



The Legacy of the Philippine Struggle for Independence in 1945

By Diana Villiers NegroponTE

The Battle for Manila in February 1945 demonstrated the horrors of war. Japanese forces under Admiral Sanji Iwabuchi determined to hold the city and prevent General Douglas MacArthur moving north toward Japan. The Admiral rejected General Yamashita and General MacArthur's call for an 'open city' which would have protected the million or more citizens of Manila. Instead, he instructed his forces to fight to the last man and die protecting the Emperor. MacArthur, on the other side, was determined to relieve the city and the thousands of prisoners of war, interned Americans, and other citizens. The clash was brutal

and over the course of 29 days, 100,000 Filipinos were killed. Historians assign the greater blame to the Japanese troops instructed to instill terror in the local population through starvation, torture, and murder. It must also be acknowledged that the advancing U.S. forces used heavy artillery to destroy buildings and Japanese gun emplacements, killing men, women and children caught in the crossfire. In the annals of World War II, the battle for Manila stands at the nadir of human destruction.

What legacies can we take away from the battle and the struggle to create a postwar democratic government in the Philippines? What were the

underlying stresses as General MacArthur strove to give the Filipino people their independence? How did Philippine leaders balance American-styled liberal democracy against the Marxist ideology of their own guerilla leaders who had fought tenaciously against the Japanese? In the aftermath of that war, what was the nature of the U.S.-Philippine relationship and what tensions continue to this day?

Manila, known as the *Pearl of the Orient*, was a city of decaying corpses, contaminated water, and stone rubble when the last Japanese left the city on February 29, 1945. Those Filipino families who had collaborated with the Japanese occupiers feared that the Americans would put them on trial. They had grown up under a Commonwealth, created by President Roosevelt in 1935 to provide transitional governance from colony to future independence. Under the Commonwealth, Philippine leaders had copied U.S. political institutions, laws, and many of its liberal values. Their admiration for America was intense, but when Japan invaded in 1942, they witnessed MacArthur retreat from the Philippines. The landed elite survived by sharing their wealth with the occupying army and either informing against or working with Philippine guerilla forces, later to become the Hukbalahap or “Huks.” One of their own, the former associate justice of the Commonwealth’s Supreme Court, Jose Laurel, became president of the “independent” Philippine Republic—a mere puppet of General Yamashita. More than half of the Commonwealth’s Senate and over on-third of its House of Representatives served in the Japanese-sponsored regime. When the war ended, intense debate surrounded the role that the *ilustrados* or Filipino elite should play in the future governance of their nation.

The post-war challenge facing both MacArthur and the Filipinos was who should lead their

country toward independence. Upon his return to Manila, the exiled Commonwealth president, Sergio Osmeña sought to reinstitute the American pattern of education and expunge all remnants of Japanese indoctrination. He proposed the creation of a People’s Court to investigate all Filipinos suspected of disloyalty or treason and he issued a victory currency to stabilize the economy. In his mind, Philippine independence should arrive on August 13, 1945 and in support of this, he emphasized that “It is part and parcel of that patriotic course to secure the rehabilitation of the Philippines, the recognition of its independence, and the protection of that independence against all external aggression.” The U.S. Congress, however, postponed the date for Philippine independence by 11 months.

Another prominent man sought leadership of the Philippines. During the war, Manuel A. Roxas had both collaborated with the Japanese and provided critical information to MacArthur. This dual role gained the opprobrium of many of his own countrymen, but MacArthur’s admiration for his energy, relative youth, and intelligence. When MacArthur returned to Manila in 1945, Roxas became his preferred candidate. So admired was the American general that critics quietened their grumblings about the ascendancy of a man who claimed to have fought with the Huks against the Japanese, despite the absence of supporting evidence. Determined to complete the promised independence, MacArthur ignored complaints that he relied upon the *ilustrados* whose loyalty during the war was questionable. Instead, he looked for men who could govern, invest and rebuild the country. U.S. High Commissioner Paul McNutt questioned the speed with which MacArthur sought to transfer governance, knowing the depth and scope of the elite’s corrupt practices, but his word carried little weight against the 5-star general who had repelled the Japanese in the Pacific and



would exercise almost unlimited power in Tokyo. A commission was sent out from Washington to examine the practices of the landed and banking *ilustrados*, but its critical report was shelved as President Truman focused on a new threat: communism.

Across the Philippines, the Huks—Philippine guerilla fighters who had fought plantation owners who mistreated sharecroppers and peons—had maintained an armed resistance against the Japanese occupation. They had become the nucleus of a communist insurgency in the Philippines with the aid of Marxist propaganda supplied by Moscow. Former guerilla fighters with socialist ideas joined with Marxists in following Vicente Lava, a charismatic leader and a brilliant chemist with a degree from Columbia University. He merged his socialist followers with war trained guerilla troops under the peasant leadership of Marxist, Luis Taruc. Together, they fought an insurgency against landowners allied with the Japanese, as well as the U.S.-allied government.

For Washington, corruption in Manila became acceptable in the fight against the communist insurgents. By 1951, this revolutionary force justified the US and the Philippines signing a Mutual Defense Treaty that recalled “with mutual pride the historic relationship which brought their two peoples together in a common bond of sympathy and mutual ideals to fight side-by-side against imperialist aggression during the last war.” The collective security agreement committed both parties “for full security for the Philippines, for the mutual protection of the Islands and the United States, and for the future maintenance of peace in the Pacific.”

In return for U.S. protection and funding, the Philippine government gave the United States a 99-year lease on several military and naval bases

in which the U.S. had virtual territorial rights. Philippine President Sergio Osmeña was so eager to keep the Americans in the Philippines that he did not impose any restrictions on the size of U.S. forces nor their deployment. In Manila, the legislature followed suit, approving the agreement without a dissenting voice.

However, in the early days of the Alliance, Philippine leaders felt slighted that the terms of the treaty compared less favorably than the terms of basing rights the United States had offered to Japan. As told by Stanley Karnow in his book *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines*, this resentment was inflamed in 1953 when the chief U.S. negotiator pushed a piece of paper under the nose of Senator Emmanuel Pelaez saying, “Here is your position.” Pelaez, who later became Vice President, stalked out of the room, delaying the talks for two years. Despite

American high-handedness, the bases played an important role when the Cold War called for the stationing of U.S. forces in the Pacific. However, the indignity to Philippine sovereignty and the behavior of American service members off-base haunted bilateral relations until 1991, when the Philippine Senate failed to achieve enough votes to renew the post-war bases agreement.

Beyond the closest military cooperation between the two countries, Osmeña sought U.S. war-damage payments and in May 1945, the Commonwealth government obtained from President Truman a “preliminary statement” which committed the United States to grant 1 million Philippine pesos for the maintenance of roads and bridges and 168,000 pesos (\$604,569 in today's U.S. dollars) for the repair and operation of irrigation systems and river control. The U.S. government also committed to sending over 600,000 metric tons of food, as well as clothing,



medical supplies, construction materials, production equipment, household items, and utensils. Truman recognized the need to contribute handsomely toward post-war reconstruction. The U.S. Congress, however, was less generous in awarding pensions to the Filipino soldiers who had acted as scouts and fought alongside GIs.

The Philippines gained independence on July 4 1946, but, in practice, the former colony remained “neocolonized.” Aside from a few ultra-nationalists, Filipinos generally welcomed the special relationship as proof of America’s concern for their welfare. They had learned and experienced American liberal democracy for a decade or more before the Japanese invaded. Many had also acquired education and professional skills.

The Philippine Trade Act of 1946 confined the Philippines to a subservient position. In exchange for the American payment of \$800 million to rehabilitate war damages, the United States required that the Philippine constitution be amended to give Americans equal rights with Filipinos to own mines, forests, and other resources without giving Filipinos equal rights in the United States. The insult of this so-called ‘parity agreement’ was compounded by the requirement of unlimited free trade for 8 years and the demand that the Philippine peg its currency to the U.S. dollar. Furthermore, Filipinos were prohibited from selling any products that might “come into substantial competition” with articles made in the United States. This meant that manufactured goods such as textiles, rum, and rope were prohibited, thus stunting industrial production and condemning the archipelago to agricultural and raw material production. Heated debate over that trade agreement—also known as the Bell Act—roused questions over the sincerity of independence, but so weak were the citizens of the archipelago in the post war years

that dependence on American financial support became indispensable. Additionally, enduring social inequity forced many of their young to emigrate and work abroad as ‘overseas workers.’

What is the nature of U.S.-Philippine relations today? What leverage can the current president, Rodrigo Duterte, exercise in Philippine relations with both the United States and China? Today, the Philippines is torn between its historical respect for the Americans and its desire to be truly independent. The Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951 remains in effect with Article IV providing for collective defense in the event of an attack by outside forces. The treaty was tested when Chinese boats harassed Philippine fishermen around Mischief Reef and other atolls. In 2013, the Philippine government sought arbitration under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, rejecting China’s territorial claims under its nine-dash line. Three years later, it achieved a favorable decision, but the Chinese have rejected the arbitrator’s determination. Later, in 2019, Philippine fishermen and former government officials brought suit before the International Criminal Court (ICC), alleging crimes against humanity in Beijing’s systematic plan to control the South China Sea. As the plaintiffs await judgement, their case is complicated by the Philippine government’s withdrawal from the ICC on March 17, 2018 due to the courts investigation into extra-judicial killings and harassment of Supreme Court justices by the Duterte government.

It is doubtful whether the United States is obligated to protect the Philippines from Chinese actions on uninhabited reefs in Philippine economic waters. However, the visit of Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo to Manila in March 2019 sought to assure the Philippine government that any armed attack on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft in the South China



Sea, would trigger Article IV of the Mutual Defense Treaty. Unanswered is the extent of the maritime area covered by this collective security agreement. Does it include the West Philippine Sea over which the Philippine government claims national sovereignty? Given this uncertainty, Philippine governments have diversified their security relations, developing close economic and political ties with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and in 2015 the Asian Economic Community (AEC) to create the largest single market in the world. Membership in these institutions enables the Philippines to confront China at the United Nations, debate U.S. policies and, from its relative weak position, leverage its relationship between two global powers.

The Philippine people continue to prefer close relations with the United States exhibited by the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). Signed in 1998, it permits US forces to carry out training and exercises in the Philippines. But, in a shock to international relations, Duterte announced in February 2020 that the Philippines intended to withdraw from the agreement. Instead, he sought to create distance between the Philippines and the United States, preferring closer ties with Russia and striving to develop stronger economic and diplomatic ties with China despite its encroachment in Philippine's 200 mile economic waters. However, the inability of Philippine forces to succeed against Islamic forces in the southern island motivated Duterte to suspend his withdrawal decision. On June 1, he restored the VFA, demonstrating his need for U.S. support and the high favorability ratings among Filipinos for the United States. Familial ties remain close with over 4 million Filipino-Americans in the US sending significant remittances to their families and generous American aid arriving when super typhoons sweep through the archipelago.

Historical respect and affection for the US remain, but Filipinos understand that the United States is weaker and China grows stronger. As they seek to balance their relations with both super powers, they might strengthen their partnership with ASEAN nations who together stand stronger to resist Chinese expansion and, in so doing, gain greater respect from the United States.

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