



Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs

Regilme, Salvador Santino F., Jr (2010),
Review: Alfred McCoy: Policing America's Empire: The United States, the
Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State, in:
Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs, 29, 4, 122-126.
ISSN: 1868-4882 (online), ISSN: 1868-1034 (print)

The online version of this article can be found at:
<www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org>

Published by
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies and
Hamburg University Press.

The *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* is an Open Access publication.
It may be read, copied and distributed free of charge according to the conditions of the
Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.

To subscribe to the print edition: <ias@giga-hamburg.de>
For an e-mail alert please register at: <www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org>

The *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* is part of the GIGA Journal Family which
includes: Africa Spectrum • Journal of Current Chinese Affairs • Journal of Current
Southeast Asian Affairs • Journal of Politics in Latin America •
<www.giga-journal-family.org>



McCoy, Alfred (2009), *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State*, Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press

ISBN 978-0-299-23414-0, 659 pages

As many liberal democratic states pull their levers of powers amidst the global dynamics of fear and insecurity in the post-9/11 security climate, the United States appears to be the iconic example of a panoptic style of global policing and foreign interventions. This manifests itself in its highly advanced military technology, which spreads virtually across transcontinental boundaries, and its politically astute information-propaganda programme, which employs the full panoply of imperialistic acumen and dexterity. Purported to be a “state of exception” pitted against the grim evils of terrorism, the United States seems to have mastered the sophisticated art of pervasive policing, espionage and surveillance with the alleged Faustian sacrifice of the foundational democratic values of civil liberties and state transparency. This seemingly anti-imperialistic tone of characterizing the American global dominion is also the overarching theme of the latest work by the leading North American historian on Southeast Asia – Alfred McCoy of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

McCoy proffers a magisterial and impressive historical treatise that traces the murky historical origins of American counter-insurgency and surveillance strategies in the name of homeland security and contends compellingly that the Philippines, its former imperial child, has been used as a pivotal testing site to enhance the efficaciousness of the tools of the *security state*. Starting from World War I and continuing through the Bush-led “War on Terror”, innovative security technologies have migrated back to the American homeland in order to mar societal terrains with illiberal practices of espionage and unimaginably extensive forms of surveillance. Thus, in principle, McCoy argues that the contemporary discursive depiction of an “American state-of-exception” may be seen based on how the Empire’s policing strategies have been hatched in remote, peripheral imperial sites of domination, perfected in those locuses of American dominion, and imported back to the American homeland itself.

Comprising two substantive parts, the book commences with a highly insightful, critical prologue that perspicaciously juxtaposes the well-characterized analogies of ardent American imperial actions during the early years of its colonial enterprise in the Philippines with the contemporary, gruelling problem of the war in Iraq.

Part one uncovers the historical genesis of American policing in the Philippines and thereby characterizes the emergence of a colonial security state fuelled by an antecedent American information revolution. Conse-

quently, this policing strategy transmogrified the terrains of Philippine politics through systemic and effective suppression of post-Spanish colonial nationalism and substituted it with overtly patrimonial politics, exemplified by the close collaboration of national and colonial elites with the new Western colonizers. More specifically, McCoy historicizes the profound themes, tackling the early years of American colonialism: colonial coercion strategies; the innovative evolutionary development of surveillance and the absurd reliance on bogus scandals; the switch of the tenor of colonial relations from hostile to suddenly collaborative; the influential role of the Philippine Constabulary in covert operations; the repressive policing of tribal areas; the end of the Republican regime and the eventual rise of the Democrats in the American homeland vis-à-vis the shift from a stark policy emphasis on tyrannical policing to one of law enforcement and colonial politics in the Philippines; and the emergence of the Philippines as an effective experimentation site for untested American surveillance technologies during President Wilson's evolving "surveillance state".

Building upon the rich historicization of the first part of the book, McCoy then goes on to investigate the influential historical bequest of colonial surveillance in the post-colonial Philippines. The American colonial heritage is depicted by the practices of the post-colonial executive government in Manila: Emblematic of Washington's global-scale power, the government in Manila utilizes the state's security apparatus vis-à-vis American post-9/11 interventionist policies through the Philippine security-modernization programmes. Referring to the institutional ontogenesis of the Philippine National Police (PNP), McCoy sagaciously depicts the unfettered and imprudent exercise of the executive authority's police power leading to the eventual illiberal practices that consequently usher in constant re-emergence of legitimacy crises of post-colonial presidencies. McCoy's historical narrative encompasses the PNP's involvement during the preliminary political challenges faced by President Quezon's Commonwealth; the escalation of electoral and political violence during the pre-martial-law years of the Philippine Republic; the 14 years of Marcos' dictatorship; and the post-martial-law democratization efforts.

McCoy underscores with great insight how the much-admired and bloodless 1986 revolution, which concluded two decades of authoritarianism, proved too impotent to prevail over the perilous institutional legacy of Marcos – namely, the national police force that gravely undermined the much-needed institutional checks over central executive authorities. Akin to the American imperial model of total information control, the Marcos legacy of a central police force confounded the democratic transition as an inaptly empowered security apparatus and paved the way for gargantuan police

corruption, scandals and abuses. Pointing out how gambling and police corruption fuelled the dynamics of electoral politics, McCoy spells out how this post-colonial security apparatus became totally uncontrollable, despite the relatively massive reforms of President Ramos. Such abuses may stem from the unjust maximization of police power during Estrada's time, which led to his ouster and the successive Arroyo administration that apparently tolerated extrajudicial killings in order to suppress dissidents, not only because of post-9/11 security considerations but also in an effort to secure the political survival of the highly unpopular executive government in Manila.

In its entirety, *Policing America's Empire* epitomizes the author's fruitful, four-decade-long career in Southeast Asian historical studies: He fuses the broad and seemingly disparate themes of the Philippine state's police power vis-à-vis American foreign interventions in a richly nuanced historical contemplation that uncovers the evolution of the post-colonial Philippine state alongside the robust and historically embedded development of the contemporary American security apparatus. The author's analytical acumen in the exposition of oft-discarded and seemingly paltry historical details along with his eventual presentation of a convincing and grand historical narrative is, to say the very least, impressive, considering McCoy's methodology of maximizing the use of multi-archival primary and secondary research materials involving Spanish-, English- and Filipino-language documents and materials culled from the Philippines and the United States. Aside from the impressive extent of archival research, McCoy's originality can be gleaned from the recognition of key personalities from colonial and post-colonial epochs as they steered the evolution of the Philippine state. Moreover, McCoy's history-telling deviates from the orthodox and disappointingly mundane style of traditional Philippine historicizing, shifting the gears from the usual depiction of the story of colonialism as a monolithic, unidirectional relationship of the colonial master and the colonized to a more elaborately nuanced story of the symbiotic development of the Empire and the colonized entities.

Although the theme on the colonial strategy of fusing the efforts of the native Filipinos and the American colonizers may not be groundbreaking in Philippine historical studies, McCoy's stark emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between the Empire and the imperial child is a neoteric thesis reinforced by nuanced (his)story-telling on its grandest scale. Specifically, the engagement of the Americans with the native Filipinos from the early years of colonization up until the post-9/11 security climate has made possible the regular, innovative testing of counter-insurgency strategies that have purportedly created a political climate with an overtly powerful, illiberal state

with abusive policing practices that occur not only in the imperial capillaries of power such as the Philippines, but also in the American homeland itself.

On a more specific note, McCoy's work has pointed out the injustices of the Arroyo administration's illiberal policing practices, such as the repression of political dissidents, as may be gleaned from the analogies of extrajudicial killings during the Marcos dictatorship. Clearly, this reminds us of how the future trajectory of Philippine social and political studies must undertake more systematic analyses of the democratic-consolidation efforts of the Arroyo administration amidst the seemingly tolerant executive government in Manila upholding the military's illiberal practices on the repression of dissidents.

Despite the fact that McCoy is a historian devoid of pronounced intentions of challenging orthodox political science characterizations of the Philippine state, I contend that *Policing America's Empire* offers a novel understanding of the Philippine state, with a historical and deeply insightful biographical analysis of specifically important socio-political actors of the colonial and post-colonial Philippines. McCoy offers a dynamic and historically embedded story of the contemporary Philippine state, in which its police power apparatus is beset with historical "continuities and changes" brought on by political scandals, crime, surveillance and illiberal policing practices. More importantly, future scholarly inquiries may start building upon McCoy's focal point of analysis – that is, the contemporary Philippine state facing tremendous pressure to achieve democratic consolidation alongside exogenous variables at the global level such as US foreign policy and the post-9/11 security climate, among others. Thus, McCoy's work on the symbiotic, imperial dynamics of the US and the Philippines invites future scholarly endeavours to re-read, re-modify and re-visit our conceptions of the state in light of other, extra-national factors amidst a more complex and dynamic global system.

Conclusively, McCoy's *Policing America's Empire* is an impressive historical piece of research that appeals not only to Southeast Asianists but also to those interested in examining the historical embedding and institutional ontogenesis of post-colonial states' police power apparatuses and their apparently inherent propensity to implement illiberal practices of surveillance and repression. McCoy's disciplinary bias as a historian notwithstanding, his latest work presents a more intriguing line of inquiry in other scholarly terrains such as the social and political studies areas – that is, the paradox of post-colonial democracy: Since contemporary post-colonial states are creations of their former imperial masters who possess long histories of subjugation of colonial dissidents, democratic transitions of struggling, post-colonial states are somehow forced to suppress current state dissidents, often with

illiberal policing practices, in order to maintain a seemingly temporal climate of political stability and national cohesion. Apparently, reliance on the formal aspects of democracy, as exemplified by electoral processes and advocacy of liberal constitutionalism, has to be matched with the actual liberal practices of tolerance and the championing of civil liberties, consequently discarding the temporal and false promise of stability via abusive state practices.

Salvador Santino F. Regilme, Jr

- Salvador Santino F. Regilme, Jr, earned his B.A. (Philosophy and Political Science) at De La Salle University-Manila, Philippines. Currently he is a graduate student in the Faculty of Social Sciences in the Democratic Governance and Civil Society Program at the University of Osnabrück, Germany.
<sregilme@uni-osnabrueck.de>