

THE PHILIPPINE INDEPENDENCE CONTROVERSY
FROM MCKINLEY TO TAFT: THE POLITICS OF
ACCOMMODATION

RAWLEIN G. SOBERANO

READERS OF PHILIPPINE HISTORY COME ACROSS MANY QUESTIONS that could be raised in the area of the independence controversy during the American Occupation to clarify issues that finally led to the granting of self-rule in 1946. Did William McKinley have in mind the welfare of the Filipinos when he decided to annex the Islands? Did Theodore Roosevelt justify American annexation in view of the "Filipino incapacity for self-rule," because the latter was not of the Anglo-Saxon race, in order to promote American commercial penetration in the Far East? Was William H. Taft free from the clutches of the clandestine imperialism of the Republican Philippine policy?

This paper will go deeper into the controversy and deal with the American atrocities that were levelled against individuals and groups who showed opposition to the intruders, the debates for and against annexation among American legislators in the United States Congress, the division among the commanding officers of the invading army and the Filipino response to this changing scene.

The strained relations existing between Filipinos and Americans in 1900 are easily traceable from the war of the preceding years. For the Filipinos it could be safely said that there was never any faltering or any concealment of what they wanted. They knew what they were struggling for, and they had made it plain that independence was the goal for which they had pledged their lives, their possessions and their honor.¹ Even before the start of the hostilities between the Americans and the Filipinos, there was no doubt at all as to what the Filipino leaders had set as their goal. In a letter to McKinley, they were very clear "that independence signifies for us redemption from slavery and tyranny, regaining our liberty and entrance into the concert of civilized nations."² On the other hand, the policy of Washington had been so vague and evasive that the American public did not know the true state of affairs.

¹ Archibald C. Coolidge, *The United States as a World Power* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1927), p. 154.

² U.S., Congress, Senate, *Treaty of Peace*, S. Doc. 62, 55th Cong., 3rd sess., 1899, p. 561.

The period from 1900 to 1905 was properly described as the "period of suppressed nationalism."³ The only political party permitted to function in the Philippines during this time was the *Partido Federal* which advocated annexation by the United States. However it did not win popular support among the masses.

To manifest the Filipino antipathy against American suppression of their freedom, nationalistic plays were staged. Among them could be cited *Walang Sugat* (No Wound) by Severino Reyes; *Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas* (Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow) by Amelio Tolentino; *Hindi Ako Patay* (I Am Not Dead) by Juan Cruz Matapang; *Pag-ibig sa Lupang Tinubuan* (Love of One's Own Native Land) by P.H. Poblete; and *Tanikalang Guinto* (Golden Chain) by Juan Abad.⁴

A strong argument to retain the Philippines was the commercial trade opportunities for the United States by expanding its foothold in East Asia. This was looked upon as a threat by the big powers already entrenched in the area that wanted to eliminate American intrusion into the commerce of China.⁵

It was McKinley himself who summed up his administration's stand on whether or not to annex the Philippines. Denying any imperialistic venture, he made this clear in his second inaugural address when he said:

Our institutions will not deteriorate by extension, and our sense of justice will not abate under tropic suns in the distant seas. If there are those among us who would make our way difficult, we must not be disheartened, but the more earnestly dedicate ourselves to the task upon which we have rightly entered.⁶

As a whole there was a general desire for peace from both sides. In a letter from the Promotor Fiscal to the Military Governor, it was mentioned that in a meeting with General Trias, the latter indicated his wish for peace and the people's desire to go back to their everyday chores. However, he pointed at the difference of attitude between those who were in favor of and those who were against the continuation of hostilities. Those who opposed the peace movement fell into various degrees of opposition to it. As he described them:

Those who are least opposed are those who have nothing to lose and who imperiously demand recognition of their deeds. Those who are firmly

³ W. Cameron Forbes, *The Philippine Islands*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1928), Vol. II, pp. 339-340.

⁴ Gregorio F. Zaide, *Philippine Political and Cultural History*, 2 vols. (Manila: McCullough Printing Co., 1961), Vol. II, p. 238.

⁵ Norman A. Graebner, *An Uncertain Tradition* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co. Inc., 1961), p. 29.

⁶ James D. Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1907*, 11 vols. (New York: Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1908), Vol. X, pp. 242 ff.

opposed . . . do not wish for the war ever to cease, because they are bandits and there is no other remedy left than to exterminate them.⁷

Meanwhile, the anti-imperialists in the United States were holding rallies protesting against the Republican colonial policy. In one such rally in Boston, proofs were produced to support their accusations that prisoners were not taken in battle. Fatalities exceeded the wounded five to one. Captured and disarmed prisoners were shot without trial or opportunity for defense. There was the seizure of all males whether combatants or not, and the herding of women and children into deserts and mountains. Famine and pestilence were made inevitable by systematic burning of homes and authorized waste of growing grains and fertile fields. Tortures unto death were inflicted upon persons only suspected of holding secrets of hostile import. There was the forcible extortion of secrets of religious brotherhoods from priests or ministers and the indiscriminate slaughter of all male children from age ten up.⁸ Some American officers were even named because of their ruthless barbarism.⁹

Senator Edward W. Carmack of Tennessee cried out loudly against these ignominious perpetrations: "Did these not constitute a license to all of the criminal elements in the Army?"¹⁰ Moreover, this perfidy was not reserved for Filipino soldiers and civilians alone. There was the case of Private Edward G. Richter of Syracuse, New York who was tortured to death by Lieutenant William B. Sinclair of Company I, 28th Infantry.¹¹

Defending the position of the Filipinos, Senator Henry M. Teller of Colorado pointed out that the Filipinos did not owe any allegiance to the United States. This allegiance was due to Spain, which had no right to transfer said allegiance to another country. She transferred by treaty her sovereignty over the soil, but she could not sell the nine or ten million people there. They were resisting Spain at the very time the United States made this treaty and were believed by most people to be capable of maintaining that position against Spain and of winning their independence if they were left alone.¹²

Some argued in favor of independence on the basis of the equality of man:

⁷ Letter, Jose Ner to General Elwell S. Otis, August 8, 1900, Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division, *William McKinley Papers*, Series 1, Reel 11.

⁸ *Mass Meetings of Protest Against the Suppression of Truth about the Philippine Islands*, Faneuil Hall, March 19, 1903 (Boston: n.p., 1903), pp. 1-58.

⁹ *To Lincoln's Plain People*, "Facts Regarding 'Benevolent Assimilation' in the Philippine Islands," (Philadelphia: "City and State," 1903), pp. 2-4.

¹⁰ "Court-Martial in the Philippines," *Speech before the U.S. Senate*, February 9, 1903 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), p. 7.

¹¹ "Court-Martial in the Philippines," pp. 11-12.

¹² U.S., Congress, Senate, 57th Cong., 1st sess., Feb. 12, 1902, *Congressional Record*, XXXV, 1640-1641.

Freedom is as sacred to every true-hearted man and woman in the Philippines as in Cuba, or America, and justice and honor are equally binding everywhere . . . The horrors of war still hang like a death pall over this people struggling bravely to be free, but if we are true to our trust of the ages . . . it will soon cease in a blessed peace, by the bestowal of constitutional liberty in accordance with Republican principles.¹³

The voice of those who upheld the middle ground could be heard too. Jacob G. Schurman, who headed the First Philippine Commission, was adamant in discouraging the proposal for Philippine incorporation into the Union. Because no political party would propose such an insane program, he was in favor of Philippine independence, the date of which was to be set jointly by both Americans and Filipinos. He also suggested active partnership with educated Filipinos in the government of the Islands to eliminate atrophy in their capacity for self-government. In this way they would learn "to govern themselves in the manner of the really free nations."¹⁴

The military was not unanimous in approving the Republican approach. Admiral William T. Sampson was opposed to the idea of the United States acquiring a colonial territory in a far distant land because it would endanger the United States and make her vulnerable to attack by another foreign power. As he clearly put it:

It is insisted that we must have permanent territorial expansion in order to extend our trade. . . . I do not think so. I have been strongly inclined to think that in the long run, with all the embarrassment and complication and dangers it will bring upon our peoples, it will retard rather than develop the foreign trade of the United States. We have been growing rapidly in our trade without territorial expansion. To acquire distant, non-assimilable peoples in order, through permanent dominion, to force our trade upon them seems to me to be the poorest imaginable national policy.¹⁵

Another military man, General J. F. Bell, was ambiguous when he called the Filipinos unfit for self-rule, while on the other hand he praised Aguinaldo for his sincerity, honesty and natural gift for leadership and his adjutants "most of whom are young, smart and well educated."¹⁶ He admired their determination to resist any country which might move in again and make of them a colony the way Spain did.

The official American policy expressed in the Philippine Government Act of July 1, 1902 had been first indicated as early as Decem-

¹³ H. H. Van Meter, *The Truth About the Philippines from Official Records and Authentic Sources* (Chicago: The Liberty League, 1900), p. 427. See also Washington, D.C., *National Archives*, Bureau of Insular Affairs, File 364-46.

¹⁴ Jacob G. Schurman, *Philippine Affairs, A Retrospect and Outlook* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), pp. 88-89.

¹⁵ U.S., Congress, Senate, 57th Cong., 1st sess., May 31, 1902, *Congressional Record*, XXXV, Appendix, 365.

¹⁶ 57th Cong., 1st sess., May 31, 1902, *Congressional Record*, XXXV, 450.

ber, 1898 when President McKinley instructed General Elwell Otis to follow a policy of benevolent assimilation. The policy was further refined in the Letter of Instruction of April, 1900 to the members of the American Commission to the Philippines that the American policy was not for "the satisfaction or . . . experiment of our theoretical views, but for the happiness, peace and prosperity of the Filipinos themselves."¹⁷ It was then expanded in the Philippine Government Act of 1902 as a policy whose goal was the progressive extension of self-government to the Filipinos as they became better qualified to accept responsibility, and the securing to them of all the basic freedoms except the right to trial by jury and the right to bear arms.¹⁸ Independence was not promised them, though Governor William H. Taft admitted that such was an inevitable conclusion.

When Theodore Roosevelt took over the presidency after the assassination of McKinley, army brutality in the Philippines was still a hot issue in the American Congress and among many Americans in general. In a letter to the postmaster-general, dated March 20, 1903 on the alleged brutalities of the American soldiers in suppressing the native insurrections which were being given much coverage in the press, Roosevelt demanded the immediate withdrawal of American troops and gave orders that the Filipinos be left to rule themselves. He further instructed Governor Taft to appoint a commission to investigate the conduct of the military and to verify their alleged brutalities.¹⁹

On the other hand, he extolled America's work in the Islands. Speaking in Memphis on November 19, 1902, he said:

There is no question as to our not having gone far enough and fast enough in granting self-government to the Filipinos; the only possible danger has been lest we should go faster and further than was in the interest of the Filipinos themselves. Each Filipino at the present day is guaranteed his life, his liberty and the chance to pursue happiness as he wishes, so long as he does not harm his fellows, in a way which the islands have never known before during all their recorded history.²⁰

However, the Filipinos, in a letter to President Roosevelt reiterated their aspirations for independence which, in no way, were recent nor connected with the arrival of the American land forces.

¹⁷ U.S., Congress, House, "Philippine Local Autonomy," *Hearings before the Committee on Insular Affairs on H.R. 8856*, 68th Cong., 1st sess., April 30-May 6, 1924, p. 2.

¹⁸ Charles Burke Elliott, *The Philippines: To the End of the Military Regime* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1916), pp. 34-43.

¹⁹ Joseph Bucklin Bishop, ed., *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, 24 vols., *Theodore Roosevelt and His Time, Shown in His Own Letters*, Vol. XXIII (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923-1926), p. 219.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

Neither were such aspirations under the influence of "a few politico-military adventurers." As they described it:

A review of the present situation also will show that this aspiration has lost none of its force. All the reverses which our people have met with, and all the rigors of war in which, in many respects, mercy has not been conspicuous, have not lessened their determination to continue the defense at whatever sacrifice. . . . The consequent temporary decrease in our defensive operations has proved to be simply an example of the ebb and flow which accompany all military conflicts. The surrender of some of our generals has served to separate the chaff from the wheat: whilst the taking of both allegiance [sic] by a number of our people may, in cases where sordid motives did not enter, be attributed to causes other than that of desire for American rule or a surrender of their aspiration for independence.²¹

Governor Taft disagreed with the Filipino position, stating:

In the Philippine Islands, ninety per cent of the inhabitants are still in a hopeless condition of ignorance, and utterly unable intelligently to wield political control. They are subject like the waves of the sea to the influence of the moment, and any educated Filipino can carry them in one direction or another, as the opportunity and occasion shall permit.²²

President Roosevelt echoed the same concern, pointing out that the exigencies of war were the determinants for taking possession of the Islands towards whose inhabitants the American people had since behaved with disinterested zeal for their progress. To leave the Islands at that time would have meant "desertion of duty on our part"²³ and a crime against humanity. He then added that self-government took Americans thirty generations to achieve; this could not be expected of another race in only thirty years' time.

Roosevelt indicated that the condition of the Filipinos as far as material growth was concerned, was far better than ever before, and that their political, intellectual and moral advance had kept pace with their material progress. "No people ever benefitted another people more than we have benefitted the Filipinos by taking possession of the Islands."²⁴ Roosevelt praised the work of the Philippine Legislature, but cautioned against haste in setting an exact date for the independence of the Islands:

No one can prophesy the exact date when it will be wise to consider independence as a fixed and definite policy. It would be worse than folly

²¹ Comite Central Filipino, *To the President of the United States of America* (Hongkong: n.p., 1901), pp. 4-6.

²² William H. Taft, "The Philippine Islands," *An Address before the New York Chamber of Commerce*, April 21, 1904 (New York: n.p., 1904), p. 9.

²³ Bishop, *op. cit.*, *The Books of Theodore Roosevelt, State Papers as Governor and President, 1899-1909*, Vol. XVII (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p. 128.

²⁴ Bishop, *Roosevelt State Papers*, p. 223.

to try to set down such a date in advance, for it must depend upon the way in which the Philippine people themselves develop the power of self-mastery.²⁵

Supporters for the administration were not wanting. After having gone through and studied extensively the islands of Luzon and Visayas in three hectic months, David H. Doherty, a medical doctor and member of the Anti-Imperialist League, praised the Republican policy which he said "was actuated by the loftiest principles."²⁶ He commented on the benefits that would befall the Filipinos if they remained under the tutelage of the United States. He also praised the civil government for its service to the people and its dedication to duty.

The opposition was strong in voicing its disapproval of the Republican course. Francis G. Newlands, United States senator from Nevada, warned against tying down Philippine economy to that of the United States saying it would prove a deterrent to ultimate independence. He did not relish the idea of binding the two countries so strongly by navigation laws, tariff legislation and trade ties as to make it impossible to cut their political ties.²⁷

James H. Blount, a former Judge of the Court of First Instance in the Philippines, substantiated Bryan's statement urging the granting of independence to Filipinos. In summary, he said that:

1. The Filipinos themselves wanted independence;
2. If they were protected from the land-grabbing powers, they did not have to account for their internal affairs to any alien government. There was definitely a consciousness of racial unity. The fact that only a few elite took care of the governmental affairs was true of most countries, even democracies;
3. There was wisdom in setting a date for Philippine independence, since it provided a goal towards which to work. But he warned against an inconsistent policy—treating the Philippines as American territory when American interests were served, while treating it as foreign territory when American interests were not served.²⁸

From the beginning of the American Occupation, President Roosevelt was personally favorably inclined towards independence, but he did not reveal this attitude until sometime later. In so doing he was very careful and discreet about it. He thought that the Filipinos would not settle for anything less than independence, which though not promised to them was hinted at in the Philippine Bill of

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 632-633.

²⁶ David H. Doherty, *Conditions in the Philippines* (Washington: n.p., 1904), p. 2.

²⁷ Francis G. Newlands, "A Democrat in the Philippines," *North American Review*, Vol. DLXXXIX (December, 1905), pp. 941-943.

²⁸ James H. Blount, "Philippine Independence—When?," *North American Review*, Vol. DCVIII (January 18, 1907), pp. 146-149.

1902.²⁹ But he would not commit himself to the specific time when the American withdrawal would be. In his annual message to Congress on December 8, 1908 he said it would be foolish to rush the granting of independence to the Islands before the people had proven that they were capable of self-rule.³⁰

Unfortunately, there is a strong doubt as to how honestly Roosevelt felt toward Philippine independence. Lieutenant-General Nelson A. Miles was personally rebuked by the president for telling the truth about the conditions in the Philippines, in an inspection report. Miles fell into disfavor with the administration and was treated with utmost discourtesy.³¹

At a later date, speaking about preparedness for any military eventuality, Miles insisted that the territorial coastline of Alaska, Hawaii and the Panama Canal be protected at all times. His tone on the Philippines was different, though the reluctance to grant it independence was clearly perceptible:

I exclude the Philippines. . . . I have never felt that the Philippines were of any special use to us. But I have felt that we had a great task to perform there and that a great nation is benefitted by doing a great task.

It was our bounden duty to work primarily for the interests of the Filipinos; but it was also our bounden duty, in as much as the entire responsibility lay upon us, to consult our own judgment and not theirs in finally deciding what was to be done.³²

Many Filipinos felt at the time that not only had American Occupation not done anything for them, but also it had deprived them of benefits formerly derived from the Spanish market. Since they were not American citizens, the consideration of their progress or regress had no connection at all with the careers of public men responsible for American policies. Therefore, the only strong ground on which their appeal for justice rested was that of morality which disturbed so many consciences.³³

Taft never thought that the United States should rule the Philippines forever, but he was more strongly opposed to an official commitment to independence than Roosevelt. His support of McKinley's policy best expressed his stand on Philippine independence:

If the American Government can only remain in the Islands long enough to educate the entire people, to give them a language which enables

²⁹ Elting E. Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, 8 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951-1954), Vol. III, p. 276.

³⁰ *National Archives*, Bureau of Insular Affairs, File 364-740 I.

³¹ L.M.H., *Roosevelt, Historian—Shattering American Ideals* (Washington: n.p., 1903), p. 50.

³² Theodore Roosevelt, "The Navy as a Peacemaker," *New York Times*, November 22, 1914, p. 5.

³³ W. H. Carter, "A Plea for the Filipinos," *North American Review*, Vol. DCIX (February 15, 1907), pp. 382-385.

them to come into contact with modern civilization, and to extend to them, from time to time, additional political rights so that by the exercise of them they shall learn the use and responsibility necessary to their proper exercise, independence can be granted with entire safety.³⁴

Taft's program was founded on one great assumption, namely, that the American people were unselfish in their attitude towards Filipinos and would continue to do so. Hence they could be trusted to keep men in office who would carry out this policy, no matter how absolute a power they might be able to wield from that position. Ultimately, it was the American people who had under their guidance and control an archipelago of eight million inhabitants.³⁵ Taft held this view during his four years as president. Since he was in an advantageous position to claim personal knowledge of Philippine affairs, no one questioned his statements.³⁶

Both Roosevelt and Taft favored ultimate independence as the apex of American policy, but neither was clear in his stand for it. They thought it unwise to promise self-rule when there was no chance for its achievement during the lifetime of present national leaders. They did not favor the idea of raising false hopes that could only culminate in uselessly endangering the status quo.³⁷

The failure of both men to come out unequivocally for the Philippine Bill of 1902, the inevitable goal of which was independence, made them vulnerable to the accusation of being hypocrites. It obstructed the Filipino appreciation of American efforts and achievements during the Taft era. Meanwhile, the Filipinos continued their demand for an American policy of independence which ultimately ended in the clamor for complete and immediate self-rule in the Islands. This circumstance caused undue hardship to those Filipino leaders who would have preferred gradual American withdrawal, in view of the many benefits the Philippines reaped under the latter's rule. Such ruthless Filipino criticism of the Roosevelt-Taft policy bungled Filipino-American relations during the Taft era. In the end, this lack of a clear direction on the part of the Republican Philippine policy encouraged the formation of underground rebel groups, some of which were used as a front for the exploitation of the masses by swindlers and opportunists to serve their own selfish goals.

³⁴ U.S. War Department: Office of the Secretary, *Special Report of William H. Taft, Secretary of War, to the President on the Philippines* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1905), pp. 74-75.

³⁵ Taft, *New York Chamber of Commerce Address*, p. 1.

³⁶ Forbes, *op. cit.*, pp. 348-350.

³⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1913), pp. 543-544.