“The tribes which inhabit the island of Mindanao and Sulu have attracted much attention because of their warlike character and their distinction as the only Mohammedan wards of the United States. As a governmental factor they are most embarrassing. The wild men [pagan tribes] are good raw material, and the [Christian] Filipinos are easily influenced in favor of good government, but the Moros, encased in the armor of Islamism, present a much more difficult problem.” - Charles Burke Elliott, 1917

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1. The Empire of Spain and the Moros (1565-1899)

Like two large, opposing tectonic plates grinding against one another, the westward push of Christianity collided with the eastward thrust of Islam over 440 years ago in the islands we now call the Philippines. Although first claimed for Spain by Ferdinand Magellan in 1521, it was not until 1565 that the Spanish conquistadores, with cross in one hand, sword in the other, began a conquest of the islands. Their goal was to extend the realm of their king, Philip II (whom they named the islands after), find riches, and save souls. To their consternation and rage, they discovered that many of the people they sought to subjugate were Muslims, believers in the same religion as that of their ancient and bitter enemies, the Barbary Moors of North Africa (present day Morocco). Only seventy-five years earlier, in a revolt lasting over hundreds of years, the newly-united Spanish kingdoms of Castile and Aragon had overthrown the nearly seven-hundred year long rule of Muslim invaders over the Iberian Peninsula. Thereafter they referred to any practitioner of Islam as a “Moro” (or Moor), considered a hereditary enemy of their nation and religion, a target for their vengeance and destruction. But after 330 years of trying, by 1898 the Spanish had failed to fully conquer and subdue the southern Muslim homelands, known as La Tierra de el Moros, “The Land of the Moros”. Despite extravagant claims to the contrary, by the time the Spanish were forced to abandon the Philippine Islands by the United States they had only come to control a handful of small, fortified port cities. Spanish sovereignty never extended beyond the parapets of these few miserable and remote outposts.
2. The Spanish-American War (1898)

In the pivotal year of 1898 war broke out between Spain and the United States as the result of a long-simmering feud over the island of Cuba. Improbably, the first battle of that conflict took place half way around the world in Manila Bay, when on May 1 a small U.S. flotilla led by Commodore George Dewey sank or captured most of the Spanish Far East squadron and their naval station at Cavite. The motive had been purely tactical; to destroy the Spanish fleet and then either blockade or seize the capital city of Manila, holding it as a bargaining chip for expected peace talks after the war. The original objective of the war was to remove Spanish power from Cuba, not the Philippines. Nevertheless an expeditionary force of 20,000 men was assembled and dispatched in stages to reinforce Dewey, creating an American beachhead on Manila Bay that would have future consequences.

The war with Spain, the shortest and least costly in U.S. history, ended only 3 ½ months after it had begun; the fighting limited to two one-day naval battles and two-days of storming of Spanish defenses at the city of Santiago in Cuba. No ground fighting took place between Spain and the U.S. in the Philippines other than a sham, pre-arranged “battle” in which the Spanish garrison turned over the capital city of Manila to the Americans in order to avoid surrendering to Filipino revolutionaries. A truce was declared the next day August 12, 1898, and a peace treaty signed December 10, 1898. Puerto Rico and Guam were ceded to the United States and Cuba was granted independence, although subject to two-year “transitional rule” by the Americans. But a last-minute, surprise demand from President William McKinley (picture above) was made for the cession of the Philippine Islands to the U.S. McKinley was unequivocal: the Spanish must either sign over all their claims to the archipelago or go back to war. With great reluctance and bitterness Spain capitulated. America’s new venture in the Philippine islands would signaled its entry onto the world stage and usher in an infatuation with the idea of building a new kind of empire by creating an entirely new nation in an American image.
3. The Philippine-American War (1899-1902)

The Philippine-American War began February 4, 1899, two days before the Senate narrowly ratified by one vote the treaty ending the Spanish-American War. Unlike the conflict just ended, the Philippine-American War (a.k.a. Philippine Insurrection) was long (3 ½ years) and nasty. The point of contention was straightforward. Who would become the ruler of the former colony in the wake of Spain’s departure; the United States or the Philippine Revolutionary Government (PRG)? The PRG was dominated by the largest ethnic-language grouping, the Tagalogs, and the largest island, Luzon? The President of the PRG and commander of its armed force, the Army of Liberation, was 29-year old General Emilio Aguinaldo and most of its civilian and military leadership were drawn from the “illustrado class”, the country’s landed and educated elite.

Eventually the United States prevailed but in doing so more than 126,000 American soldiers would be “cycled through” the Philippine conflict (the peak strength in 1900 was just over 71,000) in order to subdue the 30-40,000 man Army of Liberation, the military arm of the PRG. It was truly the first of the many of the “wars of national liberation” that would follow in the 20th Century in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, and in being such would set the pattern and provide the lessons for the multitude of conflicts that followed.
4. American Troops arrive in Moroland (May 19, 1899)

On May 19, 1899 as the war between the U.S. and the Filipino revolutionaries began in earnest, two battalions of the 23rd Infantry, 733 officers and men commanded by Captain Edward B. Pratt, were landed at the walled and fortified city of Jolo on the island of Jolo, to replace the Spanish garrison. The Spanish flag was ceremoniously hauled down and the Stars and Stripes “unfurled to the breeze” amongst weeping Spanish officers and jubilant Americans. The Spanish garrison was by then, because of desertions, down to 824 men, a fraction of its original size. In low spirits they trudged up the gangplank and left. The next day the equally depleted Spanish garrison at Zamboanga, on the island of Mindanao, was evacuated as well. But no American troops could be spared to occupy the city and Zamboanga was abandoned to a well-armed Christian Filipino militia aligned with Aguinaldo. Captain Pratt had been informed that in the event of hostilities his small command was “not to expect any relief or reinforcements as none were available.” What he was to do in the eventuality of trouble on an island of 40,000 armed inhabitants was left unanswered.
5. The Bates Agreement (August 20, 1899)

The commanding officer of the American forces, Major General Elwell Otis, realized that he had not the resources to deal with both the war in the north and the “Moro Problem” at the same time. He delegated responsibility for Mindanao and Sulu to a newly arrived field commander, Brigadier General John C. Bates. Otis demanded four things from Bates: 1) keep the Moros from joining the war in the north, 2) avoid a separate conflict, 3) gain recognition of U.S. sovereignty and acceptance of the stationing of U.S. troops, and (4) set up the framework for a longer-term relationship.

On August 20, 1899, a written agreement was concluded between the United States and the Sultanate of Sulu. While smaller in land area than Mindanao, the Sulu Archipelago was the homeland of the powerful Tausugs and the population epicenter of Moroland. In the agreement the U.S. would have the prerogatives and external responsibilities of a sovereign power over Sulu in exchange for defending its borders from foreign powers and promoting its trade and commerce. The American flag would fly above all others on buildings and on vessels. With it went the commensurate right to establish military garrisons and naval facilities, and move freely about the territory.
In turn, the Moros were entitled to continue governing themselves through their traditional datus and headmen and according to adat, their interpretation of Islamic Sharia law. Traditional property rights and ownership would be respected by the U.S. Moros would be judged by Moros in Moro courts according to Moro law. Americans or other nationalities charged with offenses would be judged in American courts under American law, while taking care to respect Moro law. Of greatest importance, the U.S. pledged it would not attempt to displace or interfere with the practice of the religion of Islam. This was the deal-breaker/deal-clincher for the Moro leadership. It was a unique arrangement of shared power.

However, a major issue was left vague and unresolved, slavery. The Moros believed enforced servitude was sanctioned by their religion. The Americans were but a little over one generation removed from having fought a cruel and wrenching civil war over the existence of slavery in their own country. In Article X of the Agreement, Bates proposed what he thought to be a pragmatic, reasonable, and acceptable compromise—a right of those in servitude to purchase their own freedom. His intention was that individual manumission would then be funded in its entirety by either the U.S. government or private philanthropy. Either way it was an almost inconsequential amount for the Americans. The Sulu Sultanate accepted this solution.

However the issue was too politically toxic for either McKinley or the Congress to take a stand. The Bates Agreement was approved by McKinley, but excluded Article X. It was a short sighted political response that would eventually work to undermine and destroy the American-Moro relationship.

Despite later claims of certain revisionist historians, the Bates Agreement ushered in a relatively peaceful four-year occupation (1899–1903) that benefited both sides. The US Army took over former Spanish outposts, established new ones, and freely traversed through Sulu, Cotabato, and the coastal areas of Mindanao and Palawan without firing a shot. The agreement permitted the U.S. Navy free rein to patrol the Sulu Sea and, with the assistance of the British in nearby North Borneo, prevent Malayan-based gunrunners from exploiting “the backdoor to the Philippines.” The Moros not only stayed out of the Philippine-American War but often assisted the Americans. This aided Bates’ successor, Brigadier General William Kobbe, in using his very limited resources to swiftly and decisively defeat Christian “insurrectos” in northern Mindanao in 1901. Less than a half-dozen Americans and about thirty Moros died in incidents or altercations (but not formal combat) between the two parties during the period. In sharp contrast to the bitter centuries long conflict between the Moros and the Empire of Spain, the relationship between occupier and occupied was tolerant, and occasionally outright friendly.
7. The Battle of Bayan (May 2, 1902)

As is often the case in military matters, an abrupt and wholesale change in leadership shattered the peace overnight. **Brigadier General George W. Davis** replaced General Kobbe. **Major General Adna Chaffee** replaced General Arthur MacArthur as overall Military Commander and Governor of the Philippines. Unfamiliar with Davis, Chaffee appointed **Colonel Frank Baldwin**, an old and trusted Civil War fellow cavalryman, as Davis’s Deputy Commander.

The problem was that Baldwin was no ordinary Colonel, but a revered Army legend, one of the very few two-time recipients of the Medal of Honor (in the Civil War and against the Cheyenne). To describe Baldwin as “headstrong” would be a serious understatement. Added to that he disdained Davis for not being a “line” officer (Army Engineering Corps). He thought the peaceful mission a waste of time, and his natural instinct from his frontier experience was to “kick butts”, show them who was boss, and then dictate the terms.

Acting on his own, Baldwin totally usurped Davis’s command, resulting in a huge, unauthorized punitive expedition to Lake Lanao, using as pretext of two soldiers who had been killed by unknown assailants for their rifles and were rumored to be Lake Lanao Moros.

However, Baldwin and all of his entire command had only just arrived from the U.S. and were entirely unfamiliar with both the supposed enemy, the daunting terrain, and unpredictable weather. Davis protested to Chaffee, but Chaffee sided with his old comrade and gave him a green
light – despite the fact that he had been expressly ordered by President Theodore Roosevelt to rigorously avoid any new military ventures on the eve of his intention to publicly declare the northern Philippine “insurrection” ended.

Finally reaching Lake Lanao on May 2, 1902 and severely depleted in size due to the rigors of the trail, seven companies of the 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry advanced toward the south edge of Lake Lanao, accompanied by the 25th Battery Light Artillery with four small mountain guns. Confronting them were two large cottas, or forts, of the Sultan of Bayan, one called Binadayan and the other Pandapatan.

After a fierce battle that was only ended by a blinding rainstorm and the fall of night, the defenders surrendered at dawn the next morning following the overnight death from wounds of the Sultan and having run out of ammunition. It was estimated about 600 Moros had opposed the Americans, but with no more than 100 single-shot rifles and a few dozen ancient small-bore cannons between them. The number killed was claimed to be 300–400, but the body count was about 200. U.S. casualties were 11 killed and 40 severely wounded.

Although Baldwin exulted in his victory, Chaffee and Davis were appalled. Using eighteenth-century bladed weapons and tactics against a twentieth-century army, the Maranaos had inflicted serious damage on the attackers, despite the lopsided American advantage in raw firepower. In outrunning his supply lines (and reserves), Baldwin had allowed his rations to run down to two days, failed to take along assault gear, such as ladders and scaling equipment, and left half his men stranded in no-man’s land without ammunition for the entire night. Chaffee had ridden with another such brave but reckless soldier in the Shenandoah Campaigns during the Civil War, George Armstrong Custer. Similarly, Baldwin had underestimated his enemy and placed his command alone in a hostile countryside, without viable backup.

As importantly, Chaffee and Davis knew that in all likelihood real disaster had been averted only by the distant heroic efforts of one other, younger man – Captain John J. Pershing. One of only two remaining officers with extensive experience with the Moros, and having gained Davis’s permission, Pershing had traveled to the more populated north shore of Lake Lanao alone and unarmed to successfully persuade the powerful datus at the north end of Lake Lanao not to join the fight. Had they done so, Chaffee and Davis realized, the history of the Little Big Horn would most likely have repeated itself. Chaffee watered down his report to the War Department and painted it as a great victory, but took away a most sobering lesson. Baldwin had not been smart, but lucky. The real hero of Bayan had not even been on the field.

The Muslim Imams quickly spread a story among the Maranao that, following the death of the Sultan of Pandapatan, the principal war leader, four angels appeared amidst a blinding flash of lightning and bore his body up to heaven on a chair, then inflicted a punishing rain and fog on the hapless Americans which forced them to withdraw from the cotta walls and spend a night in misery. The next morning a bright rainbow appeared, so the story went, signifying that the people of Bayan, by aggressively defending their part of Dar ul Islam (the realm of Islam), had greatly pleased God.

Herein lay the rub, the conundrum that would dog the Americans for the next many years. The Maranaos understood from the beginning that they were outgunned, and they did not expect to win. But, “so what?” From their perspective winning or losing was far less important than how you fought. And the more adverse and overwhelming the odds against one, the greater and more divine the personal glory. Life is fleeting and transitory, what mattered most was demonstrating to Allah one’s willingness to die? In the first of many combats to come, the Americans and Moros would use different scorecards to measure success.
8. Pershing’s Lake Lanao Campaigns (1902-1903)

Several days after the battle, General Chaffee summoned Captain Pershing to Camp Vicars, a newly established American outpost near Bayan and ordered him to take immediate “temporary command” of the new camp, ostensibly reporting to Baldwin but in reality directly to Chaffee through Davis. Even more surprising, a mere Captain, would command the equivalent of two battalions: two troops of the 15th Cavalry, three companies of the 27th Infantry, the 25th Field Artillery Battery, engineers, and hospital corpsmen, about 700 men in all.

It amounted to an independent, self-sufficient, mini-army. Chaffee (and Davis) sensed this obscure junior officer was one of the few in the Army (and one of only two officers on their second tour in Moroland) who comprehended how this new challenge had to be addressed. The iron rules of seniority must be pushed aside to make way for a new generation.

Pershing’s subsequent Lake Lanao Campaigns have often been erroneously described by historians as one of divide and conquer. But the Moros, by the very nature of their societal institutions and culture, were almost perpetually divided. Rather, Pershing focused on sorting out who were his likely friends, who were his likely enemies, and who were somewhere in between. He sensed that at some point he would have to fight some of the most recalcitrant datus, but unlike Baldwin, he knew he could not fight everyone and must forge enduring political/military alliances in advance and avoid at all costs making inadvertent and potentially permanent enemies. Pershing’s one year of command of Camp Vicars would consist of eleven months of intense political activism and diplomacy and only two fortnights of fighting.

April 7, 1903, at the Battle of Bacolod, 150 Moro fighters would die fighting at a cost of one American killed and fourteen wounded. Along the route of the march, ten cottas had flown red flags in defiance, but white flags had waved in friendship from ninety-nine. The battle was captured in amateur photography by the Chaplain of the 27th Infantry and later sold by the thousands in a booklet printed and distributed at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair. Captain Pershing returned to the U.S. in July of 1903 a celebrity.
Leonard Wood is largely forgotten today, other than through the major Army post of the same name in the state of Missouri. But in the early part of the 20th Century, he was seldom out of the public spotlight, for the most part because of controversy. Entering Army service as a contract physician in Arizona in the 1880’s, he gained fame as the commander of the volunteer cavalry regiment known as the “Roughriders” with the celebrity politician Theodore Roosevelt as his deputy. Eventually he became the youngest Army Chief of Staff at age 49 in 1910, although President Woodrow Wilson bypassed him in 1917 to select John J. Pershing to lead over one million American doughboys in France in the First World War. In the 1920 Presidential election, Wood came within a hairsbreadth of becoming the Republican nominee, barely nosed out by Warren G. Harding. Under Presidents Harding and Coolidge he became the Governor-General of the Philippines, until his sudden death in 1927.

An aloof, distant, and cold personality, Wood was nevertheless charismatic, projecting a public image of a strong, decisive, capable and serious leader. But his underlying flaws were both many and serious. Above all he was obsessed with career advancement and the ruthless destruction of any and all perceived rivals. In the pursuit of personal ambition, he recognized no boundaries.

Appointing Wood both civil Governor and Military Commander over Mindanao and Sulu, President Roosevelt and Governor-General William Howard Taft, allowed him to write his own position description. It was a one-man, barely-disguised military dictatorship. With
direct back channel access to the White House, Wood was granted almost unchecked authority, which he exercised with at times unrestrained ruthlessness.

Between the end of November, 1903 and mid-May, 1905, Wood deliberately provoked disputes with the Tausugs of Jolo, the Maranaos of Lake Lanao, and the Maguindanaos of Cotabato with a view to administering “one clean-cut lesson”, an overwhelming and punishing military defeat that would force them into total submission. In hundreds of battles and skirmishes, an estimated total of 5,000 or more Moros were killed. A high percentage of these were women, children, and non-combatants, versus 200+ American dead and half again as many wounded. Several hundreds if not thousands of villages were looted and burned to the ground, crops destroyed, and livestock seized.

In a nearly two-year fruitless pursuit of Datu Ali in Cotabato, Wood came close to completely destroying the economy of the once-prosperous Rio Grande basin. However, despite inflicting enormous pain on the Moros, Wood never succeeded in achieving his “one clean-cut lesson.” Getting the combative Moros to fight back proved as easy as hitting a wasp nest with a stick, but despite the pain they stubbornly continued to resist.

Unexpectedly, in mid-1905 Wood discovered he had a non-malignant, but life-threatening brain tumor, which mandated a return to the U.S. for an operation. Not entirely a success, Wood was left with partial paralysis and periodic seizures triggered by stress, and mental lapses, which he tried to keep hidden from the public, and even from the President. But shortly after his return to the Philippines, Roosevelt wrote a blunt letter informing him he had been made aware of his debilitating health issues. Unless he could furnish a strong argument to the contrary, Roosevelt stated he would be ordered home for an extended convalescence and reassignment. Within days and in secret he embarked on what would be the last and most controversial military venture of his entire career, The Battle of Bud Dajo (March 6-8, 1906) on the island of Jolo.
10. General Tasker Bliss and the Moro Constabulary (1906 – 1909)

Earlier, a month before the Battle of Bud Dajo, General Wood had been elevated to command the entire Philippine Department, on February 1, 1906. At the same time he was instructed him to designate Brigadier General Tasker Howard Bliss as his replacement in Moroland, effective March 1. Had this been done there would likely have been no battle, or massacre, at Bud Dajo. Instead, Wood ignored the order and retained full control over both his old and new positions until after the battle. Bliss was forced to accompany the Bud Dajo expedition as a powerless “observer” of a situation in which he was given no say and was about to inherit. Understandably, it never sat well with him.

Tasker Bliss was not a fighting general but highly regarded as one of the Army’s leading intellectuals (the first head of the Army War College). Once in control, Bliss soon became aware of the full extent of Wood’s activities and extensive abuses of his positions over the previous three years. In a private letter to his wife he expressed dismay over learning that Wood had needlessly “killed unknown thousands” of Moros and expressed fear that he might end up tarred with the same brush. “Sooner or later people will say that a military man, occupying both positions, does as a civilian what will give him prominence as a soldier.”

Analyzing the Wood campaigns, Bliss had concluded that, even when used properly, the Army had proved itself a blunt and unwieldy of a weapon for pacifying a civilian population. An axe when one needed a razor. Even though inferior in size and resources the far smaller, nimbler and less doctrinally rigid Moro Constabulary had demonstrated a talent for nipping conflict in the bud rather than allowing it to fester. Importantly, it had far superior intelligence capabilities to the Army, owing to their soldiers being drawn from the same communities in which they operated and having close ties to the traditional Moro leadership. As significant, when Bliss used the Army for a mission, he reported to General Wood and subject to his frequent meddling. With the Constabulary, he reported to the more deferential Governor-General James Smith. For most
of the Bliss tenure, the Constabulary took charge of maintaining law and order and the Army kept to the garrisons.

The models for creation of the Constabulary had been the famed Texas Rangers and Northwest Mounted Police. Originally the civil government had requested the Army to supply officers on detached duty, as was done to staff the Philippine Scouts. But the Army refused, except for the top four positions. For officers, the civil government instead recruited among former Army non-coms, land-grant college ROTC candidates, private military academies, or from foreign armies.

This diversity in itself was an asset as was their own internal, specialized officer training academy, which put heavy emphasis on learning local languages, culture, law enforcement, and exercising independent judgment (their operating manual was quite thin). The result was a distinctly different leadership mindset from the Army and a flat, responsive command structure. Physical toughness and agility were equally emphasized (30 mile marches on foot over mountainous trails were the norm) and they were required to be dead shots, competent in the use of a barong, and know how to use their fists. Those not up to snuff were unhesitatingly weeded out, much like today’s Special Forces. The Moro rank and file too were an elite group; much like the legendary Ghurkas of Nepal they were rugged, absolutely fearless in battle, and intensely loyal to their officers. Few were their peers in hand-to-hand combat.

Author Vic Hurley described Bliss’s official three-year tenure the “peace era” and scholar Peter Gowing “The Velvet Glove”, contrasting it to Wood’s tour which he referred to as “The Mailed Fist.” Indeed, the Annual Reports of the Philippine Commission and the War Department and the absence of the large and often well-publicized military expeditions of the sort mounted by Wood have led to the belief that the Battle of Bud Dajo represented a turning point in the Moro Campaigns and marked at least a temporary era of pacification. But such was not the case. There were nearly as many armed engagements between the Moros and the American government during the Bliss period as during Wood’s tenure.
November 11, 1909 and now a **Brigadier General, John J. Pershing** returned to Moroland. After some initial fumbling, Pershing took firm control and began phasing the Regular Army out of the Province altogether, replacing them with Philippine Scout companies as the backbone of his military command and forming the first two all-Moro Scout companies, one recruited in Lanao from among the Maranaos and one in Cotabato from the Maguindanaos.

At the same time Pershing reorganized and shook up the civil government, with far greater involvement by the Moro datus in resolving their many issues and grievances. Pershing’s second year became one of progress, and his popularity soared. The Province moved closer to pacification, the local economy prospered, and many public works were initiated.
But just as he seemed on a sound footing, an overreaction to an unfortunate incident inadvertently distracted and almost consumed his administration. Shortly after returning to Moroland, Pershing had taken a firm stand against a popular but ill-considered proposal advanced by the American civilian community to disarm the Moros. In a rare bit of unity, the Constabulary, Scouts, and Army opposed such a move, both due to the fear of igniting a new round of resistance and the near impossibility of implementing such a scheme.

However, on April 16, 1911, 1st Lt. Walter H. Rodney, a young officer of the newly arrived 2nd Cavalry, was viciously attacked and killed by a lone Moro while out for a stroll with his five year-old daughter on a public street in Jolo. Rodney was unarmed. An investigation placed the real blame on the post commander, who had neglected to enforce a long-standing order that officers and men were not permitted to leave the garrison alone and unarmed. However Pershing’s detractors seized upon the incident to make trouble, claiming he was at fault for having been "over-lenient" with the Moros.

Under mounting criticism, Pershing abruptly reversed himself and issued Executive Order 24 for the complete and immediate disarmament of all Moros (not just firearms, but the far more ubiquitous bladed weapons as well) no later than September 8, 1911, only a few months distant. The men who had to do the disarming, the Constabulary and Scouts, were dismayed; but Washington and Manila signaled their endorsement and the local American community was ecstatic. Even though Pershing offered generous cash bounties, only a handful of rusty old rifles and pistols were turned in, and scarcely any blades.

In mid-December as he began a sweep for weapons in several towns, an eerily déjà vu moment occurred when between 500 to 800 Tausug men and women retreated with their weapons to the top of Bud Dajo and began to dig in. But instead of becoming a second massacre, the 2nd Battle of Bud Dajo, which took place between December 14-26, 1911 and may have been Pershing’s finest hour in Moroland, a siege and blockade accompanied by a persistent campaign of persuasion.

By Christmas Day all the women and children and a large number of hungry male fighters had been talked down off the mountain and sent home with bags of government rice. Only a small hard core of 75 defiant male warriors remained. Rather than use the US Army, Pershing brought in the newly formed 52nd Moro Scout Company to confront their fellow Moros. In sharp contrast to the first battle, in the final skirmish only twelve were killed and a small number wounded, the rest surrendering or fleeing. There were no dead and only three wounded on the American side. Pershing then suspended disarmament enforcement, wisely to avoid becoming an issue during the already contentious and divisive U.S. Presidential election of 1912.
The Battle of Bud Bagsak (June 11-15, 1913)

Following the election and inauguration of the new Woodrow Wilson regime, in March of 1913, the new Governor-General, William Cameron Forbes, pressured Pershing to resume disarmament. But by this time the Tausugs had coalesced behind a single, effective, and charismatic leader, Naquib Amil. Confronted by government agents over the discovery of a hidden cache of at least 300 new, high-powered rifles, Amil simply shrugged and replied, “Tell the soldiers to come on and fight.”

Pershing first attempted to parley, but talks quickly broke down and Amil gathered atop another inactive volcano consisting of several small peaks, Bud Bagsak. Pershing secretly assembled an expedition of 883 officers and men and under cover of night surrounded the mountain. Over 90% of the force consisted of Philippine Scouts (including the two Moro companies). The only US Army contingents were 50 men of Company M, 8th Infantry and a 25-man demolition detail from the 8th Cavalry.

The fighting lasted almost five days and resulted in a hard-fought U.S. victory. Pershing spent three days taking the smaller fortified peaks one-by-one and carefully maneuvering his forces into position for a final assault on the main peak. On June 15, Captain George Charlton led the
The 51st Scouts, Maguindanaos from Cotabato, and the 52nd Scouts, Maranaos from Lanao through lines of trenches and barricades, straight up a steep, partly open, curving slope for 450 yards (415m) to eventually capture a large stone cotta at the top. The 51st and 52nd were backed up by the 24th (Ilocano) and 31st (Tagalog) Scouts, Christian companies from the northern Philippines. The intense fight lasted nine hours, and became the fiercest, hardest-fought (and most evenly-matched) military action to take place in Moroland during the entire period of direct American rule.

Pershing wrote his wife Frankie a few days later, “It looked for a time as though we should not be able to carry it…. I am a wreck today.” Despite the intensity of the battle, the American expeditionary force lost only fifteen dead (including Scout Captain Taylor Nichols) and twenty-nine wounded, roughly a 5% casualty rate. An official body count was not made of the Tausug dead, although it was latter reliably estimated that between 200 to 300 Tausugs were killed during the course of the five-day battle with at least a third escaping. Few rifles were recovered from the battlefield, most carried off. Perhaps because of few American deaths and the public focus on the upcoming transfer of political power, unlike 1st Bud Dajo the battle received scant attention in the American press.

Captain Taylor Nichols and 52nd Moro Scouts - killed by a sniper bullet on June 12, 1913
Arriving in Manila in mid-November of 1913, Woodrow Wilson’s new choice for Governor-General, Francis Burton Harrison, was pre-determined to advance Philippine independence and re-write the chapter on America’s venture into overseas empire, even though it was a low priority for the new administration. But the first issue to land on the plate of the young (40-year old) former Democratic Congressman from New York was the unresolved future of Moroland. The day Harrison arrived Pershing and Bell requested an audience. Although presented in a positive light, the two generals delivered a clear message--the Army not only wanted out of Moroland, it was non-negotiable. The civil government would have to take over the Province. They planned to leave as soon as possible. In addition, Pershing’s tour of duty was about to expire in one month and the Army was not planning on a replacement.

The justification offered was that the Battle of Bud Bagsak had finally achieved pacification of the Moros. They were no longer a threat, the Province was peaceful, and the Army had achieved its original mission. This was, however, downright untrue. Datu Sahipa, Amil’s second in command, had escaped from Bud Bagsak and continued to lead resistance to American rule in Sulu. Two major battles had occurred on Jolo less than a month after Bud Bagsak, one fought by the Scouts and one by the Constabulary. And there was still unrest and occasional fighting in
Lanao. Pershing had once observed of the Moros, “If he takes a notion to fight, he will fight regardless of the number of men he thinks are to be brought against him.”

The real reason was that, for the Army, the long experiment in nation building had become a seemingly endless, thankless drain on scarce resources, with remote prospects for a satisfactory conclusion. The Army could ill afford to continue to grapple with such a remote, major and unproductive distraction while relations with neighboring Mexico deteriorated and war clouds gathered over Europe. Pershing had written confidentially to Colonel James Harbord, the acting head of the Constabulary mincing no words, “It means a great deal to the Army to have this Province unloaded.” The Battle of Bagsak was not General Wood’s “one clean-cut lesson”, but rather perfect cover to declare victory and quickly leave the problem to someone else.

Eagerly filling this abandonment of mission by the Army, Harrison aggressively embarked upon a policy of stripping Moroland of its separate status and forcibly integrating the Muslims into the overwhelmingly Christian-oriented body politic of the newly-emerging Philippine nation to be. And that same Philippine body politic soon underwent wrenching change of its own. Harrison abolished the Philippine Commission and created an elected bi-cameral legislature, a Senate and a House of Representatives, shifting all legislative power into Filipino hands. In an action he described as “Filipinization”, Harrison began the wholesale replacement of American civil servants with Filipinos at all levels of the Executive branch, including cabinet heads. The net result was to place the Nacionalista Party in effective control of the governance of the Philippines, and in turn inherit the “guardianship” of their Moro cousins.

In December 1913 Pershing left on schedule and Harrison appointed a civilian administrator, Frank Carpenter, to succeed him as Governor of Moro Province. The next month, General Bell ordered all American Regular Army units to withdraw from Moroland, leaving behind a single battalion of Scouts in their place. By all accounts, Frank Carpenter was energetic, honest, and devoted to his duties, and provided the Moros with the most efficient and effective government of the entire American period of control. He attracted private beneficiaries from the U.S. to open trade and academic schools among the Moros and was sincere in efforts to improve their lot. But for the next six years Carpenter’s most important charge was to systematically work himself out of a job.

On May 5, 1920 the transition to control by the Philippine legislature was completed. Mindanao and Sulu were broken up into seven separate provinces, each reporting to the new bureaucracy in Manila. To help ease the transition, the leadership of the Nacionalista Party and the new Filipino Governors of the southern provinces, initiated what they termed a “policy of attraction” towards the Moros, the objective being to win them over to the new government. But notably all of Moroland was only allocated three appointed representatives in the legislature and given almost no say in their own affairs from that point on.

In perusing Constabulary records from 1914 through 1920, it is notable that the number of battles and skirmishes in Sulu and Lanao saw little change over the next seven years of civilian government from that of many years of Army control. The first Americans to die in active combat with Moros had occurred in May of 1902. The last American death to die in fighting in Moroland was 1st Lt. Charles C. LaRoche of the Constabulary in September of 1918, sixteen years later. With thousands of American doughboys dying in France, the milestone went unnoticed.

Dr. Sixto Aroso was a young doctor who in 1921 had been among the many ambitious and idealistic young northern Filipinos who went south to implement the “policy of attraction” with their “fellow Malays.” But a half century later, in 1970, Aroso observed that the Moros had still not accepted the new Republic. “Nominally our Muslim brothers are governed by the laws of the [Philippine] Republic. In reality, however, their mode of life is directed in large part by the tenets of the Luwaran Code..., universally accepted...and held sacred next to that of the Koran.... Many
of their customs are given the force of law, and many laws have lost validity because they contradict the prevailing customs of the region.”

Despite wrenching changes imposed on their fate by the Spanish, the Americans, and subsequent regimes in Manila, the Moros clung to their identities. It was almost a parallel universe; a pattern that would continue though the rest of the 20th Century and into the 21st, the large majority of Christians and Muslims still living in two parallel, divergent, and seemingly irreconcilable worlds.

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i Vic Hurley, The Swish of the Kris, 188.
ii Gowing, "Mandate in Moroland", Chapter X.
iii Dr. Sixto Aroso, MD, The Sulu Archipelago And Its People, (Yonkers, NY: World Book Company, 1923, 150.