

Book Review

Karnow, Stanley. *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1989.

“Three Centuries in a Catholic Convent and Fifty Years in Hollywood”: A Journalist's History of the American Colonial Period in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Stanley Karnow's *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines* thoroughly examined (a) the colonialist rule of the United States in the Philippines, (b) their achievements and blunders in the colony, and (c) their postwar neocolonial influence on the country. Moreover, a product of 4 years' research and frequent visits to the Philippines and the United States, Karnow's monograph discusses America's acquisition of the Philippines since 1898, the United States-Philippines "special relationship," and American efforts in remaking the colony according to their image, values, and government. His book is, primarily, a journalist's history in which he attempted to write that story while avoiding the errors of presentism. This review further traces (a) his assessment of the American colonial period in the Philippines, (b) his work's contribution in Philippine historiography, and (c) the application of John Mearsheimer's Theory of Offensive Realism to his underlying thesis.

Keywords: *Neocolonialism, US-Philippines Special Relationship, American Colonial Period, Offensive Realism*

About the Author

Stanley Abram Karnow (born February 25, 1925, in Brooklyn, New York) is an American journalist and historian, best known for his reportage and writings on the Vietnam War and Philippine History. After he had served as a weather observer and unit historian in the United States Army Air Forces in the China–Burma–India Theater of the Second World War in the Pacific from 1943–1946, he finished his Bachelor of Arts in European History and Literature in Harvard University in 1947. He then attended the Sorbonne, the University of Paris from 1947–1948, and the Ecole des Sciences Politiques from 1948–1949, also in Paris. Subsequently, he has also been a Nieman Fellow, Kennedy Fellow, and East Asia Research Center Fellow at Harvard, and a Poynter Fellow at Yale University.

Karnow began his journalistic career in Paris in 1950, as a Time Magazine correspondent. After covering Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, he went to Asia for Time and Life Magazine in 1959 and subsequently served as a reporter from there, for the London Observer, The Saturday Evening Post, The Washington Post, and NBC News. His books include Southeast Asia; Mao and China: From Revolution to Revolution (1972), a National Book Award nominee in 1973, and Vietnam: A History (1983), a book ahead of its time, for examining the war from multiple perspectives. Likewise, he was also co-author of books based on his years in Asia, including Asian-Americans in Transition (1992), Passage to Vietnam (1994), Mekong (1995), and Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War (1995). Produced in conjunction with his book on the Vietnam War is his Vietnam: A Television History series, the most successful program ever produced by public television, upon its telecast in 1983, from which he won six Emmy awards, as well as Dupont, Peabody, and Polk awards as chief correspondent for the PBS television series. He is also the recipient of two Overseas Press Club awards in 1966 and 1968, respectively, for newspaper reporting, and his 1989 companion documentary for In Our Image aired as The U.S. and the Philippines: In Our Image. The following year, he received his Pulitzer Prize for History for his book In Our Image. Finally, in 2002, he was the first recipient of the Shorenstein Journalism Award, given jointly by Harvard and Stanford universities, to recognize his reporting achievements in Asia.

Mr. Karnow died on a Sunday, January 27, 2013, at his home in Potomac, Maryland, at 87 due to congestive heart failure.

Sources

Karnow used primary and secondary sources to research Philippine history and its colonial experience under the United States. Although no bibliography exists in the book, he explained the three categories of “principal sources” he used, as indicated in the “Notes on Sources” section.

The first category is his experiences as a correspondent in Asia and Washington for thirty years (1959-1989). His firsthand observation and direct witnessing of the Philippines' events gave him a direct, personal, and contemporaneous source.

The second category is the more recent audio and visual interviews conducted for *In Our Image*, the television documentary series produced in tandem with the book (1984-1989). Karnow's frequent reporting trips to the Philippines and the United States at this time enabled him to personally converse and interact with notable personalities such as the Aquinos, the Marcoses, and American officials in Washington, among them, Admiral William Crowe (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under President Ronald Reagan), Frederick Brown (Senate Foreign Relations Committee), and Secretary of State George Schultz (1982-1989). After all, he described the Philippines in his book as a “journalist's paradise” in which he cannot recall that there was “a single instance of being denied an interview.” According to him, everybody was accessible even on brief notice, from presidents, politicians, business people, journalists, priests, lawyers, army officers, educators, and students, and that these meetings would often turn from lunches and dinners, to long weekends in the Philippines. It is in these interviews that Karnow was able to gather invaluable and voluminous notes. Aside from the advantage of transcribing interviews, another benefit from this move is that:

Like a diary, they enabled me [Karnow] to recapture the past as I observed and felt it at the time, rather than relying on my own fading memory. They also served as a record of remarks and attitudes of the individuals I interviewed, many of whom may have forgotten or revised their earlier views.¹

Also, whenever possible, he cited the names of people he interviewed for the book. However, Karnow did not cite some personalities' names as sources for

¹ Stanley Karnow, *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1989), 453.

confidentiality reasons. This issue of anonymity may lead the reader to reasonably doubt the truthfulness and authenticity of the text and its corresponding source, but given that some of the author’s interviewees are from clandestine organizations (i.e., CIA) and high government offices that refused direct citations on record, this minor dilemma in Karnow’s narrative is excusable.

The third and final category is the vast body of published and unpublished literature on Philippine history. Karnow contemporaneously selected these sources with curators and personal friends, such as Joan Howard (curator of the U.S. National Archives–Nixon Presidential Materials Project) and F. Sionil Jose. These sources can range from documents the author researched in the different archives in Washington and Metro Manila, such as the U.S. National Archives’ collection on J.R.M. Taylor’s *The Philippine Insurrection Against the United States*, the Library of Congress’s files on William Howard Taft’s private letters, the U.S. Army Military History Research Center’s documents and photographs of the early American intervention in the Philippines, the University of Texas–Lyndon Johnson Library, the Ayala Museum, the Lopez Foundation, and the Ateneo de Manila University–American Historical Collection’s *The Bulletin*, to the general histories and specific books on specific periods published from the Spanish colonization to Cory Aquino’s administration.

Karnow employed the descriptive-analytic-narrative approach.² Firstly, the descriptive approach was used to describe the event, place, and people based on the book’s sources.³ Secondly, the analytic approach was utilized by analyzing and interpreting all gathered data; primary sources (including interviews) were used as firsthand material, and secondary sources corroborated and supplied the missing information.⁴ Finally, the narrative approach was employed to reconstruct a new interpretation of the events through narration and connection of the pertinent facts.⁵

On the one hand, the descriptive approach is a discourse on the American intervention and colonization in the Philippines, how they accomplished the enterprise, and the Filipinos and their reaction towards American rule. On the

² M.C. Lemon, *Philosophy of History: A Guide for Students* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 294–301.

³ Lemon, *Philosophy of History*, 294–295.

⁴ Lemon, *Philosophy of History*, 295–298.

⁵ Lemon, *Philosophy of History*, 298–301.

other hand, the analytic approach analyzes the country's American occupation: the real reasons that propelled the Americans in the Philippines, the realistic achievements and severe shortcomings of their colonial administration, and the truth about the former colony's political independence. Lastly, the author narrated the relevant facts and revisionist arguments to uncover the United States' legacy in the Philippines and the results of America's attempts to remake the Philippines "in its image."

Theory

Although not explicitly stated in Karnow's book, John Mearsheimer's Theory of Offensive Realism can be used and applied to explain the author's premise in the book. A prominent theory in Political Science, Offensive Realism, explains America's foreign policy, the means to achieve that policy, and America's assertion of the previous status quo through indirect means.

In general, Realism's primary interest is a nation's self-preservation; the nation that adheres to this principle is working to increase its power alone, and the country that manages to have more power will survive as it can easily eclipse the achievements of less powerful nations. Instead of implementing the traditional European-style colonialism, Imperialism was instead used to accomplish the Realist theory's objectives. Imperialism is a manifestation of the balance of power and how nations try to achieve a favorable change in the status quo, aiming to decrease their strategic and political vulnerability.⁶ In cases where the colony achieved political independence, an indirect intervention can be utilized, characterized by the use or threat of force or coercion, to alter a political or cultural situation nominally outside the intervenor's moral or political jurisdiction.

By contrast, Mearsheimer further explained and diluted this concept by coming up with another Realist theory: Offensive Realism. A political scientist and a scholar of international relations himself, Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism Theory focuses on great powers because "these states have the largest impact on what happens in international politics" and the fortunes of all states "are determined primarily by the decisions and actions of those with the greatest capability."⁷ Additionally, this theory also assumes that states want to grab as

⁶ Mount Holyoke College, *Theories of Imperialism*, (Accessed May 24, 2020), <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pol116/imperial.htm>.

⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics: Updated Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 21.

much power as they can get, with hegemony as their ultimate goal.⁸ There are six primary concepts in Offensive Realism: First, the international system's natural state is anarchical – that sovereignty resides within states, and there is no higher ruling body or world government governing them. Second, states inherently possess some offensive military capability, giving them the possibility of inflicting damage, and ultimately, destruction towards each other. Third, states can never be sure about other state's intentions. It is impossible to know if a state will use its offensive capabilities against another state, and intentions (ranging from benign to hostile) can quickly change. Fourth, survival – territorial integrity and political autonomy – is the primary goal of the state. In other words, a state's security is the primary objective. Fifth, states are rational actors. They are knowledgeable in global politics, tend to draft short and long-term plans of foreign policies and conflicts, and are adept in outlining their strategic, operational, and tactical objectives. Sixth, states inherently possess other than military means of interacting with other states. In military circles, this means utilizing all national power instruments, with acronyms such as DIME (Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic) and MIDFIELD (Military, Informational, Diplomatic, Financial, Intelligence, Economic, Law, and Development).⁹

Applying Offensive Realism in Karnow's book, the United States of America, dreaming and aspiring to become a world power on the global stage, saw the Philippines as the stepping stone to that dream, and acquired it as its colony from its former master Spain, under the pretext of the “white man's burden” and the doctrine of “manifest destiny.” Economically, the colony also presented itself as a market for American surplus goods, and as an agricultural country to acquire vital raw materials. Upon the agreement of the colony's independence with the signing of the Treaty of General Relations on July 4, 1946, America sought to make a mockery of that independence by using neocolonialism: locking the country in the United States' economic orbit for its gain. Consequently, this move faked the country's autonomy even more, by using the economy as leverage, to virtually dictate Philippine foreign policy from Washington, and its politics regularly intervened by United States covert organizations, State Department officials, or even the President himself.

⁸ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 36-37.

⁹ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 45-46.

Content

The book first came into being in the author's mind when, as a foreign correspondent, Karnow first began to report from Asia in 1958. Immediately, he recognized the Philippines as:

... a country that for me differed drastically from any other in the [Pacific] region – or, indeed, from any I had previously covered in Europe, Africa or the Middle East. Here I was, in a former U.S. possession, immediately familiar to an American. Most of the people I initially met spoke Americanized English, and many had been educated in the United States or in American schools. They knew far more about the United States than I knew about the Philippines, as if they were some kind of lost American tribe that had somehow floated across the Pacific.¹⁰

Equally fascinated and curious about the new country he was covering, his observations eventually led to this book. After his first magnum opus *Vietnam: A History* in 1983, he started researching for his new book the following year, and flew no fewer than six times in the Philippines and the United States between 1984 and 1988. The end product is, as the book's reprint publisher The New Republic puts it, "an impressively researched study of an adventure in empire that dared not speak its name." Encompassing 400 years of Philippine colonial history and spanning fifteen chapters filled with insider stories, unheard-of events in Philippine history, and persuasive arguments about the truth of the American enterprise, Mr. Karnow first narrated the events, as well as the biographies of different personalities in the book, followed by an exquisite and masterful analysis of those events, and the conduct of the characters. The book addressed three critical questions that primarily outlined the book's main arguments: What propelled the Americans into the Philippines? What did they do there? What has been the legacy of their rule?¹¹

Histories written by journalists tend to be populist in style, opinionated, and sometimes ignorant of vital sources—a far cry from historians' standards. However, Mr. Karnow's background in history and professionalism got the better of him: he wrote a compelling and sometimes humorous account, while

¹⁰ Karnow, *In Our Image*, xi.

¹¹ Karnow, *In Our Image*, xi.

maintaining the standards of scholarship set by the discipline. As a graduate of history and a journalist, his sources – his observations, interviews with different personalities, and the vast published and unpublished references he read – were used to maximum efficiency, effectively reducing his personal biases in the narrative. Moreover, although he had a personal relationship with some of his interviewees, he did not let that relationship affect his reporting or his writing. Take, for example, his friendship with Ninoy Aquino. “Journalists should not befriend politicians,” said Karnow, “but I bent the rule for Ninoy.”¹² Morally speaking, Karnow was wrong in the first place to befriend a politician such as Ninoy, as this might affect his work and reputation as a reporter, through his connections with the senator. However, Karnow clarified that:

To say that I bent the journalistic rules by befriendning Ninoy Aquino does not mean that my dispatches about him were uncritical. I called the shots as I saw them and he, having been a newspaperman, understood my loyalty to my professional standards. He was also a seasoned politician who realized that he had to take the bitter with the sweet.¹³

The book has three major strengths and advantages over any book of the same subject. Firstly, the reader was informed about the lesser-known details and events missed by conventional books in Philippine History, and secondly, traditional views on specific events and personalities were debunked. He was one of the rare historians who called the Filipino–American conflict a “war” in the sense of the word, bravely put to writing the formidable influence of the CIA in Philippine affairs, and comprehensively detailed the steering of Philippine foreign policy from Washington. Moreover, he disclosed America's capitalistic attitude for confining the Philippines into its economic orbit, analyzed the real mindset of *Ilustrado* politicians during the American period, and explained MacArthur's paranoia and superiority complex. As if that was not enough, he was one of the early journalist–historians who courageously rectified the widespread view that Bataan and Corregidor delayed the Japanese conquest, reported the consequences of forbidding air bombing in Manila, and revealed the sham trial of Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita, for “ordering” the systematic destruction of the capital. Thirdly, America and her failed enterprise of self-duplication in the Philippines were given importance and postwar neocolonial influence.

¹² Karnow, *In Our Image*, 390.

¹³ Karnow, *In Our Image*, 472.

His main arguments can be synthesized into three points, which also happened to be the answers to the three critical questions his book raised: First, America's vision of glory towered over other interests, leading to the colonization of the Philippines, under the guise of the White Man's Burden and the Manifest Destiny. Second, while America endowed the Filipinos with universal education, a common language, public hygiene, roads, bridges, and democratic institutions, it came in exchange for dependent independence, a limping Philippine industry, and an agricultural country reliant on the American market. Third, despite America's development of the colony, the Philippines' status as a neocolonial state subservient to American interest and foreign policy remains, with its political scene widely dominated by a vast array of oligarchies, dynasties, politicians, warring factions, and different armed groups as a result of its neocolonial status.¹⁴

Like all history books, Karnow's book also has some weaknesses. Although the only part of the book in which the author incurred mistakes was in the Spanish period, his utterance of several incorrect statements might result in him being labeled as subscribing to the Spanish Black Legend. The root of the problem, it turned out, was that some of the sources he used to write his perspective on the Spanish period were questionable, such as Blair and Robertson's *The Philippine Islands*, John Phelan's *The Hispanization of the Philippines*, and Dean Worcester's *The Philippine Islands and Their People*, leading him to make several false statements. Although the 55-volume collection is an essential primary source, the Blair and Robertson's documents in the collection were cherry-picked, its Spanish-to-English translation very poor, and the Americans used it as a propaganda tool to criticize the Spanish colonial rule and propagate the *Leyenda Negra*.¹⁵ While Phelan's book was considered a masterpiece years after its publication, it now has been officially labeled "outdated" by several historians, and his arguments on land tenure merely dismissed as an educated assumption.

Moreover, while Worcester is known for his early photographs of the Philippines and its people, readers must take caution when reading his works due to his racist tendencies towards "exotic" Filipinos. Perhaps, the author was handicapped by his inability to understand Spanish and had to rely on these works in English to derive his narrative of the Spanish conquest, or he had to rely on them entirely for lack of sources contemporaneous to the period. Karnow further corroborated these sources to other books such as John Foreman's *The*

¹⁴ Karnow, *In Our Image*, 3-4, 9, 13, 80-81, 137, 323.

¹⁵ Gloria Cano, "Blair and Robertson's *The Philippine Islands*, 1493-1898: Scholarship or Imperialist Propaganda?" *Philippine Studies* Vol. 56, No. 1 (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 2008).

Philippine Islands, Nicholas Cushner's *Spain in the Philippines*, and John Bowring's *A Visit to the Philippine Islands*, to name a few. Whatever his reasons are, he had unintentionally written several false statements, namely the issue of the land grants and monastic supremacy in the Philippines.¹⁶ Furthermore, his acceptance of the *Pasyon* ethos as historical truth is an overstatement, in the sense that he overlooked the fact that Reynaldo Ileto's monograph is merely a thesis yet to be proven. Surprisingly, he mentioned Spain's negligence in the country, but decried the “lurid accounts of Spain's barbarism” propagated by American imperialists, to which he wrote that “... Spanish rule, while far from benevolent, was not entirely inhumane.”¹⁷ He remembered Spain's neglect of its former colony, but he did not fall for the anti-Spanish propaganda of his countrymen; he was fair, reasonable, and truthful to the historical account when he mentioned Spain's humanity and efforts to improve the colony. Then again, these mistakes might have only been thoroughly researched in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and might have possibly been corrected in the book's reissue.

Contribution to Philippine Historiography

In conclusion, Karnow's persuasive arguments on the American colonial period and the Philippines' postwar era easily eclipsed its faults. Although Karnow committed unintentional mistakes in the book, these can be dismissed entirely as trivial and may have been revised and updated in the book's subsequent reissue. Indeed, it is one of the greatest works on revisionist Philippine historiography that challenged the traditional accounts of American colonial rule by exposing the United States for who he is: a realist, imperialist, and interventionist state, bent on achieving global supremacy and the status of a superpower. Karnow credited the United States for developing the Philippines, but for him, the Philippines paid a high cost: it was only the United States that prospered, while the Philippines locked itself into America's economic orbit and deteriorated.

Furthermore, through intensive research, his experience as a journalist, and his educational upbringing as a historical researcher, he was able to investigate the little-known but equally essential facts of Philippine history, from the Spanish conquest to the Aquino administration, as well as give it a new life, through his leisurely-paced writing style. In this regard, Stanley Karnow was

¹⁶ Karnow, *In Our Image*, 9, 49

¹⁷ Karnow, *In Our Image*, 48.

able to fill the gap left by scholars touching on the same subject. Before the publication of Karnow's work as a monograph in 1989, no other work has made a comprehensive discussion on how the United States has sought to remake the Philippines in its image and its blatant intervention of the country during the postwar period.

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