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Independence Rejected: The Philippines 1924

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Notes & Comment

Independence Rejected: The Philippines, 1924*

On November 15, 1935, Manuel Luis Quezon was inaugurated as the first president of the Commonwealth of the Philippine Islands. It was the culmination of nearly two decades of struggle for complete Philippine autonomy and a fixed date for independence. Yet, it is ironic that this same goal could have been achieved a decade earlier. Few Filipinos today are aware that commonwealth status and independence had been offered their fathers in 1924.¹ Few Americans even know that the Congress would have granted full self-government, if not independence itself, to the Filipinos that year. It is assumed by most interested scholars that no significant dialogue concerning Filipino freedom had taken place between 1916 and the Great Depression of 1929. Nevertheless the Philippine Islands were on the brink of complete self-rule and, perhaps, independence in 1924. Obviously, in a short paper, we cannot examine the complex issues and questions which are raised by this subject.²

Forty years ago this past August 7, Governor General Leonard Wood died. What concerns us here, however, is an incident that occurred during his tenure of office. On July 17, 1923, the Filipino members of his cabinet and Council of State resigned. The reasons for their action are not at issue at this time. Suffice it to say, an intense poli-

* Paper read at the XXVII International Congress of Orientalists, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 14 August 1967.

¹ In their major collegiate textbook, *A Short History of the Filipino People* (1960), Teodoro A. Agoncillo and Oscar M. Alfonso briefly mention the Fairfield bill. See page 389. In his high school textbook, *Philippine History*, Agoncillo does not even indicate the existence of the bill.

² It is my hope to examine the entire independence issue during the twenties from the Filipino, as well as the American, viewpoint.

tical struggle developed during the summer and autumn of that year between the Filipino leadership (led by Quezon, Sergio Osmeña, and Manuel Roxas) and the Governor General. It was a conflict which was to focus attention on Manila.

In November 1923, a Philippine mission led by Roxas sailed to the United States armed with a mandate to seek Wood's recall. On January 8, 1924, the mission submitted a detailed bill of particulars against the Governor to the Congress and President. He stood indicted for military rule, for actions detrimental to the peace and tranquility of the people, and for being temperamentally unfit for high office. Naturally, the President of the United States categorically denied the allegations.³

It was during those long months of controversy that Filipino leaders of all persuasions argued for independence as the only equitable solution to their problems.⁴ Yet, it came as a surprise when the Congress decided to take them at their word.

The Congress which was returned in 1922 was decidedly weighted in favor of the Progressives and liberal Democrats. In fact, the Filipinos were overjoyed by the Republican setback. They argued that freedom could only come from the hands of Democrats and Progressives.⁵ Whether the Democrat party was any more pro-Philippine than the Republican party cannot be discussed at this time. It is enough to say that Filipino rhetoric gave the impression that freedom was possible from the new Congress. Indeed, Senator La Follette, the Progressive leader, had understood that to be the hope of the Filipinos.⁶ Thus, when the Filipino version of the fight with Wood was believed by many in the Congress, the reaction was almost predictable—except, that is, to the Filipinos. By early 1924, there was a flood of congressional resolutions and bills ranging from immediate Philippine independence to complete autonomy with an option for freedom after thirty years.⁷

³ For a full discussion of the cabinet crisis and its aftermath, see my "Manuel L. Quezon, Governor General Leonard Wood and the Cabinet Crisis of July 17, 1923," *Philippine Historical Bulletin*, Special Quezon Number, X (June 1966), 5-24.

⁴ See the files of the *Philippines Herald* (Manila) between July 1923 and mid-1924.

⁵ See the following articles: "Bravo Progressives!," "Progressives Win in P.I., Too!" "Progressive Victory in Elections Assures Early P.I. Independence," *Philippine Press Bulletin*, IV (November-December 1922), 1.

⁶ Robert M. La Follette to Clyde H. Tavenner, April 28, 1923, *Manuel L. Quezon Papers* (Quezoniana Collection, National Library, Manila).

⁷ See "Philippine Independence Measures in 68th Congress," *Congressional Digest*, III (April 1924), 229.

By March, the bill which had been sponsored by Representative Louis W. Fairfield of Indiana had become the most widely acclaimed. It proposed a commonwealth, an elected Filipino chief executive, a twenty-five year transition period, the maintenance of United States bases in the Philippines, the control of the foreign relations, indebtedness, and defense by the United States until the relinquishment of American sovereignty, and the presence of an American high commissioner in Manila.⁸

The congressional drive to push through some form of a Philippine independence bill was so intense⁹ that the Coolidge administration asked Wood to speak out against any rash move on the part of Congress to free the Philippines.¹⁰ The administration was convinced that independence was imminent.¹¹ Thus, on March 14, Wood issued his famous plea against further Filipino autonomy and freedom.¹² Still this did not deter the Congress. By any standard of measurement, Filipino and American leaders were convinced that any bill that came out of the appropriate House and Senate committees would be assured of passage.¹³

Back in Manila pressure had been mounting since January for a decision on the future course of action. Most Filipino leaders, it seemed, were determined to continue the attack against Wood. But the question being most asked was: What then? As reports flowed back to Manila concerning the increased congressional support for the Philippine cause, Quezon, together with other cautious Filipinos, began to

⁸ It is interesting to note that the Fairfield bill bore a striking resemblance to the proposed commonwealth bill which some Filipino leaders under Quezon's auspices worked out in November 1922 with members of the American business community in Manila. For a copy see File 364/458 Bureau of Insular Affairs, National Archives, Washington, D.C. We might add that the Fairfield bill was very similar to the independence bills of 1933 (Hare-Hawes-Cutting) and 1934 (Tydings-McDuffie).

⁹ See General Frank McIntyre to Leonard Wood, Personal, March 11, 1924. *Papers of Leonard Wood* (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.), Box 173.

¹⁰ McIntyre to Wood, Strictly Confidential, cable, March 11, 1924, Wood Papers, Box 189.

¹¹ See McIntyre to Wood, Personal, March 1, 1924, Wood Papers, Box 173.

¹² Wood to McIntyre, Strictly Confidential, cable, March 14, 1924, Wood Papers, Box 189.

¹³ McIntyre to Wood, Strictly Confidential, March 11, 1924, Wood Papers, Box 189. See also Manuel Roxas to Teodoro M. Kalaw, cable, January 8, 1924, Quezon Papers; cable Philippine Press Bureau (Washington) to Philippine Press Bureau (Manila), March 6, 1924, Quezon Papers.

wonder how far they might permit the movement to go.¹⁴ Suggestions were made to the effect that a *rapprochement* with the Governor General was possible.¹⁵ Still this did not halt the work of Congress. The freedom which the Filipinos had demanded since 1899 was now within reach. Their leaders had only to push the issue.

Why then were many leaders reluctant to seek the preferred freedom? There were many reasons but let us mention these few: Filipino dependence upon the American market, lack of military preparedness, socio-economic problems among the masses, and, perhaps, the fear of independence itself. As for the prospect of complete self-rule, there were no hard decisions taken. Commonwealth status under the proper conditions even appeared attractive to some Filipinos.¹⁶

When it became apparent that no one could slow down the Congress, Quezon¹⁷ and Osmeña decided to rush to Washington to see if they could blunt the congressional drive which they believed was detrimental to their cause.¹⁸ In their view, Congress, however well-meaning, was simply pushing them too fast. To make certain that their mission had full bi-partisan support, they invited Claro M. Recto, then the most prominent member of the opposition Democrata party, to join them.

When they arrived in early May, the congressional hearings were almost at an end. Even their belated participation acted as no brake upon the legislators. Only the quarrel among some congressional members as to the decision between immediate independence or complete autonomy delayed the Fairfield bill in committee.

Turning to the Executive branch, the new Philippine mission discovered that the Coolidge administration, despite the President's caustic denial of Filipino readiness for independence, had decided never-

¹⁴ Marcial P. Lichauco in his biography of Manuel Roxas suggests the concern of the leadership. See *Roxas: The Story of a Great Filipino and of the Political Era in which he lived* (Manila: Kiko Printing Press, 1952), pp. 44-45.

¹⁵ See Eulogio B. Rodriguez to Francis Burton Harrison, March 6, 1924, *Papers of Francis Burton Harrison* (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.). See also Wood Diary, March 13, 1924, Wood Papers, Box 20.

¹⁶ Lichauco, pp. 44-46.

¹⁷ According to Wood, the Filipino leader appealed to him to suggest how they might stop the congressional rush to legislate for the Philippines. Wood told him that it was probably too late. See Wood Diary, March 13, 1924, Wood Papers, Box 20.

¹⁸ In his biography of Wood, Hermann Hagedorn stated that it was significant that once Quezon and Osmeña were in Washington, the cry for independence died down. See *Leonard Wood, A Biography* (2 vols.; New York: Harper and brother, 1931), II, 450.

theless to endorse the Fairfield bill as soon as the Filipino leaders had committed themselves to it. In fact, there had been suggestions as early as December 1923 that the administration was not opposed to discussing the Philippine question.¹⁹ Now Quezon and Osmeña were faced with a momentous decision. Not since 1916 had freedom been so close at hand.²⁰

At a meeting with an administration spokesman, and later with the Secretary of War, Quezon stated that twenty-five years was too long to wait for freedom. If it were less, he was certain that his people would support the Fairfield bill. However, he pointed out how embarrassing that measure was to him and his associates. The Democrats were already belaboring the fact that acceptance of the bill would be a reversal of his policy of immediate, absolute, and complete independence. He then proposed what seemed a reasonable course of action. If the administration could receive assurance from Congress that the bill would be enacted in that session, he would support it. However, if it was believed that the bill would not be brought out of committee in the few remaining days of that session, then he wanted the Secretary of War to send him a statement of the administration's position. He promised that he would use it in confidence to gain support for the Fairfield bill so that it could be passed at the next session of Congress.²¹ On May 17, he received the administration's position paper.

Quezon's fear of political embarrassment was well-founded.²² Many young nationalists were furious that the mission did not lobby among its Progressive and Democrat friends for immediate independence.²³ Older and conservative Filipinos were confused and disturbed by the mission's lack of outright endorsement of the Fairfield bill.²⁴ Even General Aguinaldo, among others, had come to accept the promise of

¹⁹ See Lichauco, pp. 44-45. See also Pedro Guevara to Teodoro M. Kalaw, Strictly Confidential, cable, November 26, 1923, Quezon Papers.

²⁰ The famed Clark amendment to the Jones Act (Organic Act) of 1916 provided for independence by 1921. It was defeated by pressure from certain Catholic elements in the United States.

²¹ See McIntyre to Wood, May 13, 1924; McIntyre to Wood, Personal, with enclosure, June 3, 1924, Wood Papers, Box 173.

²² McIntyre to Wood, May 13, 1924, Wood Papers, Box 173. See also Quezon to Teodoro M. Kalaw, cable, June 10, 1924, Quezon Papers.

²³ Rodriguez to Harrison, September 9, 1924, Harrison Papers.

²⁴ Teodoro M. Kalaw to Quezon, cable, June 2, 1924, Quezon Papers.

freedom after commonwealth status as a necessary compromise with reality.²⁵

When Quezon, Osmeña, and Recto returned to Manila in the autumn of 1924, Leonard Wood was startled by the Democrata's complete knowledge of what had occurred between the administration and Quezon. Recto, who had not been present at that important meeting, had acquired key documents.²⁶ But more than that, the Governor was shocked by his decision to expose Quezon.²⁷ Thus, on November 18, Quezon and Osmeña were shaken by Recto's documented revelation that they had accepted something less than independence.²⁸ It was only party discipline that enabled them to get the legislature to endorse their version of their mission to Washington.²⁹ According to them, the Fairfield bill was a fraud perpetrated upon the Filipino nation. They had rejected it as offering no meaningful solution. They would accept independence or continued "slavery" under American rule.³⁰ In a moment of calculated political vengeance, Claro M. Recto had destroyed whatever chances there may have been for increased self-rule and early independence. It is not difficult to understand the rationale for his action. During the special senatorial election of 1923, Quezon had asserted that the Democrata party was traitorous because of its acceptance of Wood's version of the cabinet crisis. It was an unpardonable affront to their patriotism. It demanded redress.³¹ But in a practical vein, if the Democratas could link Quezon to some "deal" with the Coolidge administration, the party had a good chance of posing as defenders of principle: namely, independence or nothing. It was worth the risk. Unfortunately for the Democratas, it did not succeed.

²⁵ Kalaw to Quezon, cable, June 2, 1924, June 4, 1924, Quezon Papers. See also Jose E. Alemany to Calvin Coolidge, July 8, 1924, Wood Papers, Box 169.

²⁶ It seems that Recto acquired the incriminating evidence from a minor clerk in the Bureau of Insular Affairs office.

²⁷ See Wood Diary, November 13-17, 1924, Wood Papers, Box 21.

²⁸ See Liang, Dapen, *The Development of Philippine Political Parties* (Hong Kong: South China Morning Post, 1939), pp. 173-175. See also Wood Diary, November 19-21, 1924, Wood Papers, Box 21.

²⁹ As a consequence of legislation passed during the regime of Governor General F. B. Harrison, the Philippine Legislature was also the Commission of Independence.

³⁰ See the resolutions adopted by the legislature. See also Liang, pp. 173-175.

³¹ For the Democrata position during the crisis of 1923 see my article on Quezon and Wood in the *Philippine Historical Bulletin*. See also my essay on the Democrata Party in the April 1964 issue of *Philippine Studies*.

Quezon was more than willing to deny with vehemence that the Fairfield bill ever held any attraction for him.³²

Yet, we know that Quezon would have supported the bill despite his previous assertions of immediate, complete, and absolute independence. It seems that he had counted on his charism to gain mass support for his "new" policy. But once his negotiations had been exposed, he felt obliged to repudiate any and all interest in the Fairfield bill. He did have his reputation to protect.

From beginning to end the whole episode briefly described above had the aura of the unreal about it. Out of the clear, Congress decided to grant the Filipinos their fondest dreams. Arguments which for years were thought insufficient to prove Philippine capacity for freedom suddenly became acceptable. The Executive branch which had only three years previously accepted the conclusion of the Wood-Forbes Mission³³ suddenly turned 180 degrees. Filipino leaders who had used every stratagem to keep congressional interest in the Philippines kindled suddenly discovered the potency of their efforts. Yet, to say all this does not mean that complete autonomy and independence could not have been realized in 1924. The Fairfield bill, or something similar, could have been enacted if it had not become enmeshed in Philippine politics.

It is regrettable that the Progressives and Democrats in Congress could not go slow. The very zeal with which the legislators attacked the Philippine question scared many Filipino leaders. After living through a decade in which they had argued for years for every advance in their political autonomy, they worried that Congress was throwing independence at them. It is regrettable that the leaders should have been caught off guard. After all, it was their propaganda that portrayed America as drawing off the life's blood of the Filipino people. Yet, they were not prepared to have their rhetoric accepted. They certainly did not believe that of America. Why should any one else, especially American legislators? It is regrettable that steps were not taken to prepare the people for a switch in goals as soon as the direction in which Congress was moving became apparent. Quezon and Osmeña, among others, should have allowed themselves room to

³² When informed that the Fairfield bill was still alive, Quezon wired Resident Commissioner Guevara that it must not be endorsed. Moreover, the Consolidado Nacionalista party would repudiate it at its next convention. See Quezon to Guevara, cable, December 17, 1924, Quezon Papers. See also Guevara to Quezon, cable, November 12, 1924, Quezon Papers. In this cable, the Resident Commissioner asked if he should start work on the Fairfield bill. This was before the debacle in the Philippine legislature.

³³ For the full statement of the Wood-Forbes Mission see its Report which was issued in 1921.

maneuver. These two men should have taken the Democrata party into the equation. They, as well as their associates, chose to view the whole affair from a narrow political perspective. If there would be any advantages, it would accrue to them—members of the Consolidado Nacionalista party. It is regrettable that the Coolidge administration felt obliged to dissemble: privately granting what it publicly denied. Of course, no one (neither Quezon nor the administration) could know that Recto knew what had occurred between them. It is regrettable that the Democratas put party interests above those of their people. However, it is even more regrettable that Quezon and Osmeña did not take up the challenge despite the political embarrassment. As the principal spokesmen of their people, as well as the leaders of the majority party, they would have won any fight. The Fairfield bill would have been enacted. The Philippine Commonwealth would have been inaugurated in 1925.

After the vehement public denial of any Filipino interest in the Fairfield bill, further congressional discussion of Philippine independence lagged until Congress decided after the Great Depression to sever the Philippine-American connexion.³⁴ Whatever political, economic, and military advantages the Filipinos might have gained over and beyond what Congress had originally thought adequate in 1924 was lost. That year was their golden opportunity. Congress was more than receptive to well-directed Filipino bargaining. The independence bills of the Depression-era were conceived in different circumstances. The thirties held none of the glittering promise of the twenties.

When the full history of the Philippine freedom movement is written, it will be recorded that 1924 was the wasted year. The year when the interests of the Filipino people could not be placed above those of partisan politics.

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³⁴ For the most recent analysis of the independence legislation of the Depression-era, see Theodore W. Friend, *Between Two Empires: The Ordeal of the Philippines, 1929-1946* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965). For a contemporary study, see Grayson Kirk, *Philippine Independence, Motives, Problems and Prospects* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., 1936).