

The Philippine-American and the Fight for Freedom

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I would like to thank the organizers of this exciting event for inviting me to participate. I am honored to do so. I will briefly discuss aspects of the Filipino-American War (1899-1902) from the perspective of three important moments in the past one hundred years, each of which has shaped the relations between Filipinos and Americans, especially Minnesotans. Although the impact of these moments transcends specific dates, they can be arranged rather neatly into fifty-year intervals beginning in 1898, followed by 1948, and finally 1998.

1898

Two momentous events were launched in the middle of 1898.

For Filipinos: On June 12, 1898, General Emilio Aguinaldo declared the independence of the Philippines, established a provisional government, and set out to end Spanish sovereignty over the archipelago. His declaration and subsequent actions were the culmination of the regional revolt against Spain begun in 1896 in Manila and its neighboring provinces. In the months after Aguinaldo's declaration, support for the newly proclaimed independent government increasingly spread throughout the islands, as a growing number of Filipinos began to anticipate the end of Spanish rule and the formation of their own nation. They did so, at the time, with the implied backing of the United States of America.

For Americans: At the start of May 1898, Admiral George Dewey sailed into Manila Bay on the orders of the U.S. President, William McKinley, to attack the Spanish navy as the first hostile act in the recently declared Spanish-American War. Dewey's decisive naval victory set into motion a range of possibilities, the most prominent and most controversial being the American acquisition of the Philippines. Admiral Dewey awaited his orders and cabled for reinforcements, while at the same time making effective use of his Filipino allies, General Aguinaldo and his rapidly expanding forces, to attack and capture the remnants of the Spanish military on the island of Luzon.

For Minnesotans: Two days before Dewey defeated the Spanish fleet in Manila (4/29), over 1,200 Minnesotans answered the call of their country to serve in the war against Spain by forming the 13th Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. Two weeks after the declaration of Philippine independence (6/26), the Minnesota troops steamed out of

San Francisco harbor, arriving in Manila ready to fight Spaniards on August 7th. Six days later they engaged in the first and last land battle against the Spanish forces and, after a brief exchange of fire, celebrated the city's surrender to the United States. By this time, the Spanish-American War had ended and Spain and the United States were negotiating a peace settlement. For the next six months, the Minnesotans performed guard duty, which among other things involved preventing Filipino troops under General Aguinaldo from entering Manila.

On February 4, 1899, the persistence of the Filipino leaders to pursue the independence of their country violently clashed with the American assertion of sovereignty over the Philippine archipelago

(having acquired the claim to possess the islands from Spain in the Treaty of Paris in December 1898). What ensued was a long and bloody war that resulted in far more casualties than its predecessor, the Spanish-American War. This war, long buried in American history books under the designation of "the Philippine Insurrection," has in more recent years received more attention from both Filipino and American scholars and is increasingly referred to as the Philippine-American, or Filipino-American, War. Even by conservative assessments, this war lasted for over three years, was fought throughout the archipelago, and, as all wars, resulted in many thousands of deaths from combat, disease, famine, and dislocation. It was in the earliest and most intense stages of this war, in the towns and villages north of Manila, that the officers and soldiers of the 13th Minnesota Volunteer Infantry fought against the Filipino troops.

Looking back at this war, I would want to emphasize two important points.

1. The Filipino-American War was a war fought by the United States for the acquisition of an Asian colony. As such, it was a war that was severely criticized by many Americans, including politicians, journalists, educators, and people from many other areas of life. By early 1902, American military supremacy had been established and the United States began its formal colonial rule over most the Philippine archipelago.

2. The Filipino-American War, more than any other episode in Philippine history, was the seminal moment in the formation of a Filipino national identity. The long and widespread resistance against the United States, like the resistance of American colonists to the British forces in the 1770s and 1780s, contributed significantly to the dissemination of nationalist sentiments and actions, resulting in the permanent formation of a Filipino nationality.

1948

In 1948, fifty years after Filipinos and Americans collided in their devastating war, the State of Minnesota erected a plaque at the Capitol Rotunda in St. Paul to honor the Minnesotans who had served in the "War with Spain." It was an ironic and somewhat a-historical moment.

The raising of the plaque occurred at a time when relations between Filipinos and Americans had taken a new direction. Both countries had just emerged from an even more devastating war, World War II, wherein the Filipinos proved to be America's closest Asian ally in the struggle against Japan. Filipinos and Americans entered the post-war era with a legacy of friendship and shared wartime experiences, among them being the mutual defense of Bataan and Corregidor, the horrifying Death March to Cabanatuan, suffering and death in Japanese POW camps, the guerrilla resistance against the Japanese occupying forces, and the combined liberation of the country in 1945. Moreover, on July 4, 1946, the United States finally recognized the over fifty-year quest for Filipino independence. As the plaque was mounted on the wall of this rotunda, the new Republic of the Philippines was the first Southeast Asian nation to break away from its colonial bondage and, as an independent nation, was a staunch ally of the United States.

All of these dramatic changes seem to have gone unnoticed in the Minnesota State Capitol and are not reflected in the plaque erected here in 1948. The political officials who sought to commemorate the service of Minnesota soldiers in a distant war, seemed unclear, even unconcerned, about the nature of that war or about the identity of the enemy. The Philippines was constructed as a *terra incognita* where American soldiers engaged in a series of battles at places with exotic and often

misconstrued names. The enemy was depicted as "insurgent Filipinos under Chief Aguinaldo," conjuring up an image of a Native American uprising. It is ironic that two years before this plaque was erected, the United States government had recognized the independence of the Philippines and that a new generation of American soldiers, many thousands of them, considered the Filipinos as their comrades in arms.

1998

Today several thousand Minnesotans of Filipino heritage are productive citizens of the United States of America. Between 1996 and 1998, many of these Filipino Americans (or Filipino Minnesotans) and their friends and relatives celebrated the centennial of the origins of the Filipino movement for national identity and independence. As they commemorated the life and martyrdom of Dr. Jose Rizal, executed by the Spaniards in 1896, the efforts of Andres Bonifacio in establishing the secret society, the Katipunan, that initiated the revolutionary struggle against Spain, and the declaration of independence by General, and later President, Emilio Aguinaldo in 1898, they discovered that most of their fellow Americans knew almost nothing of these events or these prominent heroes. Moreover, they discovered that the only public memory of their ancestors' struggles to achieve liberation from colonial rule was the plaque erected in the St. Paul Capitol Rotunda to honor of the Minnesota soldiers who fought in the Philippines in 1898 and 1899. To their credit, they set out, not to demean the patriotism or sacrifice of the Minnesota volunteers of 1898, but to correct the historical record by attempting to explain the context of the war that took the lives of 44 men of Minnesota and countless Filipinos across the archipelago. They sought to remind the public that in 1898 the United States called upon its citizens to join the government in a war of colonial acquisition in the Philippines, and that the Filipinos, emerging from an earlier revolutionary struggle against Spain, chose to fight for their freedom and to resist American efforts to conquer their island country. As an American and as a historian of the Philippines, I am proud to have been a part of this worthy endeavor. I also compliment the people and leaders of Minnesota for their wisdom and courage to allow this generation to attempt to set the record straight. This is a great achievement.