

Discrepancies between Rhetoric and Realities: U. S. Commitments to Its Major Wars During the Last Hundred Years

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I. INTRODUCTION

I've never forgotten what I saw there [in Vietnam] and the bravery of so many young Americans. The price of freedom is sometimes high, but I've never believed that America should turn inward. . . .

In the last century, this nation more than any other freed the world from fascism and communism.

This quotation is taken from the acceptance speech Vice-President Al Gore made at the Democratic Convention on August 17, 2000 in Los Angeles. Speaking from his experience, he referred to the Vietnam War, and insisted that "We must always have the will to defend our enduring interests, from Europe, to the Middle East, to Japan and Korea" with armed forces that are "to be the best equipped, best trained, and best led in the entire world."¹

It seems to me that Gore was claiming that the United States had earned the status of a superpower by defeating Axis fascism and Soviet communism, and that he was determined to accept "the price of freedom" once again in the future in order to maintain this status. However, I

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wonder what he meant by “the price of freedom.” Was he specifically talking about the sacrifice paid by “the bravery of so many young Americans” who were sent to Vietnam? If so, what did he think about the many people that died and lost their homes and families in Vietnam during that destructive war? When he insisted that the United States had “freed the world from fascism and communism” in the last hundred years, did he think about how the United States had carried out that mission? What did the United States government advocate in order to “free the world from fascism and communism”? How did American soldiers fight on battlefields to fulfill their obligations?

In the twentieth-century, the United States has been involved in a series of major wars, from the Spanish-Cuban-Filipino-American War (1898–1902)² through the Gulf War in 1991 and including the Vietnam War that Gore mentioned in his speech to the Democratic Convention. Gore’s statement about America’s intention to maintain its status as a superpower in the twenty-first century seemed to be accepted at face value by many Americans. I find it necessary for the United States to look back on its history and reconsider her policy towards foreign peoples and nations sincerely and seriously before she claims to be a world leader. Actually, some historians have criticized American foreign policy in the past from different historical perspectives. For example, George F. Kennan in *American Diplomacy* described the moralistic-legalistic approach to the conduct of American foreign policy from the end of the nineteenth century. William A. Williams analyzed the driving force of American foreign policy with its emphasis on economic interests and characterized it as Open-Door Imperialism in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*.³ Both of these scholars were interested in the decision-makers of American foreign policies who created and put them into practice. On the other hand, Michael H. Hunt analyzed the self-righteous, ethnocentric aspect of ideology in American foreign policy that he felt was deeply rooted in the history of the United States.⁴

In this paper, however, I would like to analyze the rhetoric employed by each administration in justification of America’s wars, and the realities of how American soldiers fought these wars, and to reveal discrepancies between the two. In so doing, I will examine the racial aspect of the Spanish-Cuban-Filipino-American War, the two World Wars, and the Vietnam War, because this was an indispensable element in the U. S. commitments to all of these wars.

II. THE SPANISH- CUBAN-FILIPINO-AMERICAN WAR

Cuban insurgents began their armed struggle against the Spanish in 1895. They made an effort to arouse sympathy among Americans and to spread propaganda for their cause of independence. In response to the rebellion, the Spanish government dispatched General Valeriano “Butcher” Weyler, who instituted a harsh concentration camp policy designed to prevent the activities of the Cuban guerrillas. Consequently, thousands of Cubans including women and children died of hunger and disease in the camps.⁵ Such atrocities in Cuba, which were sensationally reported by the yellow press in the United States, stimulated Americans to support their cause, “Cuba Libre.”⁶ Under these circumstances, in March 1897 when William McKinley was inaugurated president of the United States, he implicitly referred to America’s attitude toward the armed hostility in Cuba. He proclaimed, “We want no wars of conquest; we must avoid the temptation of territorial aggression.”⁷ The president did not appear to be giving serious consideration to U. S. intervention at this time.

However, McKinley changed his mind, and sent a war message to Congress on April 11, 1898. The historian Robert L. Beisner states that the president “did want what only war could provide—an end to violence in Cuba” for several reasons. The president mainly aimed to restore America’s economic interests on the island and to ease domestic tension in the 1890s by leading the country into the war.⁸ However, in justifying a war against Spain, the president proclaimed that “the war in Cuba must stop” “[i]n the name of humanity, in the name of civilization, in behalf of endangered American interests which give us the right and the duty to speak and to act.”⁹ In response to his request, Congress passed a joint resolution, without recognizing the rebels’ belligerency, that declared Cuban independence and authorized military intervention by the United States. The resolution, however, added an amendment proposed by Senator Henry M. Teller denying America’s intention to “exercise sovereignty, jurisdiction, or control” over Cuba.¹⁰ The McKinley administration emphasized humanitarian rhetoric in the war with Spain, but at the same time it showed its intention to secure American interests on the island.

John Hay, the secretary of state, termed America’s war with Spain a “splendid little war,” without serious casualties on the American side. On May 1, Admiral George Dewey crushed the Spanish fleet at the Bay of Manila, and the president immediately afterwards ordered American

troops to embark in preparation for occupation of the Philippines. Taking advantage of the news of the naval victory in the Far East, McKinley proposed that Congress annex Hawaii as a necessary stepping stone en route to Manila and China to protect the U. S. interest in Asian markets.¹¹ Some of the opponents of the Hawaiian annexation emphasized the racial diversity of the population including Japanese and Chinese that were believed to be inferior to Anglo-Saxon. However, the McKinley administration reminded Congress that Hawaii had been governed by a small group of American ancestry to the exclusion of the Asian population since the Republic of Hawaii was founded in 1894. The joint resolution passed in June.¹²

The government for the Territory of Hawaii extended Chinese Exclusion to the islands, and limited U. S. citizenship mainly to white people who used to be citizens in the Republic of Hawaii. Consequently, Asiatic immigrants were excluded from the franchise by the definition of citizenship. Besides, property qualifications were imposed for voters and candidates for the Congress of Hawaii. A Southern legislator characterized these restrictions in Hawaii as “very like ours” that disenfranchised freed African Americans in the South in the latter part of the nineteenth century.¹³

As for the treatment of Cuba, the McKinley administration neither consulted with the Cubans, who had been comrades-in-arms during the war, in the peacemaking negotiations with Spain, nor made public how it would deal with the island itself.¹⁴ One Cuban general was furious about the exclusion of the Cubans from the process, insisting, “I will never accept that our country be considered as conquered territory.”¹⁵ In the annual message of December 1898, McKinley declared that the United States would help the Cubans to build a “free and independent government,” but he also warned that American military rule would persist until “complete tranquillity” and a “stable government” was established on the island.¹⁶ Elihu Root, the secretary of war, led the way toward the creation of a United States protectorate over Cuba. His policy was based on the understanding that “backward peoples” were not qualified for autonomy, and therefore they should be taught “how to become self-governing citizens of a free state.”¹⁷ General Leonard Wood was appointed the military governor of the island in 1899 to implement this objective. Wood also believed from his experiences in the war that the Cubans were not ready to govern themselves. He reported that the Cuban army was “made up very considerably of black people, only par-

tially civilized, in whom the old spirit of savagery has been more or less aroused by years of warfare.”¹⁸

The idea of a protectorate was applied to Cuba in the form of the Platt Amendment. The amendment authorized the United States to intervene in domestic affairs and to secure coaling or naval stations in Cuba. Wood successfully forced the Cubans to accept the Platt Amendment as an appendix to their constitution by threatening to continue the military occupation. There was little the Cubans could do to oppose the U.S. policy toward them.¹⁹ Consequently, the McKinley administration was able to avoid a risky second colonial war in Cuba, at a time when it was concerned about news of America’s atrocities in the Philippines that had begun in early 1899.²⁰ In addition, the government justified the Cuban protectorate policy to ensure American interests on the grounds that the Cubans were racially inferior, and therefore were not civilized enough to adopt self-government.

The comments issued by the McKinley government leaders were common in American society in their association of darkness of skin color with racial inferiority, even after African Americans were freed from slavery as a result of the Civil War in the mid-nineteenth-century. The nativism aroused by new immigrants prevailed in the North, as the discriminatory Jim Crow system did in the South at the turn of the century.²¹ According to the historian Michael H. Hunt, Americans ranked other peoples from a racially hierarchical point of view. They put white Americans of Anglo-Saxon heritage on the top of the ranking, and placed African Americans and Native Americans at the bottom. In addition, they located other races such as Latins and Asians in between. Consequently, white Americans felt destined to educate racial “inferiors,” in correspondence with their concept of racial hierarchy. This concept of a racial hierarchy “powerfully shaped the way the nation [the United States] deals with other peoples” and it constituted an essential part of America’s justification for and practice of its tutelage of racial “inferiors.”²²

While the McKinley administration had started the war with Spain in the name of civilization and humanity, it also evoked the same rhetoric to acquire all of the Philippines. The president explained that “there was nothing left for us [the United States] to do but take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and Christianize them,” through a program of benevolent assimilation, because the Filipinos were “unfit for self-government.”²³ Therefore, he was determined to impose the principles and rules of American style government “for the sake of their liberty and

happiness, however much they may conflict with the customs or laws of procedure with which they are familiar.”²⁴ Senator Orville H. Platt strongly endorsed the president’s position by asking, “[D]oes not the finger of God unmistakably point to the civilization and uplifting of the Orient, to the development of its people, to the spread of liberty, education, social order, and Christianity there through the agency of American influence?”²⁵

Why did McKinley decide to acquire all of the Philippines? There were several reasons for his decision, including his perception that the Filipinos could not run their own country. For instance, the historian Thomas A. McCormick interprets the acquisition in the context of protecting American interests in Asia, where European powers were competing with each other to secure their own interests.²⁶ Nevertheless, McKinley tried to justify his decision in the name of humanitarian rhetoric with an emphasis on America’s sense of itself as a nation with a destiny granted by God. It is small wonder that “imperialism” did not constitute the “paramount issue” in the presidential election in 1900 despite the robust movement of anti-imperialists against the addition of overseas territory.²⁷

In the Philippine Islands, on the other hand, Emilio Aguinaldo, who had led the Filipino resistance movement against Spain, announced the independence of the Republic of the Philippines, and decreed the establishment of a provisional government in 1899. Resolutions protesting the annexation of the Philippines to the United States were passed in various regions throughout the islands. Aguinaldo, the president of the government, tried to persuade the McKinley government to recognize the independence of his country, but his attempt ended in failure. Consequently, the American-Philippine War broke out in February 1899.²⁸ When he heard the news, a Chinese diplomat criticized the U. S. government by saying that “a truly civilized nation should respect the rights of other societies, and refrain from stealing other men’s property, or imposing upon others unwelcome beliefs.” But his voice did not reach either the administration or the public that believed that western values were the most preferable, and must prevail.²⁹

Although the McKinley administration proclaimed a lofty rhetoric of civilization, it flatly imposed violent policies on the insurgents in the Philippines. The United States government dispatched 120,000 soldiers in total during the three-year armed conflict with the Filipinos. Most of the regiments were from the western states, “where memories of Indian

wars were strongest.” Twenty-six out of the thirty generals who served on the islands had experience with Native Americans after the Civil War.³⁰ The following letter exemplified how American soldiers fought against Filipino guerrillas. “We continually found their [Philippine] barracks and hidden food in the most unexpected and remote hiding places. We burned hundreds of small barracks and shelters as fast as they could construct them. We destroyed their clothing and supplies and pursued them so persistently that they finally ceased to stay more than twenty-four hours in one place.”³¹

Nevertheless, Root was able to insist that the American soldier “is the advance guard of liberty and justice, of law and order, and peace and happiness.”³² Root also believed that those who possessed the ability to govern must rule the “inferiors,” and categorized the Filipinos as such.³³ This is probably because he had been immersed in a racially hierarchical society, and he justified the pacification of the Filipino independence movement from the standpoint of America’s duty to extend civilization to “inferiors.”

American soldiers exhibited severe racial contempt and prejudice towards Filipinos and called them “goo goo” or “darkey.” One American lieutenant was heard to swear that he would like “to kill every Goddam goo goo in town.”³⁴ They were also insensitive to barbarities toward the Filipinos. A letter written by a soldier describes an atrocious method of fighting against Aguinaldo’s troops: “We shot at every human being that came within range—paying no attention to white flags.”³⁵ Another lieutenant wrote: “It is great fun for the men to go on ‘nigger hunts.’ The air would be delightful were it not for the odor from dead niggers which have been left unburied.”³⁶ Moreover, it was revealed that American soldiers tortured Filipino insurgents to get information with the “water cure,” in which they forced them to drink an excessive amount of water till they became informants, or unconscious, or, worst of all, dead.³⁷ These were the realities of the war on the battlegrounds for “uplifting” the Philippines.

The atrocities of the American-Philippine War had already been carried out against Native Americans in the past. Living in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains, Native Americans tenaciously made attempts to protect their land against the invasion of white settlers, railroad builders, and miners after the Civil War, but their efforts ended in failure. They repeatedly lost bloody wars with the U. S. Army, including the infamous Massacres of Sand Creek and the Wounded Knee Creek, and were forced

into reservations toward the end of the nineteenth century. The Dawes Act of 1887, which imposed individual ownership of the land on Native Americans, represented the final victory of the United States government.³⁸

As the policy of recruiting generals familiar with Indian wars for duty in the American-Philippine War suggested, the McKinley administration intended to deal with the Filipinos as the previous administrations had dealt with Native Americans. It is small wonder that responding to a charge of atrocities by United States troops in the Philippines,³⁹ Theodore Roosevelt admitted that such incidents “happened hundreds of times in our warfare against the Indians.” Moreover, he saw the American position there as being exactly parallel with its expansion on the North American continent, and asserted that if whites were “morally bound to abandon the Philippines, we were also morally bound to abandon Arizona to the Apaches.”⁴⁰ Roosevelt’s statement explicitly demonstrated the close relationship between U. S. government policy toward Native Americans in the nineteenth century and the pacification of the Filipino fighting for their independence. He justified atrocities abroad by comparing them with those of the Indian wars at home, and McKinley and Roosevelt won the presidential election in 1900 while the war in the Philippines was still in progress.

III. THE TWO WORLD WARS

In 1914 when World War I began in Europe, Woodrow Wilson proclaimed to the public America’s neutrality “in thought as well as in action.”⁴¹ But as severe battles continued in Europe, Wilson made public his plans to mediate a just peace by pleading for “peace without victory” in January, 1917. His proposal was not accepted by the warring powers.

In April 1917, Wilson asked Congress for a war declaration based on grievous violation of the neutral rights of the United States. Especially, Wilson characterized the German government’s unrestricted submarine warfare against commerce as “a warfare against mankind.” At the same time, Wilson interpreted World War I as “the culminating and final war for human liberty,” expecting it to establish “the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities,” and to secure “their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or

weak.”⁴² The principles advocated in this speech constituted the rhetoric of U. S. intervention in World War I, and also set the basis for the Fourteen Points designed for the post-war world order.

Wilson announced in January 1918 the Fourteen Points in order to counter the revolution in Russia and European imperialism and to propose a post-war world order. The program included references to open diplomacy as opposed to secret treaties and alliances, disarmament, and a new league of nations to ensure peace in the future. The historian Akira Iriye pointed out that although these ideas had been already advocated, Wilson’s contribution lay in putting them together in a comprehensive agenda for peace.⁴³ Especially, Wilson regarded the creation of the League of Nations as the “keystone” of the Fourteen Points to make the world safe for democracy.⁴⁴ This was also Wilson’s proposal of “American national interest in liberal-internationalist terms.”⁴⁵

However, Wilson was forced to compromise with the Allied powers in order to save the peace conference and obtain their agreement to establish the League of Nations. The principle of national self-determination was not strictly applied for the readjustment of national boundaries in Europe because the territorial provisions were in reality crucial to the warring governments.⁴⁶ Despite the clause of respect for colonial peoples in the program, neither was the idea of self-determination practiced in relation to European colonies overseas. The victorious great powers decided to take over German colonies abroad under the pretext of a mandate by the League of Nations. In addition, Wilson chose to accept Japan’s insistence that it should stay in Shantung, a former German sphere of influence in China, in disregard of Chinese sovereignty.⁴⁷ These examples illustrate how Wilson’s democratic principles were refused by the great powers. His rhetoric of democracy for the world ran counter to global political realities.

At the same time, Wilson could not persuade Congress and the American people to accept his proposal for establishing the League of Nations. Especially, Article Ten in the Covenant was a major target for opponents, as it seemed to bind the United States into acting with the imperial European countries regardless of its own interests. It also seemed to violate the power of Congress to declare war under the pretext of collective security.⁴⁸ In other words, Wilson could not convince Congress and the American people of his vision that the international organization would function as the “keystone” for making the world

safe for democracy. His rhetoric of “defense of democracy” failed in the United States because of the lack of national consensus among Americans.

There was another response to the Covenant of the League of Nations. The Japanese delegate at the conference proposed an amendment to the Covenant of the League declaring equality of every race, that is, “just treatment in every aspect, making no distinction, either in law or in fact, on account of . . . race or nationality.”⁴⁹ A Japanese newspaper in Tokyo appealed to Wilson, as one who preached the principle of equality of nations and peoples. The paper argued that “If the discrimination wall is to remain standing, President Wilson will have spoken of peace, justice, and humanity in vain, and he would have proved after all only a hypocrite.”⁵⁰ Given the fact that Japan had presented the Chinese government with the Twenty-one Demands in 1915, which would virtually have violated Chinese sovereignty, the proposal of racial equality was not taken seriously by the great powers. In political cooperation with them, Wilson, who was chairperson of the conference, declared the unanimity of the attendees against admitting the clause, and prevented Japan’s proposal from being inserted in the covenant.⁵¹ It might be possible to say that his decision at the conference reflected his racial prejudice against minorities in the United States. For example, the movie “The Birth of a Nation” with its strong racism against African Americans, was first run in 1915. Madison Grant’s book entitled *The Passing of the Great Race* was published in 1916 and became popular. In this, Grant admired Anglo-Saxon stock and criticized the new immigrants whose bloodstream would debase Americans of the main stream.⁵² The restriction of immigrants was established by a literacy test during the war. In an American society of this mood, Wilson favored the idea of restricting Japanese immigrants when it appeared in California in 1912, saying: “Their lower standard of living as laborers will crowd out the white agriculturalist and is, in other fields, a most serious industrial menace.”⁵³ Wilson also regarded African Americans as backward, and he did nothing to change Princeton’s hostility toward black students while he was the president there from 1902 to 1910. After he was elected president of the United States, he gradually introduced wholesale segregation into federal departments without official orders.⁵⁴

As for the rhetoric of equality of peoples and nations, Wilson took initiatives to refuse the Japanese proposal, but no great opposition was aroused to his attitude in the United States where a racial hierarchy of

white superiority was predominant in the progressive movement. Unlike the case of Article Ten in the Covenant, Americans apparently agreed to Wilson's opposition to the insertion of the racial-equality clause in the Covenant, even though the United States did not join the League of Nations.

The rhetoric of democracy was again employed by the Roosevelt administration when the United States entered World War II. The war aims stated in the "Atlantic Charter" of August 1941 represented the Wilsonian principles. The Charter called for freedom of the seas, self-determination and support for democracy, international economic cooperation, free trade and equal access to resources, and "the abandonment of the use of force" in favor of a "permanent system of general security."⁵⁵

The United States became involved in World War II with the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. The air raid convinced Americans that Japan was a "lawless nation" that had betrayed the United States, which had been negotiating in good faith.⁵⁶ An admiral of the American navy was so outraged about the attack that he rallied his men under such slogans as "Kill japs, kill japs, kill more japs." Moreover, the American people remembered the air strike as the symbol of the treacherous Japanese.⁵⁷

This memory set the foundation for racial propaganda during the war and lasted until the end of the war. For example, as the historian John W. Dower has pointed out, racial slang like "Jap" was routinely used in the daily press and major magazines. Besides, racial contempt of Japanese was displayed by "nonhuman or subhuman representation" such as animals, reptiles, or insects. They included "monkeys, baboons, gorillas, dogs, mice and rats, vipers and rattlesnakes, cockroaches, vermin," among which the most common caricature was the monkey or ape.⁵⁸ On the battlefields, American soldiers treated Japanese counterparts as nonhuman. For instance, Charles A. Lindbergh, a well-known isolationist before the war, who visited U.S. forces based in New Guinea, noted down the atrocities he had heard about. He wrote in his diary, "It was freely admitted that some of our soldiers tortured Jap prisoners and were as cruel and barbaric at times as the Japs themselves. Our men think nothing of shooting a Japanese prisoner or a soldier attempting to surrender. They treat the Japs with less respect than they would give to an animal, and these acts are condoned by almost everyone."⁵⁹ William Manchester, a popular American writer, also recorded the same kind of

outrageous acts that had taken place in Okinawa. The author put on record in his memoir that an American commander had “snatched up a submachine gun and unforgivably massacred a line of unarmed Japanese soldiers who had just surrendered.”⁶⁰

Another massacre was conducted in August 1945, when the Truman administration dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Although there are controversies among scholars concerning the reasons for the dropping of these bombs, racial prejudice against Japanese and reprisal for the sudden attack on Pearl Harbor are among them.⁶¹ Truman was concerned about the killing of children and women by the nuclear bombs, and avoided using the bomb on Kyoto and Tokyo, but he believed that “the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless, and fanatic.”⁶² Truman also confessed that “When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast. It is most regrettable but nevertheless true.”⁶³ He even regarded the dropping of the atomic weapon as “the greatest thing in history.” His justification for using the atomic bombs on the Japanese cities was based on his concept of the Japanese being a “beast.” According to the public opinion poll taken on August 8, 85 percent of Americans approved Truman’s decision, in the hope of ending the war.⁶⁴ Consequently, Americans remembered World War II as a “good war,” fought to defend democracy from Axis fascism.⁶⁵

These examples of barbarities on the battleground were far from the rhetoric of democracy advanced by the Roosevelt administration when it entered World War II. Besides, they were also reminiscent of atrocities that had been committed by American soldiers against the Filipinos during the American-Filipino War. The practice of giving contemptuous names to Asian enemies was also inherited from the previous war with Asians in the Philippines. The sense of racial superiority held by Americans appeared in the conduct of such outrages against Asians, and it also helped them to justify their atrocities during the war against what they ranked as the inferior races.

In the meantime, another event took place that showed racial discrimination against those of the Japanese ancestry, including those holding U.S. citizenship. After the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt of the Western Defense Command took the initiative in carrying out the mass removal of Japanese Americans living in the coastal area, on the pretext of “military necessity.” Earl Warren, then Attorney General of California, was a major advocate of their internment and evacuation, saying that “the Japanese situation as it exists in this state

today may well be the Achilles' heel of the entire civilian defense effort."⁶⁶ Roosevelt had received a report which concluded that they were "90 to 98 percent loyal to the United States," and that they would pose no threat to American security by sabotage or by espionage.⁶⁷ Although there were some officials who were opposed to the internment, Roosevelt, who was himself motivated by racial bias, signed Executive Order 9066 in response to the anti-Japanese chorus and war hysteria fears of another attack from Japanese troops.⁶⁸ Germans and Italians on the west coast were not subject to the relocation policy. The decision to intern only the Japanese Americans reflected the history in which they "were excluded from trade unions, went to segregated schools, lived in segregated neighborhoods, and generally were barred from entry into non-Japanese communities."⁶⁹ In this sense, the practice of internment showed the culmination of anti-Japanese feelings based on racial prejudice, and it lasted until the end of the war. Although some Japanese Americans brought the U. S. government to court for its violation of the constitutional rights of citizenship, they were turned down by the Supreme Court of the United States.⁷⁰

On the other hand, the Roosevelt administration conveniently decided in 1943 to repeal the Chinese exclusion legislation mainly in order to secure their cooperation in waging war against Japan. Japanese propaganda since the start of the war had condemned the United States for its discriminatory laws and mistreatment of the Chinese, and advocated Asia for Asians under the leadership of Japan.⁷¹ When Madame Chiang Kai-shek visited the United States, she gave a speech before Congress in which she emphasized that the abrogation of the laws would boost Chinese morale and the Chinese war effort against Japanese forces. At the same time, there was severe criticism among Asian Americans of "the contradiction between American racist practice at home and proclamations of principles abroad." Under such political pressure, Roosevelt sent a proposal to Congress for making the Chinese exclusion unlawful, and insisted that "we can correct a historic mistake and silence the distorted Japanese propaganda." Congress repealed the exclusion laws and provided an annual quota for Chinese immigrants in 1943 just as European counterparts were admitted. But the number of the quota was only 105, and the naturalization procedure for U.S. citizenship was complicated.⁷² Consequently, the Roosevelt administration was able to "silence" critical opinion toward the government as a result of the abolition of the Chinese exclusion. He felt satisfied with his policy of cor-

recting “a historical mistake,” and saw no need to “correct” the rhetoric of democracy to rally wartime efforts at home.

III. THE VIETNAM WAR

After World War II, the United States had an opportunity to realize the Wilsonian vision of the world order based on the liberal capitalistic system described in the “Atlantic Charter.” Actually, Truman stressed the indivisibility of peace, freedom and free trade in the postwar world order, and embarked upon the enterprise in pursuance of Roosevelt’s vision. In the field of international economy, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were established under the leadership of the United States. In addition, the United Nations was also organized in New York to keep the world safe and stable. However, the Soviet Union refused to join these international institutions, except for the UN, in order to maintain its socialist economy, and to keep eastern and central Europe under its control for security reasons. Other conflicting elements also contributed to the beginning of the Cold War.⁷³

Under these circumstances, Truman announced in March 1947 a containment policy, which was to form the basis of American foreign policy in the post-war period. Truman insisted that two ways of life existed in the world. One was “based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression.” The other one was “based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority,” and “relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms.” The president declared that it must be the policy of the United States to assist “free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation” by communist forces.⁷⁴ This was a manifestation of the rhetoric of anti-communism, and a declaration of the Cold War against communist forces in order to defend the freedom of the people in the free world.

Truman fought against communism by promoting liberal democratic society in the world, both in Europe and in Asia. In June 1947 the United States began the Marshall Plan in order to help the impoverished European countries recover. In so doing, according to the historian Michael J. Hogan, American leaders successfully “sought to recast Europe in the image of American neocapitalism” based on free trade and a “corpo-

ratism” approach to the market, meaning close cooperation between labor, capitalists, and government. The plan set the stage for the security and recovery of Europe,⁷⁵ and also helped the United States maintain the economic prosperity of its society which had resulted from its wartime efforts made under the slogan of “arsenal for democracy.” In addition, the Truman administration was able to create the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in hopes of promoting open and free trade in the international community. Under the rhetoric of anti-communism, the United States was able to implement the vision inherited from Wilson. The justification for the Cold War was accepted not only by European countries but also by Americans at home.

In Asia, the situation after World War II was somewhat different from the one in Europe. After Japanese military forces were defeated in Indochina, while the Viet Minh led by Ho Chi Minh founded the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the French returned to resume control over their old colony and create the State of Vietnam. The Truman administration regarded the French effort with distaste, but as the Cold War intensified in Europe, it granted diplomatic recognition to the French puppet government in hopes of blocking a communist victory in Asia. In 1946, armed conflict between the two countries in Vietnam broke out, and continued until 1954 when the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu.⁷⁶

Dwight D. Eisenhower believed that “Indochina was the first in a row of dominoes,” and emphasized, “If it fell its neighbors would shortly thereafter fall with it, and where [would] the process end?” Consequently, the United States established the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization for regional collective security, in addition to giving military aid to South Vietnam in order to hold the line against communism in Asia. Moreover, the president was eager to restore American “prestige in the Far East”⁷⁷ as a champion of the free world. The American commitment in Vietnam obviously constituted a part of the Cold War on a global scale.⁷⁸

John F. Kennedy who believed in the “domino theory” like his predecessor, formally made public the U.S. commitment to deterring the communist advance in Indochina.⁷⁹ His administration not only provided \$185 million to South Vietnam but had also dispatched by 1963 military advisers and 16,000 U.S. soldiers to counter revolutionary forces.⁸⁰ In August, 1964 in response to alleged North Vietnamese naval attacks on a U.S. warship, Lyndon B. Johnson asked Congress to allow the pres-

ident to use military force to confront communist aggression. In the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Congress considered the security of the Southeast Asia “vital” to U. S. “national interest,” and authorized the president “to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force” in order to assist allies in the area “in defense of its freedom.”⁸¹ In response to the government’s request, Congress gave the president almost unanimous consent to the proposal, and the American people also favored it by a great majority. The Johnson administration was able to obtain a blank check. It was a matter of time before it turned the armed conflict in Vietnam into an American war. In the process of increasing intervention in Vietnam, the United States employed the rhetoric of anti-communism which was supposedly aimed at protecting democratic countries and the freedom of their people. This stance of the U. S. government can be traced back to the Truman doctrine under the rhetoric of fighting against communism threatening democracy.

In February 1965, the Johnson administration began air strikes against North Vietnam in retaliation for U.S. soldiers having been killed by communist guerrillas. In addition, it dispatched more than four thousand ground troops to South Vietnam to engage themselves in battle against the National Liberation Front and North Vietnamese forces. The number of American ground forces steadily increased, reaching 380,000 by the end of 1966, and 450,000 by the end of 1967.⁸² The United States totally committed itself to the war, and kept on fighting a losing battle until 1973 when the cease-fire agreement was signed in Paris.

American leaders justified their policies toward Vietnam in the name of helping “free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation” by communist forces, as stated in the Truman doctrine. Therefore, they paid scant attention to the quality of the South Vietnamese government, how democratic it was, how responsive it was to the people, or how serious it was about promoting social and economic reforms in order to make the country democratic and stable. Under the rhetoric of anti-communism, the U. S. government neglected to assess seriously these aspects in the governance of the people by the South Vietnam government. On the contrary, it maneuvered the country by means of Vietnamese political and military leaders at the expense of the principle of self-determination.⁸³

At the same time under the rhetoric of defending the freedom of the people, the result of the U. S. intervention was to bring extraordinary misery to the Vietnamese. In referring to America’s commitment to the

Vietnam War, one should realize the damages that the long armed conflict imposed on the Vietnamese themselves and their society as a whole. According to a dictionary of the war, nearly two million Vietnamese, civilians and soldiers, were killed after the United States got involved the war, and about 57,000 American soldiers died. The prolonged war created several million refugees, which obviously tore apart the Vietnamese social structure. Between June 1965, when the United States started air strikes, and August 1973, when the cease-fire agreement was signed in Paris, the U. S. air force dropped more than six million tons of munitions on enemy positions. This number amounted to almost three times the total tonnage of explosives dropped during World War II. In addition, “Agent Orange” and other herbicides were used in order to defoliate the countryside on a wide scale. This caused not only a severe ecological impact on forests but also birth defects and other serious symptoms.⁸⁴ These destructive operations were put into practice in the name of defending the people in their fight for their freedom against communism.

How did American soldiers in Vietnam fight against the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam that Diem had labeled the Viet Cong—the Vietnamese equivalent of “Commie” in American English?⁸⁵ They also called the enemy “gook,” “dink,” or “slope,” derogatory terms used historically toward Asians. This kind of disdain for the Vietnamese was more than nominal. American soldiers in Vietnam did not treat their enemies as human beings. General William C. Westmoreland, Commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, once said, “In this war we’re using screwdrivers to kill termites because it’s a guerrilla war and we cannot use bigger weapons.”⁸⁶ An officer described them as “just like animals,” and sent a letter to his mother in which he depicted some of them as treacherous, acting one way in the daytime, but becoming Viet Cong at night like “dirty little rats.”⁸⁷ Moreover, another Vietnam veteran talked about his experience in the battlefield after he returned to the States: “I enjoyed the shooting and the killing. I was literally turned on when I saw a gook get shot.” “A GI was real. American get [sic] killed, it was a real loss. But if a gook get [sic] killed, it was like me going out here and stepping on a roach.”⁸⁸ Another officer regarded his search and destroy mission as “very successful” because the American soldiers “managed to kill a few probably innocent civilians, found a few caves and burned a few houses, all in a driving rainstorm.”⁸⁹

These atrocities were reminiscent of those that had been committed

by American soldiers during the American-Philippine War and in the Pacific theater of World War II. Their outrageous activities were conducted based on a sense of racial superiority over the Asians involved. Besides, there was a historical continuation between World War II and the Vietnam War in the sense that American soldiers treated the Asian enemies as subhuman like “the Japs” and “gook” and committed atrocities almost without feeling any guilt.⁹⁰

Some veterans admitted to cutting off the ears from dead bodies for souvenirs or proofs of the killing. A veteran described it a “trophy,” pointing out that “If a guy would have a necklace of ears, he was a good killer, a good trooper.”⁹¹ A soldier mentioned his own experience of cutting ears from dead enemies. He said, “I was enjoying the firefights and enjoying killing, and at one time I displayed as many as thirteen ears on this chain that I had hanging off my gear.”⁹² The mutilating of bodies was also practiced during World War II, and this represents another historical continuity of the racial hatred against Asians.

The most notorious massacre in Vietnam by American troops took place in My Lai in March 1968. An American company under the command of Lieutenant William Calley murdered more than four hundred villagers that did not fight back, including women and children. In the court martial conducted afterward, Calley was found guilty of murder, but the rest of the soldiers involved were either acquitted or dismissed. This was not an isolated event, but “commonplace to the way America fought the war” in Vietnam.⁹³ The same situation had been seen in Indian wars with the U. S. Army in the West. Several well-known massacres took place in the history of the conquest of Native Americans, and as the historian Richard Drinnon pointed out, there was a historical continuity between the Vietnam War and the Indian wars in the sense that both of them were racial wars.

In the meantime, in the domestic arena, the Johnson administration was eager to reform American society, by eliminating poverty and racial injustice in the 1960s while it was waging the Vietnam War. Students began to have doubts about the authority of universities and the establishment, and the movement for women’s liberation became more active. Moreover, African Americans became militant because of the deep-seated discrimination of white America against them, and many ghetto riots broke out in the period.

Support for the Vietnam War rose considerably during the last half of 1965 when the United States started waging a full-scale war, and this

trend continued into 1966. But dissenting voices began to emerge at home as the political confusion in South Vietnam remained unchanged and the number of U. S. casualties increased.⁹⁴ As a result of the Tet Offensive in the beginning of 1968, Americans were divided equally between supporters of the U. S. government and dissenters. The confrontation between them became serious as the military and political situation in South Vietnam grew increasingly worse. The Democratic Convention for the presidential nomination held in August was a vivid example of the lack of national consensus toward the Vietnam War being waged under the rhetoric of anti-communism.

In addition, the civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., despite his support for liberal reform policies of the Johnson administration at home, criticized the Vietnam War against the backdrop of race riots in American cities. He pointed out the connection between growing violence at home and abroad. The African American leader claimed, "Now it should be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present [Vietnam] war."⁹⁵

As the historian Richard Polenberg notes, it was reported that more than half of the African American soldiers stationed in Vietnam were opposed to the war because "it is a race war pitting whites against non-whites," or "they flatly don't want to fight against dark skin [sic] people."⁹⁶ As a result of ghetto riots and the ongoing Vietnam War, the impulse toward black nationalism became stronger. In other words, the concept of racial assimilation which had been promoted by liberals was being replaced by the idea of separatism between blacks and whites. Despite the rhetoric of freedom as opposed to communism, the Vietnam War conversely increased racial tension in American society.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have described how the United States committed itself to its major wars and how American combat soldiers fought its enemies on the battlefields during the last hundred years. In so doing, I focused on the rhetoric employed by the U. S. government officials. The McKinley administration advocated the extension of civilization to racially "inferior" peoples under the leadership of the United States. In waging the two World Wars, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt proclaimed the rhetoric of defense and diffusion of peace and prosperity in a democratic world. During the Vietnam War, the United States empha-

sized the rhetoric of anti-communism to defend the freedom of the people in order to remain committed to the war. The American people as well as the government leaders supported such lofty rhetoric in order to justify America's commitment to its respective wars.

However, what did the United States actually do in the shadow of its rhetorical justification for its wars? The McKinley administration imposed a protectorate on the Cubans and acquired the Philippines by suppressing the independence movement. It rationalized these suppressive policies on the ground that local peoples were unprepared for self-government because they were racial "inferiors." When the United States became involved in World War II, the Roosevelt administration, despite its slogan of defense of democracy, interned citizens of Japanese ancestry against the backdrop of anti-Japanese feelings that had been historically rooted in American society. The justification for this measure was military necessity. As the Cold War began in Europe, the U. S. government gradually became involved in Vietnam under the rhetoric of anti-communism. However, the very same rhetoric allowed the United States to do a great deal of damage to the Vietnamese and their society with air strikes, herbicides, and ground battles.

In addition, American soldiers committed atrocities toward the Asians involved in the respective wars under the concept of racial hierarchy, with white Americans at the top. In the war with Filipinos, American soldiers called them "goo," and killed and tortured them in addition to burning villages. They also called Japanese "Japs," and Vietnamese "gooks" in racially derogatory terms, and committed atrocities toward them without concern.

Why was it possible for American soldiers to commit such barbarities? The method of subjugating the enemies was inherited from the conquest policy toward Native Americans. In other words, the atrocities during the last hundred years toward Asians represented a historical consistency and continuity with the violent conquest policy of the past. In retrospect, the American people rationalized the atrocities in Asian countries by referring to them as something happened to Native Americans at home.

Strong racial prejudice against the peoples that Americans regarded as "inferior" characterized the discrepancies between the rhetoric of America's justification for the wars and the realities of the wars on the battlegrounds. Whenever it came to justifying wars and atrocities during wars involving Asians, white Americans were able to rationalize

them on the basis of the very same racial prejudice they showed toward all groups whom they considered “inferiors.” They shared the common concept of racial hierarchy. The sense of this self-righteous ethnocentrism, which has been prevalent in American society, served to disguise the discrepancies between the rhetoric and the realities of the respective wars.

In the mid-1990s, Robert S. McNamara, the secretary of defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, published *In Retrospect*, and mentioned eleven lessons that he suggested the United States should learn from the Vietnam War to avoid another “tragedy.” His major concern was to reflect how the leaders of the United States were dragged into the quagmire of the war. Consciously or unconsciously, McNamara did not take racial elements into consideration when he discussed the lessons from the war.⁹⁷ When Gore referred to the Vietnam War in the speech I quoted at the beginning of the paper, he did not say a word about the Vietnamese who had suffered most from the war.

How will Americans reconcile the rhetoric of war with the reality of underlying racism? In the twenty-first century, this will be a crucial topic not only for the understanding of American history but also for Americans themselves.

NOTES

¹ Al Gore, “The Speech: Gore Says Prosperity Must Be Shared with All,” *The New York Times* on the Web, August 18, 2000, <www.nytimes.com/library/camp/081800/gore-text.html>

² Recently, some historians changed the name of the Spanish-American War in 1898 to the War of 1898 or the Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War. Akira Takahashi, *Amerika Teikokushugi Seiritsushi no Kenkyu* (A Study of the Formation of American Imperialism) (Nagoya: Nagoya University Press, 1999), 15–53; John L. Offner, “Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War, 1898,” in Bruce W. Jentleson & Thomas G. Paterson eds., *Encyclopedia of U. S. Foreign Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), IV: 110–114; Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *The War of 1898: The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), xii.

³ George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951); William A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1958). For other analyses of American foreign policy from a historical perspective, see, for instance, Robert Dallek, *The American Style of Foreign Policy: Cultural Politics and Foreign Affairs* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983); Thomas J. McCormick, *America’s Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

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⁵ John L. Offner, *An Unwanted War: The Diplomacy of the United States and Spain over Cuba, 1895–1898* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 13.

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¹² Rubin F. Weston, *Racism in U. S. Imperialism: The Influence of Racial Assumptions on American Foreign Policy, 1893–1946* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), 56–73; Gavan Daws, *Shoal of Time: A History of the Hawaiian Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968), 285–290.

¹³ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 236; Daws, *Shoal of Time*, 293–295.

¹⁴ Offner, *An Unwanted War*, 194–224.

¹⁵ Quoted in Pérez, Jr., *The War of 1898*, 98.

¹⁶ Richardson ed., *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 6322–6323.

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²⁰ David Healy, *Drive to Hegemony: The United States in the Caribbean, 1898–1917* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 51.

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