

50 YEARS OF PHILIPPINE-AMERICAN RELATIONS*

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When the organizers of this symposium invited me to speak about the political aspect of "50 Years of Philippine-American Relations - A Filipino's Perspective," my first reaction was panic. Among other reasons, I find the subject too sensitive. While a mere mention of it can produce a profound euphoria in some, it can incite a murderous rage in others. Indeed, it is one of the ironies of history that while the half-century of Philippine-American relations was supposed to be an experiment in international partnership, the issue has divided Filipinos deeply.

In the course of my preparations, however, I have come to believe that it is necessary that we discuss the subject. It is said that to be a nation, we must have a common history. And having a common history does not only mean that we have shared the joys and pains of the journey from the past. It also means that we have a unified understanding of the past. Otherwise, we are building the future on a shaky foundation.

Let me now warn you that I will address the issue from a narrow perspective. I speak as a Filipino who has no memories

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of the bloody battlefields of Bataan, the cold caves of Corrigidor, or the landing at Lingayen or Leyte. Mine is the perspective of somebody who was born in the 60's, quietly grew up during the repression of the 70's, and participated in the street marches of the 80's. It may not be the view of the majority of the Filipinos, as recent surveys seem to indicate, but it is shared by many of those who belong to my generation.

Our retrospection this afternoon should bring us back to July 4, 1946, when the Philippines, as promised by the United States government in the Tydings-MacDuffies Act of 1934, proclaimed its independence. Symbolically, as was re-enacted a few days ago at the Luneta, the American flag was lowered and the Philippine flag was raised. The event, President Ramos would say, marked the dismantling of the United States colonial machinery even as it ushered in the birth of a new Democracy.

As soon as the Philippine flag started flying, the new State began entering into agreements with its former colonial master. These agreements would not only ensure the continued political relations of the two countries after independence but would also intertwine their destinies for the next 50 years. Among these accords was the United States-Philippines Trade Agreement of 1946 which provided for free trade relations between the two countries for 8 years and required the amendment of the Philippine Constitution of 1935 to give parity rights to United States citizens in engaging in business in the Philippines.

In the succeeding years, three other agreements would be concluded between the two governments. The first was the Military Bases Agreement of 1947 which, to promote the

security of the two countries, granted the United States rent-free access to 16 bases in the Philippines for a period of 99 years. The second was the Military Assistance Agreement of 1947 which committed the United States to supply arms, ammunitions and military supplies and equipment, and provided for a military advisory group for the Philippines. And the third was the Mutual Defense Agreement of 1951 where the United States and the Philippines agreed to consider an armed attack in the Pacific area on either as dangerous to its own safety and declared that it would act to meet the common dangers "in accordance with its constitutional processes."

While we all know that some of these agreements have been renegotiated, amended and abrogated, none of them would outlive the controversy, the resentment or rancor that they had generated. The main cause was the perception that they were disadvantageous to the Philippines and were forced upon it in the aftermath of the war when our fields were unplanted and our cities were in ruins. Another came from realization that the United States had treaties with less friendly governments containing more favorable concessions. In the end, rather than being seen as expressions of independence and friendship, these agreements were viewed as manifestations of dependence and continued domination.

Now, I do not share the view that the military agreements were the results of a desire to keep the Philippines in perpetual colonial bondage. Rather, I believe that they were the logical consequences of the foreign policies adopted by the two countries which at that time could have made sense. So that you understand my position, let me proceed with the following review.

United States foreign policy was forged at the end of World War II and it remained unchanged for almost 50 years. It started with the assumption that the Communists, as aggressively represented by the Soviet Union, wanted to bring the world under their dominion. According to this thinking, it was not possible to have a rational dialogue with the Communists. The goal of United States foreign policy was therefore to contain the spread of Communism. The strategy was to win allies, and set up as many barriers as possible. Since this was done without military hostilities, this state of things came to be known as the Cold War.

On the other hand, Philippine foreign policy was first outlined by President Roxas in his inaugural address on July 4, 1946. As he expressed it, is called for "the closest cooperation with the United States in all matters concerning our common defense and security." In practice, this was extended to fields other than security. As pointed out by critics, the policy assumed an identity of interests between the two governments. Subsequent administrations, including that of President Marcos who opened relations with socialist countries, preserved both the appearance and reality of close ties and goodwill with the United States.

That the United States would hammer out defense and security arrangements with the Philippines was inevitable. That the United States bolstered regimes in the Philippines friendly to it was understood by all. That the United States influenced the outcome of local elections in the Philippines was accepted by many. That the United States opposed any meaningful change in the political and social structure of the country was conceded by others.

The last proposition became the conviction and concern of many during the darkest days of the Marcos regime. Even when it had become apparent that President Marcos was sweeping away the structures of democracy that took 75 years to build, the United States government stood by him and provided him both moral and material aid to crush those who opposed him. Of course, most Filipinos are willing to forget the episode because in the end it was the United States which pressured President Marcos to resign and hastened his departure to Hawaii.

At this point, let me emphasize two matters. First, that it is not my position that the United States should have forsaken its own interests in dealing with the Philippines. That would be naive, if not entirely insane. The United States is neither a church nor a charitable institution. It has the primary responsibility of promoting the security and prosperity of its own people. The fault was with the Philippines, which failed to take care of itself by assuming that the relations mechanically would.

Second, that it is not my position that the 50 years of our political relations with the United States brought nothing to the Philippines but injustice and misery. On the contrary, at the time when we just emerged from the alleys of colonialism, the relations gave us prestige, secured us recognition, and provided us advantages, in the international associations created after World War II. In addition, all throughout the last 50 years, the Philippines has continued to reap material benefits and sometimes derived a feeling of security that enabled it to concentrate on other problems demanding attention.

It is easy to see however that most of the benefits were short-term. In the end, they fostered dependence, rather than promote independence. No less than President Nixon understood this. While in the Philippines in 1969, the United States President declared that he hoped to initiate a new era of Philippine-American relations, not returning to the "old special relationship," but "building a new one based on mutual trust, on mutual confidence, on mutual cooperation."

President Nixon's hope, however, would not easily translate into reality. In 1989, twenty years after he articulated it, President Aquino would still be asking for help to quell a military uprising, just as president Roxas begged for money to rebuild the war-torn economy, or President Magsaysay for guns and advisers to fight the Huks. While the Philippines is economically and politically unable to stand on its own, a relationship of dependence could not be avoided, and mutual cooperation could hardly be possible.

But the last few years appear to have brought new reasons for hope. With the end of the Cold War, and as a new world order begins to unfold, the struggle of the Philippines for economic and political independence continues. What can make us proud of the process is that public opinion is unwilling to reach the elusive goal by sacrificing democracy to dictatorship. The seeds of democracy sown on July 4, 1946, have taken roots and I consider this to be the most enduring legacy of the 50 years of Philippine-American relations.

As I end this, let me recall the words of Ernest Renan, the 19th century French historian who said that "Nations are built on the basis of great rememberings and great forgettings." And

to sum up my position, let me say that his statement applies as well to the 50 years of Philippine-American relations: There are things to forget, and things to remember.