



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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American Counterinsurgency Strategy during the Moro Rebellion in the Philippines 1903-1913

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The American military government of the Moro Province from 1903 through 1913 remains a grossly overlooked part of U.S. military history. However, it is a significant episode. The period of military governance in the Moro Province of the Philippines represents the first time the U.S. military conducted a counterinsurgency campaign within an Islamic society. Given that nearly one hundred years later U.S. forces returned to the southern Philippines to assist the Philippine government in suppressing Moro insurgents as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, it is important that the U.S. military give more study to that earlier counterinsurgency campaign conducted by the military government of the Moro Province from 1903-1913. The evolution of the military government's overall strategy in pacifying the Moros is particularly important in light of current U.S. Army counterinsurgency doctrine that focuses on a whole of government approach to dealing with insurgencies.

Following the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States Army spent over three years fighting Filipino insurgents throughout the northern provinces of the Philippines. During the period of the Philippine War (1899-1902), Moroland, the southern Philippine islands of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago inhabited by the Islamic Malay Moros, was controlled under the terms of the Bates Agreement. The Bates Agreement was a form of indirect rule over the Moro areas in the southern Philippines that allowed traditional Moro leaders, known as sultans or datus, to maintain power provided they acknowledged American sovereignty. However, the United States decided to abrogate the Bates Agreement in 1903 and implement a military government that would impose direct rule over the Moro population. What followed were ten years of violent resistance to American authority over the course of the administrations of three military governors, generals Leonard Wood, Tasker H. Bliss, and John J. Pershing.

The military government maintained control of the Moro Province until the end of 1913, at which time it was finally deemed stable enough to transition to civil control, thus signaling the end of the military counterinsurgency campaign. However, it was a long road for the military government to get to that point. The American government committed thousands of troops to the task and provided many of the best officers available at the time to serve in the military government. Despite the amount of resources and capabilities available to it, the military government was for a majority of the time unable to make significant progress in pacifying the resistance. Obviously, the strategy it was implementing was in some way failing to meet the

objectives of the military government. An examination of that strategy explains why it took so long to accomplish the government's objectives.

Initially, military operations were only intended to play a supporting role in the American strategy for the province. The actual strategy of the American military government and each military governor was to focus primarily on first establishing a system of governance, followed by economic development supported by educational initiatives as a means of pacifying and controlling the Moros. However, security threats and violent opposition constantly hindered that strategy so that the desired end state of pacification and acquiescence to American rule could not be established. Ultimately, it was Pershing's decision to focus on security through his disarmament policy and the subsequent campaigns to enforce that policy that finally established conditions for the transition of governance to civilian control and end military government within the province. Despite only initially conceived of as a supporting effort to a broader whole of government approach, in the end military operations became the decisive means for ending Moro resistance to American authority.

Each of the military governors of the Moro Province arrived at their commands with different strategies for pacifying the Moros. All of them considered the establishment of effective government and economic development as the primary means of ending resistance to American authority. However, none of them took command with the impression that a long, drawn out military campaign was required to achieve that end state. The military government eventually adopted a strategy that relied on military force, but only after eight years of military governance that focused on governance and economics failed to achieve results. It was the military government's enforcement of disarmament that was ultimately successful in ending widespread resistance in the Moro Province.

General Leonard Wood (military governor 1903-1906) bears considerable responsibility for establishing the initial strategy of the American military government. Wood's strategy was to focus on establishing a system of governance for the province down to the local level. He believed that the Moros would willingly switch from their customary and traditional forms of tribal rule to the new American system once they were shown the benefits of good governance. He never considered a military campaign of conquest as a requirement for ending resistance. One firm example would be enough to end all resistance, or so he thought, so he approached every act of resistance as if it was the last and decisive. He spent the three years of his command convinced that each fight was the last, only to have resistance spring up again in other parts of the province. Unfortunately for him, there was always one more battle around the corner until he was confronted with the Battle of Bud Dajo in the Spring of 1906. The comparative size of this battle to the others during his command likely only confirmed his belief that this was indeed the decisive battle that he anticipated, rather than just another in a long series of resistance that continued for the remaining years of military governance.

The mood in the American administration after the Battle of Bud Dajo was that resistance was indeed at an end, and General Tasker H. Bliss (military governor 1906-1909) focused his strategy on the economic and educational development of the province. Under traditional Moro leadership, individual Moros were reliant on the largesse of their leaders to survive. The economic system for the average Moro was one similar to slavery, peonage, serfdom or

vassalage. Bliss hoped that through economic development, combined with education on craft and trade skills, individual Moros would be able to provide for themselves economically rather than relying on their leaders for support.

Bliss, believing that the decisive battle had already taken place at Bud Dajo, aligned security operations to protect and promote the economic development that he wanted to foster. He withdrew his forces out of contact with much of the population in an effort to be less confrontational, and to ease administrative and logistical support. Under Bliss' tenure, continued resistance was primarily viewed as criminal activity and Bliss undertook actions in positioning and adjusting his forces in accordance with such a perception. As a result, the military government did not effectively expand its control or confront the sources of resistance. Security actually decreased in the province, but Bliss' decisions would seem sound if one truly believed that there was no organized threat to authority remaining after the decisive battle.

Neither the Wood nor Bliss administrations believed that a military campaign was required to actually conquer and overcome resistance by the force of arms. Despite mounting evidence to the contrary, they continued to maintain these perceptions throughout their time in command. The consolidation of military forces into garrisons during the Bliss administration encouraged resistance leaders to ignore or discount American military power. It took years before the military government realized that expanding military presence into the furthest areas of the province was essential to overcoming resistance and that governance and economic development could not accomplish the job alone. As a result, Pershing arrived to take command of a province that was no more secure than when he had departed six years previously in 1903 (just prior to Wood taking command).

General John J. Pershing (military governor 1909-1913) was the final military governor of the Moro Province. It was during his tenure that security conditions were finally established to transition to civilian control. Pershing immediately recognized there were problems with security when he took command, and he initially believed that transition to civilian control was much farther off than it actually turned out to be. Like the others, he strongly believed that improvements in governance and economic development were essential ingredients to success in pacifying the province, and initially those areas were his main efforts. He also determined that he needed to get more of his troops out of garrison and interacting with the population if he ever hoped to establish security. However, over time he concluded that disarmament was required and security would have to become his main focus. He recognized that disarmament would inspire considerable resistance from the Moros and that considerable force would be needed to enforce this policy. While neither Wood nor Bliss envisioned a military campaign to conquer the Moros, this is exactly what Pershing eventually found necessary and embarked upon to achieve success. Only after that military campaign was organized was resistance defeated. Without this, widespread violence and resistance to American authority would have continued for many more years. After nearly two years of focused military operations enforcing disarmament, security conditions were established so that Pershing could transfer the Moro Province to civilian control and end the military government.

Naturally, we must question how Pershing succeeded in getting it right and Wood and Bliss fell short. It is tempting to fall into the trap of thinking that Pershing succeeded because of his

“intellectual superiority,” as most biographers wish to argue (especially given the record of animosity and disagreement between Pershing and Wood). Biographers say that Pershing’s success was due to his personal qualities of leadership. Pershing was therefore either a more competent commander in assessing the situation or more adaptable and flexible in mind and thus able to shift strategy while the other commanders were not.

However, the idea that personal military competency was responsible is an insufficient explanation. All three men were highly intelligent and capable officers who were chosen for that command based on proven abilities and selected for a position recognized as requiring the best officer available for the job. Afterwards, all three went on to eventually serve as Chief of Staff of the Army, which was a formal recognition that they were considered the most capable military officers of their particular year groups. Clearly, there was no shortage of military competence in any of these men. Nor can one question the competency of the subordinates working for any of these men when so many of these subordinate officers rose to prominence in later service. In particular, Wood’s two most accomplished subordinate officers included Hugh L. Scott, later to become Chief of Staff of the Army (1914-1917) in his own right, and Robert L. Bullard, commander of the 1st Infantry Division and the Second U.S. Army during World War I. We cannot say that compared to Pershing, any of the other military governors was incompetent in their position or lacked competent subordinate leaders to execute their strategy.

It is certainly true that Pershing proved to be better than the other two military governors at engaging local leaders in dialogue and encouraging his subordinates to do likewise. This definitely made it more likely that conflicts and misunderstandings were avoided and violence averted during his command than during the others. This is indeed one of the methods that enabled disarmament to work as a successfully strategy and convince many of the local leadership they were better off siding with the Americans than against them.

Pershing also had the advantage of having six years of prior military government to look back on and assess its effectiveness when he took command. He was able to examine what had occurred before his command, see that it was not working and make appropriate adjustments. That he was able to do so has as much to do with him being in the right time and place to effect change as it does with his personality and leadership ability. There is no reason to think that another officer, Hugh Scott or even Wood returning for a second term, would not have made a similar shift in strategy. Therefore, one cannot explain Pershing’s success solely on the basis on personal leadership, competence or the ability of subordinate leaders and staffs. Some other explanation outside the realm of the personalities involved must be examined.

What the history of the military government of the Moro Province shows is that smart, competent leaders can still come up with flawed strategies. Even with the most competent subordinates executing that flawed strategy, they still will not achieve success. One of the first things a leader does as part of developing a plan for an operation or campaign is to assess the enemy they are going up against and incorporate that assessment into their strategy for defeating that enemy and accomplishing the desired objective or end state. In the contemporary American military this process has become detailed, formalized and sophisticated in its practice, but it has always been conducted in modern warfare to some extent, even if only in the mind of the commander rather than as a staff process. It is not our purpose to conduct a Clausewitzian center

of gravity analysis of the Moros, especially given that such an idea, as military professionals understand it today, would not have occurred to the military governors crafting their strategies for the province. However, the military government did assess and identify the source of the opposition's strength. A man with considerable experience among the Moros, Dr. Najeem Saleeby, was one of Leonard Wood's principal advisors. Saleeby identified the power wielded by the datus and their positions of influence within Moro society as the center of Moro resistance that the American government must seek to co-opt or eliminate. Therefore, the American government did have a good idea of who they really needed to influence, either by military defeat or persuasion, from the very beginning if they wanted to secure the province. In crafting their strategy, the Americans did indeed seek to undermine, defeat or co-opt the power of the datus to assist them in pacifying and controlling the province. The official reports from this period include numerous examples in governance and economic development that the Americans attempted to use to influence the power of the datus for their own advantage. So it cannot be said that the strategies the military governors adopted failed to adequately consider the base of power of the source of resistance.

So why was it that the strategies either did not work or took so long to work? One of the obvious reasons is that no strategy is perfect and mistakes often get made. There were instances where each military governor initiated policies that antagonized and enflamed opposition and resistance in one way or another. Pershing's policy of disarmament, while being the most successful, was also the one most resisted and it generated considerable violence before it succeeded. Policies regarding land reform and agricultural development also created other issues such as labor exploitation and inequality that generated resistance to American authority that the American government never fully resolved and only worsened after the Filipinization of the provincial government after 1920. American policy decisions more often than not simply created some degree of opposition and resistance that had to be overcome before the policy was accepted in general.

Cultural misunderstandings also generated opposition at various times and places. The Moros were a traditional society resistant to any change. Many of the changes the Americans implemented in order to "civilize" the Moros threatened the culture of the common Moro as much as it threatened the power of the datus and religious leaders that had the most to lose in accepting American authority. Slavery, the bearing of weapons, piracy, ownership of land and property, and many other areas affected by American government all had cultural implications that affected every Moro. The Moro leadership could, therefore, capitalize on these cultural implications to garner support for resistance, and encouraged the perception that the American government was threatening the Moros' Islamic religion itself. The American objective of "civilizing" the Moros was itself a source of resistance that the American strategies never took into account and none of the strategies were able to overcome. Pershing's disarmament campaign only rendered cultural opposition to American authority a moot point.

Another shortfall of the American strategies is that they assumed that the positive attraction of American governance and economic development on the common Moro would be sufficient in overcoming opposition to resistance. The strategies were more reliant on the "carrot" versus the "stick" approach to gaining support from the population. Without being too culturally biased, it is fair to say that the lives of the average Moro tended to improve materially and politically

under American governance. The Moros took to trade, market agriculture, education when it was accessible, and many of the changes in governance readily enough that we can be certain that the Moros themselves thought that these were desirable, positive developments. This is especially true during the Wood administration when common Moros could choose between municipal and tribal ward styles of government and many Moros voluntarily choose to live under municipal rather than traditional government. That trend only increased over time, so there is plenty of indication that the American belief in the attraction of their authority was bearing out over the long run. Unfortunately, the attractiveness of American authority only proved valid for those exposed to it, meaning those that were nearest to American authority, and more for the common Moro than for Moro leaders.

The things that made American authority attractive to the common Moro also weakened the power of the Moro leadership, making it unattractive to them. Traditional Moro leaders were likely to lose political, economic and social power and prestige under the new American government. As a result, many Moro tribal and religious leaders became promoters of resistance. American attempts to co-opt those leaders through diplomatic engagement at the local level were insufficient during much of the military government, although Pershing pushed for greater efforts once he took charge. The natural tendency on the part of the Moro leadership to attempt to maintain their power when threatened ensured that there would be resistance to American authority.

Those Moro leaders in more isolated areas were able to exploit two weaknesses in American strategy to resist. The first is that the benefits of American authority that made it attractive to the common Moro could only be manifested in proximity to American authority. Limited contact with American authority meant that the Moro population could either be kept ignorant of the benefits, or denied access to the benefits by Moro leaders wanting to maintain their authority. For example, datus continued to wield considerable but technically illegal judicial authority for adjudicating criminal or civil actions by denying or controlling access to the new American legal system until they began to be co-opted during the Bliss administration into the American legal system. Prior to that point, the Americans lacked the ability to enforce their authority over the datus exercising their traditional authorities. As long as the Americans did not exert full physical control, the datus were free to continue as they had always done and the common Moro inhabitants had no option but to comply with the will of the datus.

The second weakness in the American strategies builds off the first weakness. Just as the American strategy of attracting support from the common Moros failed in attracting those common Moros it could not reach, the American strategy likewise failed to attract and co-opt the Moro leadership in those areas for the same reason. During every administration, many Moro leaders saw the benefits of cooperating with the Americans. Cooperative datus continued to wield influence among their supporters, maintained political and legal authority by assuming a role at the local level of administration and had opportunity for economic gain by entering the market with an advantage in regards to access to resources, labor and material property that common Moros did not have. For many Moro leaders, cooperation with American authority meant no reduction in economic or political power, especially compared to neighboring datus who chose to resist. However, just as common Moros could not receive the benefits of cooperating with the Americans if they were too far removed from the American system of

governance and economy, neither could their leaders benefit from the American system if they did not have the means and opportunity of benefiting from cooperation. The American system was least likely to co-opt and attract the cooperation of datus in those interior regions where American authority was the most remote. Resistance in those areas continued for the longest time not only because Americans could not exert their authority to overcome, but also because any benefits of cooperation could not be realized. The American strategies were focused on the power of the “carrot” approach, but the carrot could not influence the datus of the interior in any more significant way than the stick. It was only during Pershing’s disarmament campaign that the carrot could really be applied to the interior regions in any meaningful way, but by then the enforcement of disarmament reduced much of the attractiveness of American control.

These two weaknesses led to a third failure in the American strategies. The Americans were correct in identifying the power of the datus as the main strength of the opposition. The datus were not a collective body by any means. The Moros had no leader to organize true opposition and as a result they were never a real militarily existential threat to American power in Moroland. The Americans knew that the Moros were incapable of mounting a large enough force that was competently armed and could throw the Americans out of Moroland any more than the Moros were able to threaten the Spaniards before them. As a result, the Americans had the luxury of believing that force and a drawn out military campaign was not required to pacify the whole province. The Americans could focus their strategies on governance and economics because they did not perceive a major threat to their ultimate control.

When force was required against the Moros, it was usually a localized affair with none of the resistance coordinated between groups. The opposition would always be at a military disadvantage, unable to compete against American firepower and forced to always remain operationally on the defensive, manifesting their greatest strength and numbers when occupying their fixed cotta forts. On the surface, this seems like it would make the problem of defeating the Moros easier, which is why Wood could be forgiven for thinking that one fight would be sufficient to demonstrate the futility of opposing the Americans by force of arms. However, because the datu leaders were independent actors, and not part of an organized resistance movement, it was essential then that they all be defeated or co-opted individually. No cadre of elite datu leaders existed that could be defeated, and on their surrender urge their subordinates to lay down their arms and acquiesce to American authority. The defeat of a particular datu had no influence on other Moro leaders beyond his immediate neighbors. There were also cultural factors within the martial society that encouraged leaders to continue resistance until militarily defeated. Moro leaders never learned from the example of others as Wood anticipated, therefore Wood and Bliss never received a decisive battle that ended resistance. What was actually required was that each Moro leader had to be conquered individually, and that never occurred until Pershing initiated his disarmament campaign. Still, it took considerable time and effort for that campaign to achieve success because every individual leader choosing to resist had to be confronted before the campaign was over.

Because the Americans did not fully understand the weaknesses in their strategy, it was many years before they initiated a military campaign that effectively eliminated resistance. There were practical and cultural limits on what could be achieved using strategies based on the power to attract support from the populace. The focus on governance and economic development was

crucial to American success in Moroland, as it did provide an alternative to resistance. However, the individual nature of the resistance on the part of Moro leaders and the inability to provide the benefits of co-option or surrender to the majority of those leaders meant that only military force could pacify the province. Pershing's disarmament policy was decisive because it engendered a campaign of enforcement that confronted every Moro leader individually and forced them to accept death or defeat, or willingly submit to American power.

In the end, the American military government was able to quell resistance to American authority in the Moro Province. The years after Pershing's administration were generally peaceful. Criminal violence continued to occur under the civilian administration of Frank Carpenter, who acted as civil governor from 1914-1920, but not nearly to the extent that it had before. American authority over Moroland was finally established, secured and recognized by the inhabitants.

American military leaders would do well to examine their Army's first experiences dealing with those Islamic forces in the region. America's conduct of operations in Moroland does provide positive examples that should be incorporated into future operations in the region. Establishing good governance and economic measures that attract the support of the population and provide the opposing leadership an alternative to resistance is essential. However, there are limits to the power of attraction that confine it only to areas under effective control. The American military government always sought to co-opt the enemy opposition whenever possible. The power of engagement, by leaders and individual troops visible amongst the population, was exemplified during Pershing's administration, and his engagement of leaders in dialogue enormously decreased the violence of his disarmament campaign. Unfortunately, a hard line of resistance remained and too often that hard line of resistance must be militarily defeated, and perceive itself to be beaten, before true security can be achieved. Ultimately, military leaders must understand their enemy and the nature of the resistance and craft a strategy that effectively eliminates that resistance among the opposing leadership as much as the common citizen. Most importantly, leaders must be willing to adopt new strategies when initial strategies fail to achieve results.

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