

*Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission.* By Michael Adas. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006. 542 pp. Index, notes, illustrations. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 0-674-01867-2.

Reviewed by Robert W. Rydell

This is an important book. Sweeping in its coverage of American history from the middle of the nineteenth century, when Commodore Perry made contact with Japanese shoguns, to the near present, when the United States finds itself combating the Iraqi insurgency, *Dominance by Design* explores the technological imperatives that drive much of U.S. foreign policy. I have no doubt that this book will be required reading in many colleges and universities; my hope is that it finds a place on the reading lists at U.S. military academies as well.

*Dominance by Design* is constructed of a series of chapters that spotlight, in succession, white-Indian relations, continental expansion, the war in the Philippines, the construction of the Panama Canal, the rise of the "American century" and development of modernization theory, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War. In the hands of a less skilled writer, this case-study approach might well have generated a collection of essays. But Michael Adas always comes back to his argument, namely, that America's technological prowess, joined to its "civilizing rhetoric" (p. 409), has powered a "techno-hubris" (p. 412) that threatens the future of America's experiment with democracy and its efforts to build a multiethnic republic.

The sources of this development are many, but Adas highlights two that command attention. The first is America's war against Filipino insurgents that lasted from 1899 until just before the First World War; the second is the outgrowth of that conflict—the development of modernization theory.

America's war in the Philippines, the not-so-splendid extension of the "splendid little war" with Spain, remains one of the better-kept secrets in American history. College-level textbooks have begun to underscore its importance in shaping the future of American foreign policy; high-school texts, on the other hand, treat this insurgency as a minor skirmish, barely worthy of mention. Adas presents an important perspective—one

that may pry loose the cover that has been nailed over this war to prevent unpleasant information about water torture, rape, and massacres of civilians in the past from suggesting continuities with present. For Adas, the war in the Philippines was not just a military conflict; it was “a vast engineering project” (p. 144). “When subject peoples were viewed in terms of a set of technical problems that could be addressed by institutional adjustments and technological inputs geared to material increase,” he writes, “American ignorance of the Filipinos’ customs, beliefs, and modes of social interaction appeared unimportant” (p. 146). Indeed, American colonial officials brought to the Philippines a set of attitudes toward reform inspired by ideals of efficiency and vocational training and influenced by both racial and gender attitudes that made the Philippines fundamentally unstable for several generations to come.

Ideas for engineering the Philippines, according to Adas, followed from the Enlightenment view that progress is inexorably linked to the exploitation of the environment. For Americans, the Philippines became a laboratory, not only for testing earlier ideas, but also for creating a body of theory and practice that, a generation later, would come to be known as modernization theory. This theory, best articulated by W. W. Rostow’s *Stages of Economic Growth*, provided the explanation for “the pattern that emerged first under the progressive, improving U.S. colonial regime in the Philippines, and shortly thereafter in the Caribbean and Central America,” where “high-tech mega-projects were substituted for basic social reforms and redistribution of economic assets” (p. 277). Over the course of the twentieth century, “while human misery increased exponentially over much of the globe, the superpowers profligately expended time, vast resources, and much of their scientific and technical expertise on nuclear weaponry and proxy wars to determine which of their systems truly offered (to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln) the last, best hope for humankind” (p. 279). Making the world modern, in short, has resulted in new patterns of dominance and subordination that have put human beings around the globe at risk.

As good as it is, *Dominance by Design* will generate some criticism. For instance, while Adas is surely right about the technological imperatives embedded in American culture, he applies a certain inexorable quality to them that makes the future seem awfully bleak. Perhaps it is. But there has always been a countercurrent of cultural

and political criticism that has challenged the designs of imperial-minded, self-described deciders. This was certainly the case with respect to the insurgency in the Philippines (think of Mark Twain), and it pertains in the case of Iraq (Pat Oliphant's cartoons come to mind). Dominance and dissent have coexisted in a state of tension in American history, and what is embedded in American culture can sometimes be removed (think of slavery). Can the technological imperatives that have driven America's civilizing mission be similarly rethought? Adas is pessimistic (realistic?). But his sustained critique may lead some to reflect on the wisdom and urgency of Antonio Gramsci's injunction to adopt "pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will."

*Robert W. Rydell is professor of history at Montana State University, Bozeman and is the author of multiple books on world's fairs.*