

THE AMERICAN DEBATE ON PHILIPPINE ANNEXATION AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, 1898-1900

RAWLEIN G. SOBERANO

The Philippine independence controversy constitutes one of the nebulous chapters of Philippine-American relations because the actions of the participants in the controversy were made to appear to have been motivated by noble altruism on the part of the American leaders and unquestionable nationalism on the part of the Filipino patriots. Far from it! The controversy was used by both parties to support their respective positions. Of this there is reasonable certainty. But what is more obscure are the events of approximately two years, 1898-1900, during which time a controversy raged in the United States as to whether or not to annex the Islands.

What was the real attraction of the Philippines to the United States at the time? Was it as a coaling station to facilitate her encroachment into the markets of the Far East? Was it the desire to spread the ideals of democracy? Was the United States motivated by military considerations to establish a Pacific fortress in view of the deep involvement of the European colonial powers into Chinese affairs? Was she prodded by the same imperial spirit of the times to enlarge her territorial possessions? These and more questions could be raised *ad infinitum*. However, this paper will limit itself to the heated debate that took place in both the political and private sectors in the United States after the American victory over Spain, and examine the factors that weighed on the Republican administration to take over the Philippines.

Philippine affairs took a new direction before the termination of the Spanish-American hostilities when a delegation representing Visayas and Mindanao visited the American consul in Hongkong, and voiced their aversion to Spanish and Tagal rule. They did not join the clamor for independence which they considered not only to be

mistaken but impractical.¹ This shows that they saw the inevitable clash between Spain and the United States in the Island and wanted the latter to fill up the vacuum that would result in Spain's retreat from the area.

During the war with Spain, President William McKinley had already shown interest in the Islands for trading purposes. He said at one time: "While we are conducting a war and until its conclusion we must keep all we get; and when the war is over, we must keep all that we want."²

Four months after the fighting, when the Spanish government acting through the French government finally decided to ask for peace, it was surprised at the conditions imposed by the American President. Spain tried to suggest an alternative — that the United States for \$20,000,000 would take possession of the Carolines or of the Canary Islands in addition to the Philippines, but would allow Spain to retain sovereignty over the latter.³ Her efforts to achieve this failed.

Moreover, Russia and Japan had also shown interest in the Philippines for reasons of their own in case the United States decided not to annex the Islands. Russia's motive was to prevent England's position in the Orient from becoming stronger either by having the United States as her ally or by securing additional territory without similar expansion on England's part.⁴ It is interesting to note, too, that England felt very badly at losing the opportunity of annexing the Philippines.⁵ Meanwhile, Japan told Washington that in the event that Washington did not want to administer the Islands alone, Japan would be most willing to assist her, or even do it in conjunction with still another power. This arrangement, had it materialized, would have suited Russia's plans, as it would have eliminated or at least

¹ "Request for Annexation," *New York Times*, September 4, 1898, p. 1.

² Charles S. Olcott, *The Life of William McKinley*, 2 vols. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1916), Vol. II, p. 165.

³ "Spain Is Still Wriggling," *New York Times*, November 28, 1898, p. 1.

⁴ James K. Eyre, Jr., "Russia and the American Acquisition of the Philippines," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. XXVIII (March, 1942), pp. 545-546; 551-552.

⁵ Washington, D.C. *National Archives*, Bureau of Insular Affairs, File 364-56.

lessened Japanese competition in Manchuria.⁶ But such was not the turn of events.

American historian James F. Rhodes branded McKinley as inconsistent in his public statements because in a message on December of 1897, McKinley condemned forcible annexation as incompatible with the moral code. Therefore, he concluded that from the proceedings of the Peace Commission in Paris, no justification for the "forcible annexation" of the Philippines could stand up to a moral evaluation.⁷

But another American historian, Charles S. Olcott vindicated McKinley, arguing that his decision was supported by the "law of Nations." He also underscored the fact that "Spanish sovereignty had been acknowledged by the civilized world for three hundred years and no Philippine government had ever been recognized. Indeed, no such government had ever existed except the abortive one set up by Aguinaldo which scarcely extended beyond the island of Luzon."⁸

It can be inferred from the letter of Felipe Agoncillo to Emilio Aguinaldo that the United States might not have pursued the annexation of the Philippines because of the wish of many Americans to grant it independence with Cuba. On the other hand, Agoncillo did not want the United States to withdraw from the Islands. As a matter of fact, he wanted an American fleet to be stationed in Philippine waters "to protect his government from foreign interference."⁹

American quest for adventure in Asia was not only stirred by fantasies of grandeur. If in the face of the sacred pledge to Cuba there had not been wanting counsellors who urged the retention of the Philippines for their commercial possibilities, their numbers were now augmented as the movement gained momentum. There was a glamor of romance concerning the whole project which was hard to resist. Frank A. Vanderbilt, then Assistant Secretary of Treasury, clearly put it that the Philippines were "the pickets of the Pacific,

⁶ James K. Eyre, Jr., "Japan and the American Annexation of the Philippines," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. XI (March, 1942), pp. 63, 68.

⁷ James F. Rhodes, *The McKinley and Roosevelt Administrations, 1897-1909* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1965), p. 107.

⁸ Olcott, *op. cit.* p. 185. Felipe Agoncillo was high commissioner of the "New Republic of the Philippines," established on November 2, 1897 in Biyak-na-Bato, Bulacan in open defiance against Spain.

⁹ Washington, D.C., *National Archives*, Department of State, M. 719, Roll 9.

standing guard at the entrance to trade with the millions of China and Korea, French Indo-China, the Malay Peninsula and the islands of Indonesia to the South," without excluding Australia as a possible trading partner along this new commercial route. He admitted the demise of the most revered of American political maxims and pointed to a new mainspring that "has become the directing force . . . the mainspring of commercialism."¹⁰

Thus began and thus was fostered the campaign for the retention by the United States of the Philippines. As a distributing center, with half the population of the world living within a radius of approximately 3500 miles from Manila, the Islands were an alluring treasure to acquire.

American businessmen, who generally had opted for peace instead of war, began to change their views as far as potential commercial ventures were concerned. They now looked at the Philippines as the gateway for their penetration into Asia, particularly China's markets. Some even went so far as to predict Manila as the future business Mecca of the Orient. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, the strong spokesman for commercial expansion, was serious about Manila as the great prize that would give the United States the Eastern trade.¹¹

At one time, there was strong vacillation on the part of the McKinley administration about turning the Islands back to Spain, but prodded by businessmen interested in trade with China, and at the same time by the favorable attitude of government circles at the prospect of retaining part or all of the Islands, it went for their retention. The strongest advocates for this were the National Association of Manufacturers and the American Asiatic Association concerned "for the protection and furtherance of the commercial interests of our citizens in the Far East."¹²

Amidst the echoes of national rejoicing at the acquisition of the Philippines and at the unlimited commercial possibilities which victory had disclosed, the American people failed to hear the voice of

¹⁰ U.S., Congress, Senate, *Treaty of Peace*, S. Doc. 62, 55th Cong., 3rd sess., 1899, p. 561.

¹¹ Henry Cabot Lodge, *Selections from the Correspondence of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, 1884-1918*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), Vol. I, p. 337.

¹² Thomas McCormick, "Insular Imperialism and the Open Door: The China Market and the Spanish-American War," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. XXXII (February, 1963), p. 164.

the Filipinos. To them, annexation had the same face as the previous acts of American mainland expansion. No thought was given here to the wishes of the eight million inhabitants of the Islands who, during Spanish rule, had taken part in many bloody uprisings as a protest against the cruelties and injustices from which they had suffered in the same manner as had the Cubans.

Catholic and Protestant reaction with regard to the acquisition of the Philippines hinged on different motives seemingly contradictory. The former, alarmed over the possible intrusion of Protestant ideas into the archipelago in the event of annexation, identified themselves with the Anti-Imperialist Movement, organizing their efforts towards Catholic political activity. On the other hand, they were not adverse to America acquiring coaling stations and naval bases in the Pacific thereby supporting the war with Spain.¹³ The Protestants, however, regarded permanent occupation of these territories as contrary to the principles and traditions of the United States, but welcomed the opportunity of introducing "a purer and reformed Christianity," while doing away with the "danger, oppression and inadequacy of the Roman communion."¹⁴

An unexpected defender of McKinley's expansionist policy was Robert M. La Follette who, as a pacifist, was a strong supporter of isolationism during World War I. However in 1900, listening to his speeches, one would feel they were similar in content to those of the Vice-Presidential candidate, Theodore Roosevelt. La Follette's arguments were based on the "utter and total absence of either the conditions or the capacity for self-government" in the Philippines. To support his statements, he referred his audience to the "unbiased testimony" of three sources: the reports of the Philippine Commission appointed by the President; Bishop Henry C. Potter, who was a stalwart anti-expansionist but came back "with a different opinion" after his trip to the Islands; and Bishop James M. Thornburn, who had "visited the Philippines many times."¹⁵

To retain or not to retain the Philippines was the big question. To the majority, the cession of the Philippines, if ratified, meant that America was definitely going to launch upon a policy of colonial ex-

¹³ Frank T. Reuter, *Catholic Influence on American Colonial Policies, 1898-1904* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1967), p. 110.

¹⁴ Reuter, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁵ Padraic Colum Kennedy, "La Follette's Imperialist Flirtation," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. XXIX (May, 1960), pp. 131-133.

pansion. In the past, when the federal government had acquired territory on the continent, it had also meant eventual statehood by and with the consent of the inhabitants. But the Philippine issue widely differed from this. Not only were the Filipinos not consulted in the matter, but the administration itself made it clear it was not prepared to grant the natives American citizenship.¹⁶

There were senators at the time who wanted to ratify the treaty, but who were opposed to a policy of colonization. Hence, they proposed to amend it or to pass a resolution clearly stating that the Philippines would ultimately, if not immediately, be given their independence.

Another group, though perhaps not strictly opposed to some reasonable policy of expansion, nevertheless objected to the unfairness of the treaty towards the Filipinos. They could not understand why the Filipinos should be treated differently from the Cubans in view of an official statement from Admiral George Dewey who said that they were "far superior in intelligence and more capable of self-government than the natives of Cuba."¹⁷ Brigadier General Charles King, in a letter to the editor of the *Milwaukee Journal* confirmed this, stating that the Filipinos' capacity for self-government was beyond any doubt as they were "industrious, frugal, temperate, and given a fair start, could look out for themselves infinitely better"¹⁸ than most people could imagine.

The debate in and out of Congress went on, and from the objections presented, it seemed doubtful whether the administration could have the treaty ratified. A month before the treaty was submitted, there was a heated debate on the constitutionality, morality and general expediency of the acquisition of the Islands. In general, it could be said that there was sincerity, conviction and at times a striking prophecy. A resolution was introduced by Senator George G. Vest of Missouri that "under the Constitution of the United States no power is given to the Federal Government to acquire territory to be held and governed permanently as colonies."¹⁹ Representative William E. Ma-

¹⁶ Maximo M. Kalaw, *The Case for the Filipinos* (New York: The Century Co., 1916), p. 45.

¹⁷ *Treaty of Peace*, p. 383.

¹⁸ U.S., Congress, Senate, 56th Cong., 1st sess., Jan. 9, 1900, *Congressional Record*, XXXIII, 715.

¹⁹ U.S., Congress, Senate, 55th Cong., 3rd sess., Dec. 6, 1898, *Congressional Record*, XXXII, 20.

son of Illinois voiced his opposition against annexation making it known to everyone in the Congressional chamber that his argument for Philippine independence was implied on "an implied promise, more sacred to an honorable gentlemen than though it were written in blood."²⁰

Pointing at the trade advantages for the United States in the Pacific area by granting independence to Filipinos, Senator George F. Hoar of Massachusetts warned that American presence in the Islands would not prove advantageous for the United States by the use of force on the inhabitants of the region. He added that by alienating "the affection of those people by an unjust attack upon their independence" would only injure American trade prospects in the archipelago.²¹ Lawrence T. Chamberlain, a well-known clergyman in New York, used the message of the Golden Rule and Sermon of the Mount to express his opposition against the Republican policy because of the "injustice and outrage" that would necessarily lead to "a still deeper national dishonor and a still deeper national peril."²²

However, the imperialists carried the day. In the first place, the President shared their view which was a strong factor in their favor. Besides, their arguments, although sometimes unsupportable, struck a chord with the American audience. A case in point was Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana who opposed independence because of the Filipinos' "physical ineptitude" for self-rule. He argued that since they were Orientals, belonging to the Malay race, they were not a self-governing group. He questioned their clamor for independence as aspiring for the impossible when it took the Anglo-Saxons a thousand years to achieve it.²³ After hearing this speech, some tongues spread the word that Beveridge was just McKinley's mouthpiece. The latter resented the accusation because, although he saw the occupation of the Philippines as a civilizing mission, he did not share the subtle prejudice of the Anglo-Saxonists.

²⁰ "Shall We Make Slaves of the Filipinos? — Powers of the General Government over the New Possessions," *Speech before the U.S. House of Representatives*, [no date] (Washington: Allied Printing, 1900), p. 9.

²¹ "The Conquest of the Philippines," *Speech before the U.S. Senate*, April 12, 1900 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), p. 12.

²² "The Colonial Policy of the United States," *Speech before the Quill Club of New York City*, March 21, 1899 (New York: n.p., 1899), p. 47.

²³ U.S., Congress, Senate, 56th Cong., 1st sess., Jan. 9, 1900, *Congressional Record*, XXXIII, 708.

William H. Rice, an influential clergyman from Evanston, Illinois, saw annexation from the religious point when he said that the prayers of the Christian Church were finally answered after almost a century of pleading with the Almighty "that the islands of the sea might be brought under the banner of Jesus Christ."²⁴ A criticism of the Spanish authorities for their administrative shortcomings in the Islands was made by Representative Melville E. Ingalls of Maine. He added that circumstances did not favor independence at the moment, because "the two hundred and fifty odd years of maladministration of the Spaniards have not been such as to educate eight million people sufficiently to enable them to govern themselves."²⁵

Representative Richard W. Austin of Tennessee enumerated a few reasons for keeping the Philippines:

1. To free the Islands from the danger of becoming a vassal to Japan, like Korea and Formosa.
2. A native government would be powerless to control and govern many tribes with 15 or 16 dialects, pagan, heathen and Christian, warlike and savage, with bitter and long-standing enmities between them.
3. An army and navy for defense would be beyond what the Philippine government could afford.²⁶

One of the staunchest imperialistic positions was held by Senator Chauncey Depew of New York who emphasized that the Philippines belonged to the United States by conquest and by treaty rights. He further added that the American people and Congress were unanimous in their support for this policy. He predicted too that it would be only a matter of time before Puerto Rico, Hawaii and Guam would become territories of the United States.²⁷

In a cablegram sent to the Secretary of State, the United States Peace Commissioners warned about hasty decisions in annexing the

²⁴ William H. Rice, *What Shall We Do with the Filipinos?* (Chicago: George E. Marshall & Co., 1899), p. 1. For the opposite view, see Warren Olney, "The Clergy and the Conquest of the Philippines," *Oakland Enquirer*, April 25, 1899, pp. 2-5.

²⁵ *Speech before the Commercial Club of Cincinnati on the Acquisition of the Philippines*, January 21, 1899 (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Co., 1899), pp. 4-5.

²⁶ Richard W. Austin, *Our Philippine Policy* (Washington: n.p., 1899), p. 3.

²⁷ *Speech before the United States Senate*, February 27, 1900 (Washington: n.p., 1900), p. 12.

Islands. They held the view that the Philippines was likely to prove a burden rather than an asset to the United States. They suggested that obligations be relegated to the lowest possible sphere of responsibility.²⁸

It was Senator Lodge who brought triumph to the expansionists with his polished oratory and deft reasoning, exploiting the vanity of human nature, a weapon proven to be invaluable under circumstances when all valid arguments have failed. He pointed out that ratification of the treaty with Spain would show that the American people could be trusted "to deal honestly and justly with the islands and their inhabitants."²⁹ He made his position clear. He had convinced many opponents of the treaty that refusal to ratify, unless accompanied by a statement of America's honest intention, meant a distrust of America's honorable desire to give the Filipinos a square deal.

However, it was President McKinley who made the final decision as to the disposition of the Islands after a brief communication with William Day, chairman of the United States Peace Commission, who told him that he thought the majority of the American people were in favor of annexing the Islands because of their interdependency with each other and the problems that would ensue if the Filipinos were left to themselves.³⁰ Thus the Philippines passed from Spanish to American hands in the Treaty of Paris.³¹ It can be said without equivocation that public opinion was the most important factor in persuading McKinley to retain the Islands. At ease in the knowledge that he had the support of the people he was emboldened to make the final decision.³²

Assuming that no promise was made in writing by properly accredited agents in the name of the American government for the help the Filipinos had given in defeating the Spaniards in battle after battle before the arrival of the American land forces who were not due to arrive for several months, it is certain that the

²⁸ Cablegram, United States Peace Commission to John Hay, Paris, November 11, 1898, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, *William McKinley Papers*, Series 1, Reel 5.

²⁹ U.S., Congress, Senate, 55th Cong., 3rd sess., Jan. 24, 1898, *Congressional Record*, XXXII, 959.

³⁰ Olcott, *op. cit.*, pp. 107-108.

³¹ *National Archives*, Bureau of Insular Affairs, File 364-539 A.

³² Paolo E. Colletta, "McKinley, the Peace Negotiations and the Acquisition of the Philippines," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. XXX (February, 1961), p. 346.

“rebels” were led to believe that the United States planned to do for the Philippines what she was then actually doing for Cuba. General Thomas M. Anderson described the meeting he had with General Emilio Aguinaldo who asked him whether the American government would recognize the Filipino government. No specific answer was then given. In any case, the Filipino people were glad that the Americans have come “to help finalize the last stage of blood and toil in their aspiration for independence.”³³

Laboring under such a belief, the Filipinos formally unfurled the flag of the Philippines and proclaimed independence amidst elaborate ceremonies in Cavite on June 12, 1898.³⁴ This was exactly two months before the American forces of occupation finally entered Manila. Meanwhile, Aguinaldo sent a document to all foreign consuls in Manila appealing for the recognition of “Philippine independence” and argued that the “capture of 7,000 Spanish prisoners was an eloquent proof of the nullity of Spanish sovereignty, as when they surrendered, Spain’s hold was irrevocably lost.”³⁵

When the Filipinos learned that the Americans were there to stay, hundreds from Manila enlisted daily in the rebel cause which aroused the concern of the American authorities.³⁶ Aguinaldo was angered by the American occupation and vowed that Philippine freedom would be defended at all cost. But he added that all possibilities for peace would be exhausted before resorting to the use of force, and that unlimited American resources would never coerce the Filipino people to bow in humble submission.³⁷ Jacob G. Schurman, who headed the First Philippine Commission, advised President McKinley to increase the number of troops in the Islands to achieve peace and order, to secure life and property, and to safeguard justice and equal rights for all. He added that the American presence in the Philippines was a necessity to protect the people from the European powers who might destroy forever “the hope of a free and self-governing Fi-

³³ Thomas M. Anderson, “Our Rule in the Philippines,” *North American Review*, Vol. CLXX (February, 1900), p. 275.

³⁴ George A. Malcolm, *The Government of the Philippine Islands, Its Development and Fundamentals* (Rochester, New York, The Lawyers’ Cooperative Publishing Co., 1916), p. 124.

³⁵ “Appeals to the Powers,” *New York Times*, August 9, 1899, p. 3.

³⁶ “The Philippine Problem,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1898, p. 1.

³⁷ *National Archives*, Bureau of Insular Affairs, File 1353.

lipino nationality, which American protection and guardianship would inevitably tend to develop.”³⁸

Francis A. Brooks, a lawyer and member of the Anti-Imperialist League, bitterly criticized the action of McKinley in sending more troops to the Philippines. His reason was that although the Filipinos had been ‘colonists of Spain,’ and Spain’s right over them was recognized by McKinley, bid for and purchased by him from Spain, still they were not a marketable commodity. Besides, the latter’s authority over them ceased when it had been successfully resisted and overcome before the peace treaty was made.³⁹

In addition to this, the Filipinos had assisted in the siege and capture of Manila. They expected and claimed the privilege of entering the captured city with the American troops, but were refused. In vain did the Filipinos remonstrate and try to get access to General Elwell Otis for purposes of negotiation and conciliation. Otis assigned various reasons for not listening to them. Among others he said that under instructions received by him from McKinley the only terms of peace he could entertain was their unconditional surrender.⁴⁰

Colonel Charles Denby asserted that the war against the Americans was practically waged by a single tribe of natives while the majority were “friendly to them.” He added that the intertribal hatred among them was probably more intense than their animosity against Spain. He concluded that the difficulties in the Philippines were far beyond the capacity of the natives to handle at the moment, and that it would be “base” and “infamous” for the United States government to “shirk the obligation to set up a better government.”⁴¹ After one of his visits to the villages, Denby recounted the enthusiasm with which the people received the Americans. The latter found the people both surprised and pleased at the treatment accorded them by “our soldiers, which was in marked contrast to that received at the

³⁸ “Schurman to McKinley,” *New York Times*, October 20, 1899, p. 5.

³⁹ Francis A. Brooks, *An Arraignment of President McKinley's Policy of Extending by Force the Sovereignty of the United States over the Philippine Islands* (Boston: A. Mudge & Son, prs., 1899), p. 11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 13.

⁴¹ Marrion Wilcox, “The Filipinos’ Vain Hope of Independence,” *North American Review*, Vol. CLXXI (September, 1900), pp. 333-335, 347.

hands of their own troops, who had looted the town before leaving it."⁴²

In the American election of 1900, William Jennings Bryan opposed McKinley on the issue of imperialism. Aguinaldo announced his support for the former, calling him "American by blood, by ideas, an illustrious son of the Filipinos... the clasp that links and unites two friendly peoples torn by the same dissensions and deserving of the applause and admiration of the world."⁴³ He was confident that Bryan's election would hasten the demise of imperialism "in its mad attempt to subjugate us by force of arms." He reiterated his denunciation of the "imperialists" avoiding the use of the word: "Americans" stating, "We only defend our independence against imperialists. The sons of that mighty nation are our friends and brothers."⁴⁴

However, the Republicans were able to divert the attention of the public to personalities and to a discussion of other issues like finances, monopolies and administration of the railroad. The failure of Bryan proved that imperialism was not the preponderant issue.⁴⁵

Thus the whole debate subsided for a while with the victory of McKinley and the Republican platform over the opposition that came from all sides. American imperialism found a strong support from businessmen who wanted new commercial avenues for their expanding trade, military men who relished the glory and fame brought about by the achievements of victory, and clergymen who saw in the acquisition of new lands a challenging opportunity to bring Christ to others.

But this was just the beginning of a more vociferous controversy that would rage for three and a half decades among leaders of both countries, and culminate in independence granted in 1946. The conditions surrounding Philippine independence caused this contro-

⁴² Letter, Charles Denby to John Hay, July 7, 1899, *William McKinley Papers*, Series 1, Reel 7.

⁴³ "Filipino Praise of Bryan," *New York Times*, December 3, 1899, p. 1.

⁴⁴ "Wants Democrats To Win," *New York Times*, October 8, 1899, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Thomas A. Bailey, "Was the Election of 1900 a Mandate on Imperialism?," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. XXIV (June, 1937), p. 45.

versy to erupt again among Filipino leaders during 1970-1972, and to gain political strength in the "Philippine Statehood Movement," which advocated incorporation into the United States. It has succumbed to silence for the moment with the imposition of martial law.