

HOW THE PHILIPPINES BECAME THE FIRST COLONY OF THE UNITED STATES

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Decisions made in Washington, D.C. affect not only the American people but countless numbers of people all over the world. One of these decisions made before the turn of the century permanently altered the destiny of the Filipino people when the United States government, under the presidency of William McKinley, decided to colonize the Philippines. More than 40 years of American language, education, politics, economic and cultural values, made us what we are today. Here is an account of how it happened.

The Start of the Spanish-American War

On February 15, 1898, the U.S. Battleship "Maine" while anchored in the harbor of Havana, Cuba, was rocked by two explosions and sunk with the loss of 246 lives. The sinking of the ship was blamed on the Spanish authorities in Cuba and resulted in the further deterioration of relations between the United States and Spain. The Cubans have been waging a struggle for independence for almost two decades and stories of Spanish atrocities to suppress the revolution were widely publicized in the United States. This brought waves of sympathetic feeling from the people and the American government. The incident proved to be the last straw, and on April 25, 1898, the U.S. declared war on Spain. In its declaration of war, the United States "disclaimed any disposition or intention to exercise sovereignty, jurisdiction, or control over said island (Cuba) except for pacification.....to leave the government and control of the island to its people." This provision was a key point in the initial relationship between the Filipinos and the Americans as we shall see later.

Philippines - 1898

The Philippines consists of more than 7,100 islands, with an estimated population of 7,500,000. Rich in natural resources, it is the world supplier of hemp (abaca). It also boasts of minerals such as copper, gold, silver, and iron. Timber covers more than 40,000 square miles of its 114,830 square miles of land area. A colony of Spain for more than 300 years, it is in the midst of a political upheaval. Filipinos under the leadership of Emilio Aguinaldo took to arms in an attempt to overthrow the oppressive Spanish rule. Hostilities broke out in August, 1896 after the Spanish authorities discovered a secret revolutionary society called "Katipunan". After two years of bitter fighting, the revolution temporarily ended by the signing of a shaky truce called "Biyak-na-bato" on December 14, 1897. The truce among other things, provided for the

voluntary exile of General Emilio Aguinaldo and other leaders of the revolution, and in return the Spanish government granted representation of Filipinos in the Spanish Cortez (Congress), payment to the rebels of 800,000 pesos, and reparation to non-combatant Filipino victims of the armed conflict. After a few months, it became evident that the truce was a failure, doomed from the start due to the mutual suspicion of the Spanish authorities and the Filipino rebels. Both sides violated the agreement. The resumption of hostilities was a matter of time. It was at this time that the sinking of the "Maine" happened.

The Alliance

When it became imminent that the United States would declare war against Spain, E. Spencer Pratt, American consul in Singapore, sought General Emilio Aguinaldo and his group who were in exile as a result of the truce in an attempt to forge an alliance against a common enemy – Spain. He publicly and privately assured Aguinaldo that the Americans did not have any designs on the Philippines. Aguinaldo, convinced that America was a heaven sent benefactor of Philippine independence, joined forces with the Americans. His belief stemmed out of the fact that the constitution of the United States did not provide for colonization.

Siege of Manila

Weeks before the declaration of war, President William McKinley secretly dispatched Commodore George Dewey and the U.S. Asiatic Squadron to HongKong. Upon the declaration of war, and while Pratt was courting Aguinaldo, Commodore Dewey's squadron steamed into Manila Bay and engaged and defeated the Spanish fleet on May 1, 1898. A few days later, Aguinaldo was landed by an American ship in Manila. He immediately exhorted the Filipino people to rise in arms and join him and their American allies in expelling Spain. He also promised Philippine independence. Within a short time, he had a force of an estimated 25,000. The return of Aguinaldo completely demoralized the Spanish forces. Town after town, and city after city fell in the hands of the revolutionary forces until only Manila, a completely fortified city and the seat of Spanish government in the Philippines, remained in the hands of the Spanish authorities. The Filipino rebels immediately laid siege to the city while Dewey blockaded Manila and prevented Spanish ships from reinforcing or resupplying the Spanish forces and the thousands of Spanish sympathizers who sought refuge within the fort. Aguinaldo's forces quickly cut off food and water supplies in an attempt to starve the city to submission. In the meantime, Dewey prevailed upon Aguinaldo not to attack until the arrival of American troops. On June 30, 1898, General Anderson arrived in Manila with 2,500 men and General Merritt followed with another 7,500. The Spanish leaders realized the hopelessness of the situation, but instead of negotiating with Aguinaldo, they secretly negotiated with Merritt and Dewey for the surrender of the city. In return, they extracted from the Americans the promise that Filipinos would take

no part in the take-over of Manila. So, on August 13, 1898, after a brief pre-arranged bombardment by Dewey's flagship, "Olympia" and an assault by American forces, Manila surrendered. After a few days, the American forces received the delayed order from President McKinley for the cessation of hostilities against Spain. The Spanish government sued for peace and agreed to the convening of the peace commission in Paris, France.

Declaration of Independence

Aguinaldo brought home with him a plan for self-government conceived while in exile. Immediately upon his arrival, he proclaimed a temporary dictatorial government, the first step in his aim for establishment of a republican form of government as soon as victory over Spain was achieved. In the wake of the military victories of the Filipino forces, and in a desire to inspire the people to fight on, on June 12, 1898, he issued the proclamation of the independence of the Philippines. Election of delegates in fifteen provinces under the control of the Filipinos and the appointment of delegates for provinces which were still under Spanish control, followed the declaration.

The Benevolent Assimilation Proclamation - Betrayal of the Alliance

On December 19, 1898, the Treaty of Paris was signed without the participation of the Filipinos. Under the terms of the treaty, Cuba was granted semi-independence status under the protection of the United States and the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Guam were ceded to the United States by Spain. In return, the United States paid \$20 million for the Philippines.

President McKinley issued the Benevolent Assimilation Proclamation after the signing of the treaty, proclaiming that the "military government maintained in Manila is to be extended to the whole Philippine islands and that the United States government succeeds the sovereignty of the Spanish government over the Philippines." After a long debate, the U.S. congress ratified the treaty on February 6, 1899. The betrayal of the alliance was complete. President McKinley repudiated the very concept of the declaration of war against Spain by deciding to occupy the Philippines.

The Occupation of the Philippines

The Filipinos learned of the proclamation, and Aguinaldo immediately issued a counter proclamation denouncing the planned take-over of the Americans. The Filipinos made it known that they did not want to trade one master for another. Hostilities broke out between the American and Filipino forces on February 4, 1899. The American leaders were misled that the revolution did not have the support of the people; and it took the Americans two-and-a-half years of bitter and often brutal fighting to occupy the islands. The United States suffered 4,500 casualties and hundreds of deaths due to dysentery

and other tropical diseases. It spent \$300 million in the course of the occupation and needed a force of 125,000 soldiers to pacify the Philippines. The Filipinos in defending its new found freedom suffered casualties in excess of \$100,000, including civilians killed in the conflict.