

History Textbooks: “Theirs” and “Ours”

A Rebellion or a War of Independence?

By JOHN DEROSE

WAS IT THE “Philippine-American War” or the “War of Philippine Independence”? Was Emilio Aguinaldo a “rebel leader” or the “President” who led the Filipinos in the war against the United States?

For the past 12 years, I have tried to help my 11th-grade students view U.S. history critically from multiple perspectives. Most of my students are white suburban high school juniors, but my classes also include some African American students who come from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds and generally come to our school from the city.

While I use primary sources and other historians’ interpretations, I continually search for sources that go beyond the mostly benign representations of U.S. actions overseas, which have dominated textbooks for generations. This is not just academic; how students regard U.S. conduct in the past influences how they view the exercise of U.S. power today.

Therefore, when I read Dana Lindaman and Kyle Ward’s recent book, *History Lessons: How Textbooks from Around the World Portray U.S. History*, I was excited to find textbook passages from countries that could help my students recognize that their texts are not impartial. *History Lessons* contains passages translated into English from textbooks around the world that describe many major historical events. The passages that have proved the most valuable are ones that directly challenge the accounts found in my students’ textbooks and provide them with a different way of seeing the same event. While

every account is not totally at odds with their own textbook, passages like the Filipino version of the Philippine-American War, the Cuban version of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Vietnamese



A girl protests in front of the U.S. embassy in Manila, Philippines, during a 2006 rally against ongoing U.S. intervention in the country. The sign behind her demands the return of the Balangiga church bells taken by U.S. troops as war booty in 1898.

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account of the Vietnam War—the Vietnamese call it the American War—have been invaluable in allowing my students to examine opposing historical perspectives.

Recently, I asked students to compare an account from their U.S. history textbook on the Philippine-American War with a Filipino textbook passage from *History Lessons* about the same event—called the War of Philippine Independence in the Filipino book. In order to help students unravel the perspectives presented in both nations’ textbook accounts, I first taught lessons that offered students a range of viewpoints on this event.

First, students watched the video, *Savage Acts*. This documentary depicts U.S. racism to help explain the expansionist policies to “civilize” the Philippines at the turn of the century. For instance, the video describes how 1,200 Filipinos were brought to the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair and placed on exhibit. One American observer said that she saw “the wild barbaric Igorots who eat dogs and are so vicious that they are fenced in. They thirst for blood and are the lowest type of civilization I saw.” With the prevalence of these racist attitudes, it is not surprising to hear U.S. Col. Frederick Funston say that the Filipinos “are as a rule an illiterate, semi-savage people who are waging war not against tyranny but against Anglo-Saxon order and decency.”

Savage Acts points out that after Filipinos expelled the Spanish, they established their own independent government. But instead of recognizing Filipino independence, the United States annexed the Philippines and sent troops to crush any resistance. The video examines these events from multiple points of view ranging from antiwar activists like Mark Twain to supporters of imperialism like President William McKinley and describes the camps where U.S. soldiers tortured Filipinos.

After the video, I gave students eight primary source documents representing an array of perspectives on U.S. annexation. These included

speech and article excerpts from McKinley, William Jennings Bryan, Sen. Alfred Beveridge, labor leader Samuel Gompers, the “Colored Citizens of Boston,” Filipino leader Emilio Aguinaldo, a Filipina activist named Clemencia Lopez, and a Filipino newspaper. I divided the class into eight groups and assigned each group one of the packet’s eight documents. Students wrote summaries and their own assessment of the strengths and limits of the document’s perspective. Then, one student from each group represented the perspective from his or her group’s assigned document in a panel discussion. (I borrowed this lesson idea from the website of the American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning, the organization that created the *Savage Acts* video. The website at <http://www.ashp.cuny.edu/video/fs-act1.html> includes all the documents.)

The eight students on the panel, representing the points of view in the documents, faced the rest of the class. I asked the student audience, representing McKinley, Aguinaldo, et al., to comment on or challenge other positions. It didn’t take long before “Clemencia Lopez” and the “Colored Citizens of Boston” confronted “President McKinley” and demanded that he justify how the United States could claim to spread “democracy” to the Philippines when U.S. women did not have the right to vote and our government sat idly while African Americans were lynched. “Emilio Aguinaldo” also argued against Sen. Beveridge’s viewpoint that Filipinos were incapable of self-government, suggesting that Filipinos deserved a chance to rule themselves. “Aguinaldo” also pointed out that Filipinos had already governed themselves in a republic prior to the U.S. takeover.

After this debate, students read and discussed excerpts from letters by American soldiers who fought against the Filipinos (also adapted from the American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning’s website—<http://www.ashp.cuny.edu/video/fs-act2.html>). The soldiers’ letters

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included extensive comments ranging from soldiers' descriptions of Filipinos as savages and expressions of satisfaction over killing them to statements of opposition to the U.S. action in the Philippines and condemning of the brutalities against Filipinos. For instance, according to an excerpt from one of the letters, Ellis Davis, a soldier from Kansas, wrote, "They (Filipinos) will never surrender until their whole race is exterminated. They are fighting for a good cause, and the Americans should be the last of all nations to transgress upon such rights. Their independence is dearer to them than life, as ours was in years gone by, and is today." Students saw that the term "American soldiers" included a wide range of individuals with sometimes conflicting points of view.

Offering students multiple perspectives on the U.S. involvement in the Philippines helped prepare them to compare the Filipino textbook account of the war to their textbook's description of this same event. My high school offers an Advanced Placement U.S. history course and a "regular" U.S. history course. I taught this lesson four different times in one day in a regular U.S. history course with a great deal of diversity in terms of students' academic success. In *History Lessons* students read about the Philippine-American War from a Filipino textbook, and from their own textbook, McDougal Littell's *The Americans: Reconstruction to the 21st Century*. After they finished reading both accounts, I asked students to list similarities and differences between the two passages. Then, I asked them to use their knowledge from our previous activities to describe significant perspectives or information that may have been left out of each textbook passage and to explain if they felt either of the textbooks offered a more adequate retelling of this event. Finally, I asked them to explain how reading both textbook passages will affect how they read historical accounts in the future.

Students observed some similarities. One student said that both U.S. and Filipino textbooks indicate, "Filipino citizens suffered" under U.S. occupation with American soldiers burning villages. Another pointed out, "both texts mention [Emilio] Aguinaldo as a Filipino leader." And one

student explained that both textbooks mention that Filipinos used "guerrilla tactics" when fighting U.S. soldiers.

At the same time, students observed differences. For example, one student thought that the Filipino textbook "glorifies Filipino (military) victories that the American text doesn't even mention." Another student said that the Filipino textbook referred to the Filipino leader as "President Aguinaldo" whereas their textbook described him as a "rebel leader." According to one student, our textbook claimed that "the Filipinos started the war, but the Filipino version says that the Americans started the war." Finally, a few students noticed that the Filipino textbook defined the event as "The War of Philippine Independence" and their textbook referred to it as "The Philippine-American War."

When we focused on missing information or slanted perspectives from the Filipino textbook, a number of students observed that the Filipino textbook offered an overly simplistic view of both Filipinos and Americans. One student wrote, "the Filipino textbook wants Americans to be seen as heartless devils." She supported her claim by pointing out a quote from the Filipino textbook that describes a town called Balangiga as "a peaceful little port off the southern tip of Samar" and highlighted an incident described in the Filipino text where American soldiers massacred villagers. Students recalled that in the letters we read, some American soldiers expressed disgust with the brutal treatment of Filipinos.

Students were equally critical when we discussed missing aspects from their own textbook. In particular, a number of students said that their textbook seemed limited in its portrayal of the brutality that American soldiers inflicted on Filipinos. For example, a student noted that *Savage Acts* briefly described a torture treatment where U.S. soldiers forced water down a person's throat; but their textbook did not mention torture.

While the U.S. textbook acknowledged that villages were burned and many Filipinos died of disease and malnutrition due to American soldiers' actions, the Filipino textbook and some of the soldiers' letters seemed to highlight how

vicious and racist some American soldiers were. Finally, a number of students pointed out that their textbook, contrary to the material in the Filipino textbook, never mentions that a U.S. soldier fired without provocation the first shot to begin the war.

I asked whether either textbook provided a more authentic retelling of the event. Many students commented that both textbook accounts were equally limited and authentic in their presentations. However, I wanted students to analyze the limitations in greater depth, and I challenged them to consider the war's portrayal by highlighting particular words, phrases, and omissions from each textbook. Suddenly students' comments became more precise and less neutral. For example, I asked students which title, "President" or "rebel leader," was more adequate in representing Emilio Aguinaldo. One student remembered from *Savage Acts* and our panel discussion role play that Filipinos had already begun to set up a republic prior to U.S. annexation. He argued that "President" was more accurate, and a number of students nodded in agreement. Similarly, some students contended that since the Filipinos had the desire, as expressed by each "Emilio Aguinaldo" in our panel discussion, to become independent from both Spain and the United States, the phrase "War of Philippine Independence" was a more accurate title for the conflict.

A few students also commented that contrary to their own textbook, the Filipino textbook did a much better job of describing the way the war began by not only explaining that Americans initiated the military conflict but also even citing the name of the American soldier who fired the first shot. One student wrote, "Our textbook justifies our invasion by" calling the actions of the Filipinos "a rebellion."

Students acknowledged that their textbook connected the hypocrisy of the United States fighting a war to spread democracy while maintaining racial segregation at home. Students representing the "Colored Citizens of Boston" pointed out that some African Americans refused to support the war since they were victims of racist violence in their own country, and this was acknowledged in their own textbook account.

The students' textbook even went as far as *Savage Acts* in pointing out that some African American soldiers formed alliances with Filipinos and a few even deserted to the Filipino side.

Finally, I asked if these activities would affect how they would read their U.S. history textbook in the future. One student noted that she would "realize that not every perspective is being presented." Another student added that it was crucial to consider multiple points of view about events to avoid blindly accepting the version of events passed on either in textbooks or the news media as if these were complete and unbiased.

Every history teacher has an obligation to offer students diverse perspectives about our nation's historical role in world affairs, including those that criticize U.S. policies. Our classrooms should be democratic spaces that help students think about history and current events beyond the tidy textbook narratives. How students view the past will shape how they view the present. Especially in this time of war and occupation, students need to seek a fuller story than is offered by mainstream media or official government sources. Without practice detecting limited perspectives in historical accounts, students will not be prepared to exercise the critical thought necessary to participate in a democracy.

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