

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

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## The Burden of Proof

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*Philippine Studies* vol. 33, no. 2(1985) 236–240

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

## Book Reviews

THE BURDEN OF PROOF. THE VARGAS-LAUREL COLLABORATION CASE. By Teodoro A. Agoncillo. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1984. xii, 462 pages.

*The Burden of Proof* is a significant addition to Prof. Agoncillo's impressive body of work on Philippine history written, as he puts it, "from the point of view of a Filipino." The qualification is important: in *The Burden of Proof* Agoncillo presents the Filipino side of the collaboration issue as he, "a Filipino eyewitness to that crucial period," sees it.

The writing is vintage Agoncillo: "narrative-descriptive" in style, in faithful adherence to his historian's credo, which he restates thus in his Preface to the book:

The historian should have the imagination to seek legitimate and valid ways and means of supplying the flesh and blood which make the past come alive for the present to see and feel and evaluate . . . History must tell a story if it hopes to serve its primary purpose of re-living the past.

"This book, then," he explains,

is the story of Vargas's and Laurel's collaboration with the Japanese military during the last war . . . I have tried to re-create the tortured past in as close a manner to actuality as the primary materials, including oral history, allowed me to do . . . There is just enough analysis to clarify certain points, but analysis does not, must not, impede the flow of the narrative. Otherwise, the continuity of history will be broken and its movement is to make it lifeless.

Readers will find the narrative flow of *The Burden of Proof* rapid indeed and unbroken. Like a mountain stream flowing swiftly towards the lowlands, Agoncillo's chronicle of collaboration, meticulously documented, proceeds smoothly from beginning to end, unimpeded by distracting asides or time-consuming reflections.

*The Burden of Proof* does not delve too deeply into motivations and the tangled considerations that often constitute the wellsprings of action in times that "try men's souls." The reader who expects a re-creation of "the tortured past"—the soul searching, the anguished examinations of conscience and the heart-rending doubts that most Filipinos, presumably including Messrs. Vargas, Laurel and other political leaders experienced during the Japanese occupation—will have to glean these between the lines. The narrative generates its own momentum from an almost total recall of events. For the greater part of the book, depth is sacrificed, deliberately, for "movement."

The reader finds for instance, in the chapter "The Flight to Tokyo," a detailed account of the physical aspects of the Laurel party's exodus from Baguio to Pinkian, Nueva Vizcaya, through Bayombong to Tuguegarao, Cagayan thence to Formosa and Japan. The book recalls the hazards of that tremendous journey, as the hostages wended their way along the tortuous roads and trails of Bontoc and Benguet, harassed by Filipino guerrillas, at risk from American bombers and uncertain about the intentions of their Japanese escorts. The reader learns which cars stalled and had to be pushed off the narrow road over the abyss, who were assigned to kitchen duty and what dishes they managed to cook. But there is hardly any clue to the deeper thoughts and feelings of the group during those desperate hours, with their wartime world collapsing around them and the day of reckoning on the collaboration issue looming before their eyes.

The reader, however, can hardly complain. He has been duly forewarned; the author has declared forthrightly in his Preface: "My analysis in depth always appears in the last chapter."

Forthrightness is, in fact, a hallmark of *The Burden of Proof*. Agoncillo disdains the bloodless objectivity of the run-of-the-mill historian. He is a committed, almost an obsessed, writer: he nails his colors to the mast, and they are mostly primary colors; he leaves no gray areas. He describes General MacArthur as "the brilliant but arrogant and mendacious military officer whose reputation among the American GI's in Bataan was 'synonymous with dirt'." He denounces President Roxas's "canine loyalty to America" and derides General Romulo as a "resurrected Narcissus" with "an enormous gift for concocting" self-serving "myths and tales." He dismisses the collaboration question as "a brainchild of the Americans."

Agoncillo, however, reserves his most scathing remarks for the Filipino people in his clinical dissection of their slave mentality bred of "more than three hundred years of colonial life under a repressive regime which made subservience a virtue." He describes the Filipino as a "sedulous ape" who "apes everything American . . . to prove his canine loyalty to America." He ascribes to this trait the readiness of the political collaborators to carry out, and even anticipate the wishes of their Japanese masters.

In his concluding analysis of collaboration, Agoncillo notes the "seeming

paradox" of the Filipino people voting in the postwar elections for both the collaborators and their persecutors and critics. He stops short of spelling out the reason for this ambivalence, which was the national schizophrenia caused by the Japanese occupation. It might have been a heroic time for the guerrillas in the mountains. But for the masses of people caught in the iron grip of the invader and forced against their will to submit to his wishes, the enemy occupation of the Philippines was a heavy burden on the national conscience, a shameful and ignominious experience which they wanted to bury in the past and forget as quickly as possible. Their attitude may be likened to the self-induced amnesia of most surviving victims of rape.

For their part, except for a few perceptive individuals, the Americans at that time were incapable of understanding the Filipino ambivalence towards collaboration. The United States had never been under enemy occupation; Americans had no emotional or psychological point of reference from which to view the Philippine experience with fairness if not with sympathy. The defeat and the shame of the inglorious Vietnam war was thirty-odd years into America's future.

Although it deals exclusively with the past, *The Burden of Proof* has a significant relevance to the present. Agoncillo touches on one of the most intriguing "ifs" of Philippine history. What if Quezon had not died before the liberation of the Philippines? Agoncillo surmises that Quezon, who "never for one moment doubted the loyalty of the people he had left behind," would have quickly disposed of the collaboration issue. Having "the courage to disagree with American officials," Quezon, Agoncillo believes, "would have bawled out MacArthur had he tried to dictate to him on matters outside military science and tactics."

Would Quezon, untainted by collaboration, have accepted the parity amendment as one of the two preconditions to Philippine independence, the other being the retention of American military bases in Philippine territory which he had strenuously opposed as a condition to Philippine independence in the Hare-Hawes-Cutting Act? Roxas, himself vulnerable to collaboration charges, readily acquiesced to both preconditions. "As to the problems arising from the parity amendment with all its grim aspects," Agoncillo writes, "the Filipino people owe much to Roxas."

The riddle is compounded by the coincidence of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's death, which also occurred before the Liberation of the Philippines. Something of the lofty spirit of the Atlantic Charter died with Roosevelt, and a lot of Philippine courage, dignity, self-respect and sheer guts perished with Quezon. Had Roosevelt lived, would he have had the meanness of spirit to offer a flawed independence to a people whose country had been devastated because they had remained loyal to America? And would such a flawed independence have been meekly accepted by Quezon, the proud Filipino leader who had once declared: "Better a government run like hell by Filipinos to a

government run like heaven by Americans”?

The Japanese occupation of the Philippines and its immediate aftermath may be viewed in retrospect as one of those historic watersheds that define a nation's character and shape its future.

One of the consequences of the collaboration issue was the curtailment of Philippine sovereignty in two of its most vital aspects: control of national security and control over the national economy. Some of the deeper roots of our present economic crisis may be traced to the pernicious influence of parity on our economic development during its critical formative period. And parity's deleterious after-effects are still with us, aggravating our current economic problems. Our economic difficulties, in turn, tend to erode our capability and our political will to exercise our option to terminate the Military Bases Agreement with the United States, despite the continuing curtailment of our national sovereignty and the escalating risk which the bases pose to our national survival.

By an ironic twist of history, the consequences of the collaboration issue have come full circle. Although the Philippine flag flies cosmetically over Clark and Subic, and there is much brave talk about an independent foreign policy, we are now in fact getting locked into the same position of flawed independence and curtailed sovereignty which we, under the leadership of a President rendered vulnerable to American dictation by the stigma of collaboration, had acquiesced to at the inception of the Republic in 1946.

This would have been a logical subject for a sequel to *The Burden of Proof*, which I had hoped Prof. Agoncillo himself would have written. Retirement had not dulled his wit or blunted the cutting edge of his trenchant pen, nor had age diminished his zest for spirited scholarly argument. In an earlier time, Agoncillo might have been at home in the Propaganda Movement, as a polemicist of *La Solidaridad*. Few subjects would have been more deserving of the attention of this outstanding Filipino nationalist and historian.

The Sugamo Diary, which comprises the latter portion of *The Burden of Proof*, is a down-to-earth account of life in the American detention camp outside Tokyo in which Filipino political collaborators Jose P. Laurel, Camilo Osias, Benigno S. Aquino, Sr. and the author, Jorge B. Vargas, were incarcerated for more than ten months after the surrender of Japan. It is a prosaic and gossipy chronicle of day-to-day housekeeping, neighborly and family concerns, with detailed laundry lists, exercise and bathing schedules, and news from the outside world gleaned from family letters and back issues of newspapers and magazines. One notes a curious omission: “kitchen police” duties are listed in full, but not a single menu is reproduced and no reaction to prison fare is recorded. The entries in the Diary are endlessly repetitive, reflecting the stultifying monotony of detention camp existence.

Diaries are invariably self-revealing. The self-portrait that emerges from

the Sugamo Diary is that of a person of fastidious habits who powders his body after taking a bath, keeps his cell spic and span, and dresses for meals, wearing a fresh shirt and a proper tie, even in the dog days of the Tokyo midsummer. He is scrupulously honest in his custody and accounting of government funds and expects his captors to be equally scrupulous in the safe-keeping of his confiscated personal belongings. A gregarious man who befriends his fellow prisoners, his barbers and even his guards, he is also the compleat bureaucrat ever mindful of influential present and future "connections." He has a computer's memory for the birthdays and wedding anniversaries of his distinguished companions, which he never fails to mark with thoughtful gifts from the limited resources in his cell.

The one thing he cannot abide is the ingratitude of General Douglas MacArthur, whom he holds responsible for his prolonged detention in Japan against the rules of war and the American tradition of fair play, although he had done the General many a good turn in his time. As the weeks pass and he continues to languish in Sugamo while the Philippines moves towards national elections and the proclamation of independence, his mounting anxiety provides a thread of tension in an otherwise humdrum Diary. He finds the delay of his repatriation all the more difficult to bear because he has a clear conscience. He is certain in his own mind that he has done nothing wrong in following President Quezon's "last instructions" to the officials he was leaving behind "to do everything in their power to minimize the sufferings of the civilian population."

There is no allusion in the Sugamo Diary to its apocalyptic backdrop of a devastated Japan bludgeoned into unconditional surrender by the first atomic bombs ever used in war. Yet it would be incorrect to describe the Diary as merely escapist, or to dismiss it as a collection of trivia. The sheer accumulation of common human concerns recounted in its 200 pages somehow acquires a humble dignity of its own.

In a sense, the Sugamo Diary may be said to represent the other side of the coin of human survival. It is, in a modest way, indicative of the descent of ordinary people from the high-tension heroics and horrors of the war to the ground level of everyday life. For the political collaborators, as well as for the embattled victors and vanquished, the war was over. It was time to turn again to the earthbound-business of resuming the interrupted rhythm of daily living.

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