Book Review

McCoy, Alfred (2009). *Policing America's Empire: The United States, The Philippines and the rise of the Surveillance State*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press
672pp. \$29.95 (US) paperback. ISBN 978-029923414-0

David Murakami Wood

Queen's University, Canada. dmw@queensu.ca

In recent years, there has been an explosion of historical work on the development of surveillance as a product of the colonial enterprise. In affiliated fields, particularly work on identification, this has become part of the mainstream of the enterprise. However, it still remains largely separate from 'Surveillance Studies.' Whilst many books reference this recent historical scholarship as part of the background or context to more contemporary issues, there has still been little genuine integration. Tracing the implications of this work both for the development of contemporary surveillance societies in the global north, and perhaps more importantly, for the global south, remains in its infancy. It is probably essential then that as many Surveillance Studies scholars as possible read Alfred McCoy's massive new history of US involvement in the Philippines.

The claims McCoy makes are not insignificant ones: namely that the US imperial adventure in South-East Asia not only shaped the form of governance and policing that an independent Philippines would pursue, but that the Philippines also acted as a kind of laboratory for policing of all kinds for the US itself. For a long time, McCoy argues, this was not visible in the USA, as the US state in the pre-WWI period relied on rather more old-fashioned class-based networks of control. However, with successive periods of war and emergency (WWI, WW2, then the Cold War 'red scare' and McCarthyism) the lessons of colonial practice came home. Both claims are relatively uncontroversial in the sense that they fit broadly within what we already know, firstly from many other studies of colonial and postcolonial policing, and secondly, the work done by numerous historians, mainly on British and French colonial lesson-learning in the areas of counterinsurgency and political control, from the infiltration of resistance groups to the introduction of fingerprinting.

He goes much further, however, in terms of both the Philippines themselves and the United States. For the Philippines, he links the culture of suspicion and intrigue fostered by the US occupying forces to the development of what fellow historian John T. Sidel termed government as a 'multi-tiered racket' (quoted by McCoy, p.49). Essentially, dense interconnections developed between secret policing, the shadow economy generated by the numerous prohibitions introduced by the USA, and a new political class whose fortunes depended on both. Similar suggestions have been made with regard to the way that MacArthur governed Japan in the post-war occupation and the parallel growth of the Yakuza and the Liberal Democratic Party as a political force in Japan, but that was only a brief period and there was less of a sense of inevitability about the outcome. However, the long US occupation of the Philippines meant that the Filipino state became irretrievably bound up with organised crime, yet in parallel also developed an insidious and powerful secret police system of spies and informers.

With the War on Terror, the two states have once again become entangled. Like most postcolonial nations, the Philippines as a nation-state has long seemed an artificial creation to the large number of the varied peoples within its borders, and many radical separatist and anti-state groups have existed and continue to exist. In recent years, a growing number have looked to the dispersed cellular model of Al-Qaeda as a guide to successful insurrection, and some have even forged stronger either pragmatic or ideological links. However one legacy of former US President George W. Bush's 'for us or against us' mantra has been to brand all Filipino opposition as 'terrorists.' A kind of McCarthyist targeting of cultural critics, journalists and artists has become a feature of Philippines government, leading to a condemnatory United Nations Special Report (Alston 2008) that criticized the use of violence, surveillance, arbitrary imprisonment and intimidation by both the army and police under the cover of 'anti-terrorism.'

The second direction takes McCoy back to the United States. McCoy claims that the United States "realised the coercive power of its new information technologies from its colonization of the Philippines" (p.521). The roles of Commander (later General) van Deman – who began his trajectory to US communist 'witchfinder general' from military intelligence operations in the US-Philippines War – and some other key individuals are undoubtedly crucial. However the claim is perhaps somewhat overstated and the evidence marshalled in support is not of the same depth as that for the connection between the US occupation and ongoing corruption in the Philippines.

The book is primarily a history of political policing in colonial and post-colonial Philippines, divided between two parts which cover the US Colonial Police and then the Philippine National Police, and the vast majority of both of these two parts concerns the Philippines situation. In contrast, the claims about the return home of US colonial surveillance policies and practices, despite being highlighted in the introduction (and on the cover and in marketing materials) are largely restricted to two chapters at the ends of each part – the relatively long and highly informative Chapter 9 on President Wilson's Surveillance State and the much shorter concluding Chapter 17, Crucibles of Counterinsurgency, which relies rather more on 'juxtaposition' of Philippines practice and US internal espionage in the 2000s than on the careful documentation of personal and strategic connections of the previous part.

In apparently positioning this book to appeal more overtly to a US (and perhaps a broader western) audience, the conclusion overemphasizes the fact that the connections between the two countries may have made the US domestically a country that has betrayed many of its founding ideals, and has 'degrade[d] its own democracy" (p.540), as indeed the late Nineteenth and early twentieth century US anti-imperialists warned. In global terms, it would seem to me that it is the effects on the Philippines and other already subaltern peoples subjected to multiple forms of surveillance, coercion and violence that seem to be of deeper and more vital human and moral consequence than the relatively small changes to US domestic surveillance practice and civil liberties.

However, minor quibbles about such positioning aside, McCoy's work is a massive contribution to our knowledge of colonial and neo-imperial surveillance and security practices, and the iterations and interconnections between North and South, and is highly recommended.

References

- Alston, P. 2008. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions*, United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council, Eighth session, Agenda item 3, A/HRC/8/3/Add.2. New York: United Nations.