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Jose S. Arcilla, S.J.

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## One-Eyed Decision-Making

Jose S. Arcilla, S.J.



**Exemplar of Americanism. The Philippine Career of Dean C. Worcester.** Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia, No. 36. By Rodney J. Sullivan. Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan, 1991. ix, 395 pages.

One of the early American officials in the Philippines, Dean Conant Worcester deserves closer scrutiny than has been accorded him. For obvious reasons, people like Taft, Wood, or MacArthur have overshadowed him. But as Sullivan shows in this essay, he was an important cog in the bureaucratic machinery that Americans claim gave birth to Philippine democracy. Worcester, just by being himself, a self-proclaimed apostle of "americanism," must not remain unknown to the Filipinos.

"Americanism" is mentioned three times in the book, its most graphic description being the metaphor of the *bejuco*, a vine clinging to the *balete* tree in order to survive (pp. 229-300). In the view of Dean Conant Worcester, the subject of Sullivan's study, the Filipinos in the first quarter of the century were the *bejuco*. Washington was the *balete* without whose life-support the former could not hope to join the family of civilized states, much less grow into a nation.

Today, such an outlandish notion would never enter anybody's mind. But when the young North American republic first ventured out as a colonizing power, a good number of Americans—Dean Conant Worcester among them—were convinced that no citizen of the United States could disregard the moral imperative to uplift their little brown brothers in the East. As the author points out, two scientific expeditions to the country had convinced Worcester he had the duty to Americanize the Filipinos. He had several reasons: the natural wealth of the islands left unexploited and waiting for energetic Americans; the backward state of the archipelago following the dark period of Spanish rule; the native-born population "unfit for political or economic self-management" (pp. 41-42); and Dewey's unbelievably swift mastery of the Spanish fleet off Cavite.

Worcester first came to the Philippines in 1887 as a junior member of a scientific expedition to collect zoological specimens. He was immediately repelled by the smell and dirt when their boat stopped at Hongkong, a reaction worsened by what he felt was Spanish administrative inefficiency when he docked at Manila. In contrast, swallowed by the island forests of

Palawan and the other Philippine provinces in his scientific chores, he felt nothing but "keen delight."

This scientific expedition became the first feather in Worcester's cap. He soon came back on a second trip in 1890, also successful. The specimens he collected, the new species of birds he identified, and the scientific reports he made established him as one of the up and coming ornithologists of the United States.

Significantly, while he developed a sincere affection for those we call today the "minority groups" of the Philippines, he had nothing but scorn for the majority of the lowland Christian Filipinos. Sullivan does not clearly explain why, but, one day, Worcester's Malay servant (hired at a lower rate) called in sick. Worcester dismissed him and hired two others "who know their place, keep it, and fill it better" than the first (p. 20).

Apparently, this incident confirmed initial attitudes picked up on Worcester's first trip to the East. He continued, unaware that his rather limited contact with the majority of the Filipinos should have cautioned him against generalized accusations of their laziness, tendency to lie or steal, etc. Until his death in 1924, he could not shake off this prejudice, fed, according to Sullivan, by stereotypes from "Spanish literary tradition," and confirmed by his training in ethnology at the University of Michigan. He had led himself to believe he was the providential instrument to civilize the Philippine tribes untouched by Spanish misgovernment or corruption.

Dewey's triumph in Cavite in the spring of 1898 fired the imagination of this scientist but "self-confessed *jingo*" (p. 30). He burned with the "exciting prospect of the Philippines as an American colony." The victory gave the United States, he wrote, "de facto title to the archipelago. Spain could not be allowed to reestablish herself there because of her brutal oppression of the Filipinos and the certainty that she would wreak a terrible vengeance on those who had rebelled against her" (p. 46).

To satisfy the need to know more of the new colony, a publisher asked him to write a book immediately acclaimed by the American reading public, *The Philippine Islands and Their People: A Record of Personal Observation and Experience with a Short Summary of the More Important Facts in the History of the Archipelago* (Macmillan, 1898). This added to his reputation as one of the very few who knew something about the former Spanish colony. Not surprisingly, he was asked to join the Schurman Commission President McKinley sent to the Philippines in 1899.

Not only the Schurman, but also the Taft Commission, the second sent to the Philippines in 1900 to establish civilian government where the American military forces had taken over. And from 1900 to 1913, he was the Secretary of the Interior, a role that gave him almost unlimited power for implementing his "exalted Americanism" (p. 189).

The role he had conceived for himself was to teach the Filipino wards of Uncle Sam "liberty, equality, individualism, democracy, and the rule of

law under a constitution" (p. 189). Naturally, he had to buck opposition, from the anti-imperialists in the United States, and soon from the young generation of Filipino nationalists, like Quezon and Osmeña.

Sullivan points out that even before the Schurman Commission started on its task, there was bickering among its members. Jacob Schurman, its president, opposed keeping the Philippines, but Worcester was pugnaciously for it. In the end, the latter succeeded in imposing his views on the majority of the five-man commission. Schurman was nominally the head of the group, but it was Worcester who penned the final report to Washington. It is not surprising it embodied the latter's view that the United States should retain the Philippines. He believed he had the answers and recommended what he thought best for training the Filipinos in democratic and "civilized" ways.

Worcester was never reconciled to the protracted Filipino armed resistance to American rule. Alleged Filipino atrocities were to him so much proof of their savagery. They were on a lower rung of humanity. And when counter-reports of American cruelty began to spread in his own country, he concocted half-truths that deceived the American public; for example, that the majority of the Filipinos were "praying for the coming of the Americans," or that resistance to the Americans was fomented by the machinations of an oppressive Tagalog clique, "hated" by their own people (p. 70).

The American reading public, of course, was unaware that these statements were generalizations based on the very few facts that their author personally knew. It is true he had gone on a single observation, when from the safe height of a church bell tower Worcester watched how American troops were shooting Filipino fighters (pp. 69-70). Unknown too, was the fact that Worcester's source of information about lowland Filipino communities was the *ilustrado* elite, who themselves were not on familiar terms with the ordinary Filipino farmer or wage-earner. Recent history and the so-called love-hate relationship between the Filipinos and Americans today are less mysterious when reckoned against the fact that it was basically Worcester's reports that determined official decisions about the Philippines.

Sullivan makes a convincing case that Worcester was *avant le mot* the first of Lederer's later "ugly Americans," enthused over the installation of American political and economic institutions in the Philippines for the sake of the Americans, not the Filipinos. Whether or not this contradicted McKinley's avowed policy of "benevolent assimilation" was beside the point. Worcester did not even realize or seem to care he was negating his own "americanism."

As long as the Republicans were in control in Washington, in the Philippines Worcester served as Secretary of Interior. Under him were the Quarantine Service, Marine hospital, the Weather Bureau, and the bureaus of forestry, mining, agriculture, fisheries, public lands, government laboratories, patents and copyrights, and the non-Christian tribes. Perhaps the best gauge

with which to judge him is the failure of the agricultural policies he tried to introduce in the Philippines.

The Schurman Commission had suggested modernizing Philippine agriculture and forming an "industrialized population which could serve as a consuming class" (p. 100). Unfortunately, Worcester's plans were drawn out of context. Mechanization and agricultural industrialization meant getting rid of the carabao, the Filipino farmer's traditional ally, "versatile . . . employed in the preparation of land for planting, in cultivation, and in the transport of crops to the market." The carabao was slow, but, more importantly, it was adaptable and could withstand local climatic conditions. When at a conference someone suggested importing the beast to replace easily 90 percent of the herds that had fallen prey to rinderpest, "Worcester responded aggressively with a marked lack of appreciation of the dynamics of peasant agriculture." He insisted on innovation in farm methods, the use of the mule or steam gang-ploughs instead of the carabao, warning the Filipinos to "abandon the belief that they could only plant rice or plow, with the carabao looking on" (p. 101).

To counter the rinderpest that was killing practically all of the livestock in the Philippines, Worcester set his staff looking for an effective remedy. In 1903, he announced a major break-through with the production of an anti-rinderpest serum, and an inoculation program was started. It was a spectacular failure. Typically, Worcester tried to hide the truth, and blamed his subordinates. Only after the agricultural desk was removed from his supervision did officialdom find out—and admit—that the anti-rinderpest serum was ineffective. The whole idea was dropped in 1910, after the poor Filipino farmer had endured seven painful years of suffering.

To muffle mounting criticism, Worcester published a two-volume apology, *The Philippines Past and Present* (Macmillan, 1914). By this time, he had resigned from government service, and he wanted to defend his record. Curiously, its table of contents did not mention agriculture. As he wrote his family, he had to answer James H. Blount's *American Occupation of the Philippines, 1898-1912* (G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1913), an outspoken condemnation of American retention of the Philippines. Blount alleged that Worcester had been using tribal minorities to block the campaign for Philippine independence, with "thousands of photographs of tribal Filipinos sprinkled throughout official reports and magazine articles as evidence of Worcester's attempts to manipulate American public opinion" (p. 162). Alas, the American public knew no better.

Was Worcester racist? He certainly had no admiration for the Spanish colonial regime. A not insignificant detail reveals Worcester's anti-Spanish bias. He reports in a letter to his family that he finally had his scientific equipment passed through customs after the intercession of a Father Seymour teaching English at the Jesuit-run Ateneo in Manila (p. 19). There was

no such English teacher of that name; instead we have a Father Francisco Javier Simo, whose name apparently sounded like "Seymour" to Worcester's New England ears. Against what he judged to be Spanish excesses, the Filipino insurgents exercised "self-restraint," the same Filipinos he described as "natives and half-castes." But while he admired American patriotism, he could not accept the possibility that the Filipinos might have felt identical sentiments (p. 43).

And yet, with a close friend and former academic colleague at the University of Michigan, Worcester was only too happy to make use of Filipino ilustrados to found the Federal Party (*sic* for the Spanish *Partido Federalista*) to solidify American control, and eventual statehood, of the Philippines. As he smugly wrote his brother, he and his friend had "nursed" the party, "until it was big enough to stand alone," the "most important political move . . . since the outbreak of the war" (p. 121).

Sullivan is at pains to point out Worcester's "love for the naked savage," his enthusiasm for the scientific study of tribespeople, and his concern for their welfare." They were "wild," but they showed a "primitive nobility" not found among Christian and Muslim Filipinos, and were amenable to American rule (p. 162). His attention and efforts were accordingly directed to their "betterment."

The present study, as its title indicates, is not a biography. But its importance cannot be overstated. Based on primary sources, it shows how one man's prejudices determined the history of an entire nation in the last fifty years. One might even say that because of Worcester, the American presence in the Philippines was a case of the blind leading the blind.

The Americans had no inkling of what they had received from Spain, and they had to fish for information. Except for what he had picked up from his scientific trips to the Philippines, and, of course, his ethnological studies, Worcester was no better informed than the ordinary American government official. One of his sources was John Foreman's *The Philippine Islands: A Historical, Geographical, Ethnographical, Social and Commercial Sketch of the Philippine Archipelago and Its Political Dependencies* (London, 1892). A "sketch" indeed, limited, inadequate. On this basis, Worcester suggested and made decisions that affected the lives of about seven million Filipinos.

Not to belabor the obvious, Sullivan believes there is evidence that both Pratt and Bray in Singapore, whatever their reasons, had "deceived" Aguinaldo with their promise to at least favor Philippine independence. Worcester, however, relied on Dewey's claim that no such commitments had been made, and kept denying that the Filipinos had legal or moral rights to rule their own country. A contemporary historian calls this Worcester's "habit of argument 'by insinuation, red herrings, and character assassination'" (p. 84).

The point is mentioned because it was this same approach that enabled Worcester, after resigning from government service, to build a successful business empire in the Philippines. Former contacts with government offi-

cially helped tremendously. His innate business sense—not excluding deals that occasioned suspicions of corrupt business practices—were his stepping stones to wealth and comfort.

*Exemplar of Americanism* was originally a doctoral dissertation in whose literary style, even after revision for publication in book form, an alert reader will easily detect “the scent” of the academe. This is not to say that not enough research was done. But, as is often true in such intellectual exercises, the author proposes a thesis he wants to prove.

For Sullivan, this was the concept of “americanism” which in the book is neither condemned nor praised. The author’s assessment of Worcester is perhaps as objective as can be possible. As he observed:

Worcester was well aware the Filipinos regarded him with hostility . . . . Worcester’s unpopularity cannot be adequately explained by the trivial (his brusque manner). . . . In 1913 the proindependence magazine *The Filipino People* devoted a leading article to . . . the qualities that have made Mr. Worcester so conspicuous a failure. Tellingly, it emphasized the contempt, if not hatred, that Filipinos detected in Worcester’s attitude toward them. This was the underside of what Walter Robb described in an obituary as Worcester’s “Americanism.” His administrative career is littered with occasions of it: his disdain for the peasant agriculturist and the ubiquitous carabao; his peremptory firing of Filipino dwellings during the 1902–1904 epidemic; his preference for employing Americans in the anticholera and antirinderpest campaigns; his persistent racist disparagement of Filipinos; his refusal to concede them nationality or the rights that attach to citizenship; and, perhaps most blatantly, his campaign to provide Americans and their corporations with the means to acquire extensive areas of Philippine land. (p. 139)

Thanks to continuing research, Filipinos are just now beginning to see they have been had, and how one-eyed decision makers affected their life. But, as they say, better late than never.