have been intentional, Linn argues that it succeeded because it allowed commanders the latitude to implement measures responsive to each local situation. This regionalized view demonstrates the value of what modern practitioners refer to as “mission command,” and that is what makes this work relevant for readers today.

The book is organized into six chapters — an introduction, four regional case studies, and a short conclusion. The first chapter is a sweeping synopsis of the conventional war in the Philippines and a brief but excellent introduction to the geography of the islands, the Spanish colonization of Luzon, and the nascent Filipino reformist and nationalist movements that led to open revolt against Spain in 1896.

In the following chapters Linn describes counterinsurgency operations in four numbered districts. Using several examples in each of the districts, he skillfully supports his claim that the insurgency varied widely from one area to the next. For instance, in the Fourth District, the Department of Northern Luzon, the Army exploited cultural rifts in the provinces by playing antirevolutionary elements of the population against the guerrillas, who themselves eroded what local support they enjoyed by heavy-handed terrorism against the populace. In contrast to guerrilla campaigns in the other districts, the insurgents in the Fourth District suffered from poor leadership and slipshod organization. The Army rapidly gained the support of the local elite, and pacification soon followed.

Linn describes the counterinsurgency in the remaining districts. Wildly different circumstances prevailed in each. In his description of the Army’s responses Linn supports the validity of his claim that the U.S. Army eventually pacified the archipelago by making campaign decisions at the right level and on the basis of local circumstances, rather than by forcing a centralized, top-down approach.

Linn makes a well-organized argument in support of his regionalized thesis, but his effort is not without some shortcomings. First, his case studies apply only to the island of Luzon. Details of American efforts elsewhere in the archipelago would have broadened understanding of the war. Second, Linn only makes cursory mention of the logistical challenges presented by the terrain and the disjointedness of the theaters of operation. A brief but comprehensive look at the logistics in each of the case studies would have been appropriate, especially a discussion of how logistical problems affected areas differently. Finally, the text includes several photographs, but the six maps are lacking in topographic detail that would have visually reinforced the remoteness and disparate nature of the four districts.

In each district, the Army prevailed because commanders implemented plans that suited the unique circumstances of the insurgency in their respective districts or provinces. This decentralized approach avoided strict adherence
to doctrine that did not suit situations on the ground and saw the employment of effective, sophisticated, counterinsurgency measures that reflected the local state of affairs. Although not achieved without controversy, the victory in the Philippines represents the most successful counterinsurgency campaign in U.S. military history. Though it details a war fought over a century ago, the book holds valuable lessons for today. It provides not only a historical framework for understanding counterinsurgency but also a glimpse into the complexities that have confronted the U.S. military over the last thirteen years and points to the wisdom of a decentralized command structure for such cases. Linn leaves the reader with a reminder that even when the strategic objective is President William McKinley’s “benevolent assimilation,” or the winning of George Orwell’s “hearts and minds,” nonmilitary efforts toward achieving it will not work without victory over the insurgents responsible for the instability.

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