

War Is Health: U.S. Military Medicine and Police Power at the Edges of Empire

Michael Willrich
Brandeis University

This paper presents original research from my work-in-progress: a history of the great wave of smallpox epidemics that struck the United States and its new overseas territories at the turn of the twentieth century, spurring the growth of modern public health authority and engendering widespread social, legal, and political opposition to the government policy of compulsory vaccination. The book aims to deepen historical knowledge of the struggles for personal liberties that attended the growth of institutional power in America during the Progressive Era.

During the Spanish-American War of 1898 and its colonial aftermath, the U.S. government attempted in Puerto Rico and the Philippines something it could not possibly have tried on the mainland: to wage an aggressive military campaign of disease eradication using strategies of population surveillance, sanitation, and, wholesale vaccination. The government's campaigns against epidemic smallpox in the new overseas possessions began as a necessity of war and occupation—a classic *cordon sanitaire* to protect the troops against “native” disease. But the tropical campaigns against smallpox developed into something much larger: a “great sanitary undertaking” that, along with other campaigns against bubonic plague, yellow fever, and cholera would foster the development of new medical knowledge and public health technologies, protect American lives and commercial interests, and, most grandly, demonstrate the moral righteousness and technical superiority of U.S. militarism and colonialism.

Building upon a formidable historical literature about European colonial health systems, historians of American medicine have recently published a number of fascinating studies of U.S. colonial health interventions in the tropics. The historical relationship of these interventions to American legal institutions and domestic politics, however, has received very little scholarly attention. In my paper, I'll show that in their war against smallpox, Army Medical Department surgeons and U.S. colonial health officers drew upon the long American tradition of police power. Public health stood at the center of that tradition. In the American system of government, judges and law-makers had often likened public health authority to the power of the sovereign to protect the people from invasion. Here in the new tropical possessions, that old analogy took on a violent new literalism. Absent the institutions of popular sovereignty and due process (which the Americans planned to withhold until the indigenous peoples proved themselves fit for a measure of self-government), police power was military power. The Army's smallpox eradication campaigns far exceeded the normal bounds of the police tradition, which had always been assumed to originate in the sovereignty of local communities of free people. The scale and scope of governmental intervention were greater, the colonial space was different, and the fact that an institution of the national government—the U.S. Army—was undertaking these measures was altogether revolutionary.