

# An Enemy You Can Depend On: Trump, Pershing's Bullets, and the Folklore of the War on Terror

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## Abstract

This essay, adapted and expanded from an article published in *Foreign Affairs*, explores the origins of the legend used by Donald Trump to justify torture and war crimes against terrorists that Gen. John “Black Jack” Pershing had Muslim prisoners in the Philippines shot with bullets dipped in pigs’ blood. While the story is patently false, it is worth revising Pershing’s knowledge that his men attempted to terrorize Philippine Muslims with pigskin burials, while asking what widespread American beliefs about Islam the story traded in. Approached in this way, the Pershing legend emerges not just as Trumpian fabrication, but as an archetypal parable of the “war on terror.”

**Keywords:** Pershing, Philippines, Moro, historical legend, terror



**Gary Cooper: A still from the 1939 colonialist action movie "The Real Glory": William Canavan (Gary Cooper) confronts a treacherous datu who has been pretending to aid American forces.**

The most intriguing thing about Donald Trump’s speeches and tweets about General Pershing around 1910—which claim he had his men shoot 49 captured terrorists in the Philippines with pig-dipped bullets in order to terrorize the rest—is not that he made the story up. That the tale is a fabrication is not pattern breaking when it comes to Trump’s general approach to history, or reality. One thing that is distinctive about the yarn is that it may qualify as the quintessential Trumpian use of history: the story’s naked and brutal hatred of Islam, its romance of aggressive, martial masculinity, its raw violence and obsession with blood released from bodies point squarely to its teller.

But while important, it’s not enough to simply call out a uniquely mendacious demagogue for playing fast and loose with historical facts for his own purposes. It is far more illuminating to ask why Trump has repeatedly (most recently, in response to an attack in Barcelona) chosen to transport his audiences to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century’s colonialist pith-helmet tropics. Where does the story come from, how does it work, who is it meant to hail, and why—those exultant audiences—has it hailed them? Without doubt, the fable reveals more about its speaker than most would ever want to know. But what does it say about America?

Here is how Trump introduced the legend to

supporters at a campaign rally in North Charleston, South Carolina on February 19, 2016, the day before the state's Republican primary. He's about a half-hour into his stump speech, mocking his rivals' leeriness about talking about water-boarding—"your minimal, minimal, minimal torture"—and embracing it and more extreme measures as necessary to counter ruthless, medieval-style decapitators. He baits his audience. "You know, I read a story, it's a terrible story, but I'll tell you," he says. "Should I tell you, or should I not?" There are cheers. Trump proceeds. It's early in the last century, he says, and Gen. Pershing—"rough guy, rough guy"—is facing a terrorism problem, somewhere. Trump doesn't say outright who the terrorists are, but "there's a whole thing with swine, and animals and pigs, and you know the story, OK? They don't like that."

Pershing sits upright on his horse, "very astute"—Trump chops his hand straight downward—"like a ramrod." He catches fifty terrorists who have done "tremendous damage and killed many people." He has fifty of his men take fifty bullets and dip them in pigs' blood. Then they line up the prisoners and shoot forty-nine of them. To the fiftieth, Pershing says: "You go back to your people and you tell them what happened." Pershing's approach to terrorism works: "For twenty-five years, there wasn't a problem. OK?" The crowd roars, and Trump's repeats the happy ending, then concludes with an ominous message. "So we better start getting tough, and we better start getting vigilant, and we better start using our heads," he warns, "or we're not going to have a country, folks."

The story is a hit, and Trump takes it on the road. He tells it again ten days' later at a rally in Radford, Virginia, this time setting it in the Philippines. He always inserts the tale right after he's primed the audience by imitating someone in the Middle East slicing off the heads of Christians, then mocking the United

States' weak, law-bound responses. The message is always the same: the enemy obeys no law, and so America must get tough and ruthless, stretching or disregarding the rules, or be defeated and humiliated. But the story's details swivel a bit in transit. Sometimes Pershing's men dump the bullets into sliced-open pigs, rather than dipping them; sometimes they splash blood around. Usually, Pershing hands the fiftieth bullet to the spared terrorist, a token of coiled mercy and threat. Sometimes Pershing's cure for terrorism lasts twenty-eight years instead of twenty-five and, on one occasion, forty-two.

In Orlando, Trump makes a revealing slip. He's explaining that Pershing has "a huge problem with" and the word "Islam" slips out. He catches himself, tries to back up. He swaps in the word "terrorism." Then he decides to charge on ahead, smashing it all together as "radical Islamic terrorism." From Dayton onward, this is the name for what Pershing is fighting, right from the start. "Some things never change, folks," he says, wearily. "Some things never change."

Journalists, historians and fact-checking websites instantly debunked the story. A writer for the *National Review* condemned Trump for falsification, endorsing war crimes, and libeling an American hero. Scholars who had studied Pershing said there was absolutely no evidence to support the account, and that the killing of prisoners of war in this way was inconsistent with Pershing's command style.

What these commentators tended to underplay or overlook was that Pershing, while he did not order the shooting of prisoners as far as we know, did participate in forms of warfare that used pigs and the threat of pigs to spread terror in Moro society. As early as April 1911, he had heard of such terrorizing approaches to the war from his commanding officer, Maj. General J. Franklin Bell. Pershing had written Bell about the recent killing of a sergeant, and

Bell replied: “I understand it has long been a custom to bury juramentados”—Moro suicide attackers—“with pigs when they kill Americans.” Bell thought this was “a good plan,” as “the prospect of going to hell instead of to heaven” would discourage them. “You can rely on me to stand by you in maintaining this custom,” he wrote. “It is the only possible thing we can do to discourage crazy fanatics.”

It’s not clear whether Pershing initiated such burials himself, received orders from his superiors, or whether soldiers under his command engaged in the practice on their own. But he later endorsed these actions, somewhat defensively, in his autobiography. Writing in the 1920s and 1930s, in a memoir published only in 2013, he recalled that *juramentado* attacks had been “materially reduced in number” by the burial of attackers’ bodies with dead pigs, “a practice that the Mohamedans held in abhorrence.” It was “not pleasant to have to take such measures,” he wrote, “but the prospect of going to hell instead of heaven sometimes deterred the would-be assassins.” So Pershing didn’t order pig-bullet massacres—of which no record has so far surfaced—but he knew of the burial of Muslim assailants with pigs and later reflected that he thought this technique was effective and necessary.

Over the decades that followed, this gruesome terror tactic made its way into Americans’ popular understanding of the war the United States had fought in the Southern Philippines. As in the slippery, twisting arc of folktale, one can see elements combined and recombined, found and lost, whispered down across the decades and overheard by half-listening listeners with their own agendas. In 1927, a Captain Herman Archer wrote of Pershing’s career in a *Chicago Tribune* feature awash in colonialist derring-do. To stop *juramentados*, had used their belief that “if they ever were sprinkled with pig’s blood they were doomed forever to their own particular hell.” According

to Archer, Pershing had “sprinkled some with pig’s blood and let them go”—with “much ceremony”—letting them know other assailants would be treated the same way. “And those drops of porcine gore,” Archer wrote “proved more powerful than bullets.”



**Hanging at a distance: The execution of three Moros in Jolo during Pershing's command in the Southern Philippines, July 21, 1911.**

In his 1938 book *Jungle Patrol*, the author Vic Hurley, a colonial adventurer, former plantation owner and honorary Third Lieutenant in the Philippine Constabulary, credited the pig burials to Colonel Alexander Rodgers of the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. According to Hurley, Rodgers “inaugurated a system of burying all dead juramentados in a common grave with the carcasses of slaughtered pigs.” Other American military officers had added “new refinements.” Some had beheaded an attacker after death and had the head sewn inside a pig carcass. “And so the rite of running juramentado, at least semi-religious in character, ceased to be in Sulu,” he wrote. The “last cases of this religious mania occurred in the early decades of the century.” Rodgers and these others had, “by taking advantage of religious prejudice,” achieved “what the bayonets and Krags had been unable to accomplish.”

The weaponizing of pigs also features prominently in the 1939 adventure film “The Real Glory.” Gary Cooper plays William Canavan, an American doctor who arrives in the Southern Philippines just as the US military is handing over control to civilian authorities and Filipino troops. They are preyed upon by Moro pirates led by the reliably sinister chieftain Alipang, who deploys fierce, seemingly unstoppable suicide warriors against them. (In a different, unfiled screenplay, a soldier refers to Alipang as “an enemy you can depend on.”) Successive commanders are killed, and Filipino troops—depicted as obedient, child-like, and cowardly—are terrified. That is, until Canavan marches onto the parade ground with a captured attacker: “genus homo moro juramentado,” he quips. Lambasting the Filipino soldiers for their fear, he has the man forced onto a pig skin. He wails and pleads; the Filipinos are stunned, then emboldened. “How can you be afraid of that worm crawling on the ground, howling for mercy, begging for help?” Canavan hollers. “Scared out of his skin by the skin of a dead pig!” The Filipinos are transformed. They walk past a straw dummy of Alipang and, for the first time, they jeer. One of them jabs it with his bayonet.

It’s still unclear what kept the various versions and elements of the story alive across the decades that stretched between *The Real Glory* and the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (One strong possibility is the well-established fact that the Colt .45 was adopted as the US Army’s standard-issue sidearm in response to Pershing’s request for a weapon that could stop on-rushing *juramentados*, where .38-caliber weapons didn’t. Based on personal, anecdotal evidence, this fragment appears to be one of the few things commonly known among Americans about US colonial rule in the Philippines. Upon hearing that I research these themes, dozens of history buffs over the years have suddenly related the Pershing Colt .45 origin story to me or asked me if it’s true.)

But one thing is certain: the Pershing pigs’ blood story, in its fully elaborated form, is the child of 9/11, rising as the debris settled in Lower Manhattan. Just weeks after the attacks, the story had emerged full-blown, crafted to turn Americans’ rage, shame and fear of 9/11 into vengeful, Islamophobic violence. As early as September 21, 2001, emails carrying pigs’ blood stories were ricocheting across the Internet; one was entitled “HOW TO STOP ISLAMIC TERRORISTS... it worked once in our History...” They elaborated the pig story in the outlines that Trump would later employ. There’s the take-home point: “Once in U. S. history an episode of Islamic terrorism was very quickly stopped.” The stage is set: it’s the Southern Philippines “around 1911” (Pershing served as governor of Moro Province from 1909-1913; was it just coincidental that the date the authors chose happened to have “911” in it?). Pershing’s men shoot captured terrorists with pig-dipped bullets and bury their bodies with pig guts. The terrorists aren’t afraid of dying—they welcome it—but they’re afraid contamination with pigs will prevent them from entering a promised martyr’s heaven full of virgins. “Thus the terrorists were terrorized,” one email reads.

Within weeks, versions of the narrative were in play at high levels of policy-making. In an interview in October, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Senator Bob Graham, referred to conversations he’d had at a recent dinner with members of the intelligence community about how far US’s tactics could go in the newly-declared “war on terror.” The dialogue, he said, had “ranged in part” on “how U. S. military commander ‘Black Jack’ Pershing used Islam’s prohibition on pork to help crush an insurgency on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao.” Graham explained that US soldiers had captured twelve Muslims, killed six with “bullets dipped into the fat of pigs,” wrapped them in funeral shrouds made of pigskin and “buried them face down so they could not see Mecca.” They also “poured



the entrails of the pigs over them.” The other six had been forced to watch. “And that was the end of the insurrection in Mindanao,” Graham said.

The story had legs. In December the following year, the *National Review* (apparently not yet aware of the story’s falsehood and libel), applauded Pershing’s strategic use of pigs against Muslim enemies, drawing on the story specifics that Graham had (six terrorists, entrails, the spared messenger, the rebellion’s end.) At some point, a poster featuring the fable was posted on a wall inside the California National Guard’s Civil Support Division, an agency which had been established to carry out anti-terrorism operations in the state. “Maybe it is time for this segment of history to repeat itself, maybe in Iraq?” it read. “The question is, where do we find another Black Jack Pershing?”

A scandal over the poster erupted in the summer of 2005, two years into the Iraq War, when it was spotted by antiwar activists. Critics had accused the Division of surveilling American citizens during a Mother’s Day protest against the Iraq War, and been invited to its Sacramento headquarters for an inspection tour meant to reassure them. While there, the visitors—Muslim leaders, a state senator, and peace activists—caught sight of the poster as they were preparing to leave. The Council on American-Islamic Relations issued a statement of protest. “It is troubling to see a governmental organization that is dedicated to security, promoting religiously insensitive ideas,” said William Youmans, its media relations spokesman. “It’s very possible to combat terrorism without offending the cultural values of a major world religion.” A guard spokesman, Lt. Col. Doug Hart, defended the poster as “historically accurate,” but it was quickly removed. (An army investigation into the allegations of domestic spying by the Division found “questionable activities” that might have included “egregious violations of

intelligence laws, policies or procedures”; the Division was quietly disbanded.)

By this point, as the Bush administration and its allies defended the invasion of Iraq as part of an expansive, boundless “war on terror,” the US colonial experience in the Philippines was back with a vengeance. Military historian Max Boot wrote in 2002 that the United States’ war in the Philippines represented “one of the most successful counter-insurgencies waged by a Western army in modern times,” celebrating the United States’ garrisoning of the countryside, its intelligence operations, and the training and discipline of its soldiers. In a summer 2003 article in the *Atlantic*, “Supremacy by Stealth: Ten Rules for Managing the World,” foreign affairs writer and Defense Department consultant Robert D. Kaplan made Rule #7 “Remember the Philippines.” Like Boot, Kaplan attempted to recuperate the Philippine-American War, praising the US military’s reliance on decentralized, locally adaptive commands, its interrogation of prisoners, and its exploitation of ethnic divisions. There were valuable lessons to be learned. Given the challenges the US faced, “our experience a century ago in the anarchic Philippines” was newly relevant.

So why did the Pershing parable’s disparate elements find each other, snap together, and take off when they did after 9/11? The Pershing pig story is not just the archetypal Trump story; it’s also an archetypal “war on terror” story. The particular kind of conflict the United States has repeatedly engaged in since 9/11—without geographic or temporal limits, often without ethical or legal stricture, undertaken in the name of maximalist principles of freedom and civilization embodied in, safeguarded by, and outwardly imposed by one particular nation, and one in which victory was difficult if not impossible to gauge—badly needed a story like this one. One might say that if this specific tale of prowess, violence and mastery had not existed, the advocates of a US-led global war

on terror would have had to invent it. It didn't, and they did.

First and foremost, it's a myth about how Islam and terrorism connect. It holds that they are more or less identical. The religious, theological or ritual connections are not always specified; indeed, that they don't require explanation is part of the point. This linkage renders any Muslim-identified community—or country—suspect until, or after, being proven “innocent.” In fact, the question of innocence is not in play: even if Islam has not “caused” terrorism in any particular case, it is understood to leave Muslims susceptible and in need of preemptive surveillance and control. Making terrorism the essence of Islam, and Islam the essence of terrorism, makes it difficult to impossible to conceive of terrorists who are not Muslim. Trump's slip of the tongue—did he mean to say Islam or terrorism?—was, in its own way, eloquent.

It's a story about the radical, intractable lines that separate “us” and “them.” They have bizarre, silly, superstitious ideas about death that we don't. Our approach to fighting, tactics and strategy—and life—is scientific and rational, while theirs is mystical and stupid. And the gap in the civilizational planes separating us—about which we are aware and they are not—prevents us from communicating with them except through violence, politics' most primal, seemingly universal language. The story is, therefore, about the impossibility of peaceful co-existence beyond relations of hierarchy and domination.

It's also about superior cultural know-how: while they are mired in dreamscapes of pigs and heaven, we have keen, anthropological insights into the (remarkably easy-to-operationalize) rules that govern their behavior. Where both 9/11 and the guerrilla warfare American forces face on the proliferating front-lines of the “war on terror” have involved unknown enemies that know the

United States' vulnerabilities and sometimes exploit them to deadly effect, the story represents a viscerally satisfying reversal: we can defeat you because we know you. It's also a classic, colonialist fantasy: the white man who scares the natives by posing as one of their gods, brandishing one of their sacred relics, or claiming to summon an eclipse he knows will terrify.

It's a story about Islam's homogeneity and all-determining character. It isn't different in one place or another: the Southern Philippines might as well be Iraq, which might as well be the international terminal at JFK or, for that matter, the ordinary-seeming family with the Prius that just moved in next door. This is a convenient way to approach cultural geography if your goal is a war without borders. According to the myth, Islam completely defines the worldview and actions of all its participants: their beliefs, practices and institutions are saturated by dangerous religious fervor. The *juramentado* and the terrorist do everything they do—especially, fight—exclusively because of Islam. When the correct religions do this, it is called devotion; when the wrong ones do, it is called fanaticism.

It's also conveys the message that Islam never changes over time. When figuring out how to deal with contemporary opponents who are Muslim, you don't need to think about what era they are living in or about their economic, political social or cultural conditions: you can go back in time (and, presumably, forward), and the beliefs and actions of those under Islam's sway will be the same. Such time travel peels away confusing layers of modernity—what to make of their use of cell phones and Twitter?—revealing an unchanging core beneath.

Relatedly, it's about the dream of returning to the good old days before the Geneva Conventions of 1949 or, even further, to a time before the United States' adoption of a code of

military regulation. Here the fantasy has to go into overdrive: during the years of Pershing's service, the U. S. military in the Philippines was actually operating under General Orders No. 100

<https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/bookviewer?PID=nlm:nlmuid-101534687-bk>, which barred the intentional abuse of prisoners of war. Trump's Pershing doesn't consult American or international rulebooks about the treatment of prisoners of war, even to reject them. Such laws are for losers. The violence Pershing deploys springs only from his individual will and what needs to get done.

In the largest sense, the fable is about the ways that propaganda which smells sufficiently like history can preempt a serious wrestling with the past by seizing the place in our collective memory that should be dedicated to events that actually happened. What other actual histories might justifiably take the place in our collective memory currently occupied by this fabricated, mythological one?



**Bagsak trench: A photograph taken of a trench at Bud Bagsak, where Gen. Pershing's forces killed several hundred Moros, including non-combatants.**

Pershing did not tell his men to kill forty-nine prisoners with pig-bullets. What he and his forces did do, and what we aren't talking about while we're talking about this myth, was carry out a brutal campaign of colonial conquest and pacification in the Southern Philippines. As the commander of the US military government there, Pershing's task was to disarm Moro fighters, compel local communities to pay taxes, and create conditions safe for U. S. colonial rule, trade and investment. In June 1913, several thousand Moros who refused to submit to US military authority withdrew to fortifications inside the extinct volcanic crater

of Bud Bagsak. Pershing hoped to starve them out. Concerned about a possible mass killing of non-combatants, however, as had happened in 1906 when U. S. forces massacred Moros at the crater of Bud Dajo, Pershing made arrangements so that those who desire to leave could do so. Then, on June 11th, his forces attacked. In the end, five days of hard fighting left several hundred Moros, including non-combatants, and fourteen US soldiers, dead. The resistance was broken. "Submission to law and authority is complete," Pershing reported the following January.

Bud Bagsak helped launch the Pershing legend, to which Trump would later attach himself. One observer noted in 1917 that, in officers' clubs, "not a night goes by but [one] hears a rehearsal of the story of the battle of Bagsak," when Pershing, with "a handful of men," had charged up the sacred mountain and taken its supposedly unconquerable fortress. In 1940, Pershing received the Distinguished Service Cross for his "extraordinary heroism in action against hostile, fanatical Moros" there. But others hoped to see histories like this fade. When, in 1938, Colonel Adelno Gibson submitted an article to *Military Engineer* that made reference to Bud Bagsak, it was rejected; the Chief of the Chemical Warfare Service said that the battles of Bud Dajo and Bud Bagsak "represent incidents which should not be unduly publicized." He feared Gibson's "discussion of these actions may revive public attention to military operations that might well remain forgotten."



**Knocking out the Moros: This romanticized image of American campaigns against the Moros, entitled "Knocking out the Moros: The U. S. Army in Action," was commissioned by the Department of the Army in 1953 as a recruitment poster.**

As the result of such deliberate erasures, the killings at Bud Bagsak and similar events are "forgotten," at least by some. In their place, we build for ourselves—telling and retelling, enlisting and reworking—histories like the ones that Trump tells us: about a resolute military commander, a savage enemy, a cunning tactic, and a winnable war. Such fictions authorize, then forgive, then marginalize the massacres of the past, in order to do the same for those currently underway and those yet to come. At their most ambitious, these tales can help us forget such violence before it takes place. That history's lessons about this process are elusive may prove the most meaningful lesson of all.

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