Military operations during the Philippine-American War moved through three distinct phases. Between February and December 1899, the U.S. Eighth Army Corps defeated the Philippine Republic's conventional field army in Central Luzon. Local nationalists immediately began to construct clandestine intelligence and supply networks to support a two-tiered guerrilla force of part-time Sandahatan village militias, or boleros, reinforced by small groups of full-time, rifle-armed insurgents, or fusileros. Confronted with renewed irregular resistance, senior U.S. commanders shifted from maneuver warfare to a strategy of regional population control, restructuring the Eighth Corps into a Philippine Division with four geographical departments for a sustained pacification campaign. In the war's second phase, between January 1900 and May 1901, U.S. troops forced most guerrilla bands throughout the archipelago to surrender under the dual pressure of local offensive patrols, or "hikes," and martial law coercion exerted through provost courts and military commissions. The war's third and final phase took place in Southcentral Luzon and the Visayan island of Samar, subdued between September 1901 and April 1902, or shortly after the introduction of population reconcentration and widespread property destruction outside designated secure zones.


Two ongoing controversies within recent Philippine War scholarship concern the questions of total Filipino mortality and the degree to which U.S. soldiers practiced various forms of illegal violence against both combatants and noncombatants. Some estimates of combined military and civilian casualties between 1899 and 1903 have run as high as 500,000, to include the cholera epidemic of 1902–3, often viewed as a direct consequence of the U.S. occupation. In its most advanced formulation, however, this argument relies on two anachronisms. First, it assumes an archipelagowide employment during 1899–1901 of the same tactics used during the 1902 campaigns in Batangas and Samar. And secondly, it displaces onto an earlier guerrilla struggle the nation’s recently acquired knowledge of illegal killings during the Vietnam War. After My Lai, it became easy to assume that a similar mixture of racism, tactical frustration, and poor leadership at the platoon level led to equally widespread atrocities in the Philippines. However, one element is missing from this Vietnam-era connection between individual hostility and collective violence: the restraint imposed on soldier behavior by a functioning military justice system. From this perspective, the critical question is not whether U.S. infantrymen in 1900 were racist and ethnocentric, and thus potentially abusive, but whether they were allowed to violate the protections guaranteed Filipino civilians and prisoners of war under contemporary U.S. martial law.

This essay examines the administration of military justice in four United States Volunteer Infantry regiments stationed in the southern Philippines during 1900 and early 1901, in order to determine how well their men honored the Army’s instructions for the treatment of noncombatants and surrendered guerrillas. Under orders in the field,

3. For discussions of total mortality see Richard E. Welch, “American Atrocities in the Philippines: The Indictment and the Response,” Pacific Historical Review 43 (May 1974), and John M. Gates, “Notes and Documents: War Related Deaths in the Philippines, 1898–1902,” ibid., 53 (August 1984). Linking cholera mortality in 1902–3 to the pacification campaign, which was largely concluded by the late spring of 1901 outside Batangas and Samar, is particularly problematic: see May, Battle for Batangas, 270–75.


6. On 1 October 1900, the eve of the 1900–1901 dry-weather “campaign season,” 27,524 regular and 28,724 volunteer infantrymen served in the Philippine Division (see Annual