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The Philippine Independence Mission of 1922

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Notes and Comment

*The Philippine Independence Mission of 1922**

As the Filipino people enter the third decade of freedom from American sovereignty, their historians will begin, no doubt, to re-evaluate the American connexion. We have seen a start in this direction during several recent conferences relating to Philippine-American affairs.¹ Without doubt, the struggle for independence, the ardor of the Filipino elite, particularly the politicians, for freedom, and the various missions sent to Washington seeking independence will be examined. So far, there has been no study of the Filipino struggle for independence.² Except for the writings of contemporary propagandists, whether American or Filipino, speaking for or against independence, we are left to our own resources to understand the mechanics and dimensions of that struggle. Obviously, in this short communication we cannot trace the course of that search for independence. For our part, we have chosen a narrow slice of that struggle for freedom. In the time remaining

* Read at the Annual Meeting of the American Oriental Society, University of California, Berkeley, March 19-22, 1968.

¹The popular book, *The United States and the Philippines* (edited by Frank H. Golay), was a by-product of the February 23-26, 1966 Davao City conference sponsored jointly by the American Assembly and America-Philippine Society. Subsequent regional American Assembly meetings have been held at Fresno, Calif., Ann Arbor, Mich., and Philadelphia, Pa. This writer participated at the Philippine Colloquium, Western Michigan University, December 5-7, 1966.

²There is definite need for a major study of the independence struggle from the earliest moment of American sovereignty to the establishment of the Commonwealth in 1935. Aside from Grayson Kirk's *Philippine Independence, Motives, Problems and Prospects* (1936), there is no other examination of the issue.

we will trace the reasons for the Independence Mission of 1922, the attitude of Washington, and the results of that mission.

Some future Philippine historian might represent the Independence Mission of 1922 as the one which secured America's solemn pledge that it would neither retreat from the goal of Filipino freedom nor attempt to turn back the clock on Filipino autonomy. Led by the two senior Filipino political leaders, Manuel L. Quezon, president of the Senate, and Sergio Osmeña, speaker of the House of Representatives, the delegation comprised leaders from all walks of life. The mission was a remarkable cross-section of the Filipino elite.

Briefly put there were two stated reasons for the mission.³ The first was to rebut, as diplomatically as possible, the findings of the Wood-Forbes Mission⁴ of 1921 which had disclosed the incompetency, dishonesty, and general disarray in the Philippine government. The second was to ask for independence or, at the very least, a further grant of self-rule: perhaps, the establishment of a dominion relationship like that of Canada or else the appointment of a Filipino governor general. Obviously, we are not here to speak about the public reasons for the mission.

The unstated reasons for the mission lay rooted in the Filipino partisan politics of the day. During the latter half of 1921, Quezon made his bid for power. He decided to challenge Osmeña for the political leadership of the country and the presidency of the Nacionalista party. If either could lead a mission to Washington ostensibly to rebut the Wood-Forbes findings and, at the same time, attempt to secure some political concession or pledge to maintain the status quo, then either could claim that he had the ear of the Republican administration of Warren G. Harding. Obviously, neither politico could permit the other to lead any mission singlehandedly—at least not when a general election was in the offing. Thus Quezon, despite the fact that he had no political organization com-

³ There were several independence missions (1919, '22, '23, '24, '25, '28, '29, '30-'33). The Os-Rox missions of the late twenties and early thirties have been examined by Theodore Friend in the issues of *Philippine Studies* and his book, *Between Two Empires* (1965). The only other mission which has been studied, to this present writer's knowledge, is the first independence mission. See Frederick Gilman Hoyt, *The Philippine Independence Movement: The First Independence Mission to the United States and its Antecedents* (Unpublished Master's Thesis: Claremont Graduate School, 1954).

⁴ For a recent analysis of the Wood-Forbes report and mission, see M. Onorato, "The Wood-Forbes Mission," *Philippine Historical Bulletin*, VIII (March 1964), 1-9.

parable to Osmeña's regular Nacionalista machine, nevertheless decided that he had to co-chair the mission to Washington. For Osmeña, his participation with Quezon would neutralize any propaganda value hoped for by the Senate President. Osmeña could still remember the flamboyant claims made by Quezon in 1916 that he had brought home singled-handedly⁵ the Jones Act which granted virtual self-rule to the Philippines.⁶

When Washington was informed by the Governor General in late 1921 that the leaders wanted an opportunity to rebut the Wood-Forbes findings, the White House responded with the promise not to comment on that report until the Filipinos presented their case. At the same time, the President was informed by the Filipino Resident Commissioner to Congress that his people requested a hearing. Unwittingly, however, the Commissioner hinted at the true character of the proposed mission when he asked the President to "summon" Osmeña, along with Quezon to Washington⁷. Harding refused on grounds that this might be misconstrued in the Philippines.⁸ The attempt to have the American President give the mission a bipartisan character failed. It would be up to the Filipinos to paper over their own partisan differences.

Washington waited for the mission that spring of 1922 with mixed feelings. Harding was cynical concerning the leaders' motives. Too often Filipino leaders demanded independence in public only to repudiate or soften their stand in private.⁹ Harding, however, was willing to let the politicians use the trip for whatever political mileage they needed at home. He knew the needs of politicians. Yet, he

⁵ For Quezon's reminiscences of that memorable occasion, see Manuel L. Quezon, *The Good Fight* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1946), pp. 131ff.

⁶ For a recent study of the Jones Act and the development of Filipino autonomy, see M. Onorato, "The Jones Act and the Establishment of a Filipino Government, 1916-1921," *Philippine Studies*, 14 (July 1966), 448-459. See also M. Onorato, "The Jones Act and Filipino Participation in Government," *Solidarity*, II (July/August, 1967), 86-93.

⁷ Jaime C. de Veyra to Warren G. Harding, Confidential, December 15, 1921, Warren G. Harding Papers, Ohio Historical Society, The Ohio State Museum, Columbus, Ohio.

⁸ Harding to de Veyra, December 16, 1921, Harding Papers.

⁹ For a recent article on Quezon's efforts for independence, see Gerald E. Wheeler, "Manuel L. Quezon and Independence for the Philippines: Some Qualifications," *U.P. Research Digest*, II (July 1963), 12-16. See also G. E. Wheeler, "Quezon and the American Presidents," *Folio: Philippine Collegian Literary Supplement*, I (January 1964), 4-8.

had no intention of considering seriously any substantive matters concerning independence or further extension of Philippine autonomy. Moreover, the inability of the Filipinos, while in Washington, to offer any meaningful suggestions leading to a reconciliation of Philippine-American differences concerning independence, only convinced the administration that the Filipino leaders were on a political junket.¹⁰

On June 22, 1922, after receiving a petition from the mission, President Harding replied that the Filipinos were to be commended for their progress, their loyalty, and their desire for freedom. But, he continued, the day of independence was still a long way off. In the meantime, he pledged that no backward step would be taken in regard to Philippine autonomy. Thus a meaningless gesture was made toward Filipino sensibilities. It was meaningless because Harding knew, as the politicians did, that neither he nor any responsible American sought to destroy Philippine autonomy. Moreover, the President knew that it would have taken armed force to challenge the status quo.

What then were the results of the mission. First of all, neither Quezon nor Osmeña was able to fully capitalize upon the "solemn pledge" given by the President. The general election of 1922 did not succeed in dumping Osmeña or crushing Quezon's bid for power. Through subsequent shrewd bargaining, Quezon succeeded in getting Osmeña to abdicate. Second, the mission brought home a "pledge" which any sophisticated student of the Philippine scene knew was valueless. After all, it cost nothing to give it. Third, the fact that the mission neither rebutted the Wood-Forbes Report nor secured independence, or even an extension of Philippine autonomy, only served to frustrate those Americans who were generally sympathetic to Filipino aspirations.¹¹ They became concerned, just as the Re-

Harding, while chairman of the Senate Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions, had listened to all the Filipino arguments during the 1919 mission.

¹⁰ Horace M. Towner to Harding, June 14, 23, 1922, January 2, 1923, Harding Papers. Towner was the chairman of the House Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions. He was considered several times for the post of governor general.

¹¹ Ex-Governor General F. B. Harrison doubted if the mission could accomplish anything with the Harding administration. See Harrison to Isauro Gabaldon, April 23, 1922, Francis Burton Harrison Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. Gabaldon was one of two resident commissioners from the Philippine Islands to the Congress.

publican administration was convinced, that the Filipino leaders were using the independence issue for political capital at home.¹²

In conclusion, it goes without saying that a thorough study of the 1922 mission is necessary. Yet, we can offer this tentative assessment: the mission did nothing to further the Filipino cause. Indeed, the Filipino leaders would have been shocked if Harding had granted their professed wish for freedom. After all, the Philippine Independence Mission of 1922 was undertaken for reasons other than seeking Philippine independence.

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¹² There is no doubt that independence was used for political gain by the politicians. See Vicente Bunuan, *Arguments for Immediate Philippine Independence: Supported by Facts and Figures* (Washington: Philippine Press Bureau, 1924), pp. 12ff.