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Notes and Comments

An American View of the Bases

BARTHOLOMEW LAHIFFE, S. J.

The year 1990 will be the year of decision for the American bases here in the Philippines. The agreement which permits their existence will lapse at the end of 1991. If it is to be renewed, substantial accord on the terms of renewal will have to be reached in the next few months.

Since there is still a large reservoir of goodwill among the Filipino people toward the U.S. the majority of them would probably accept an extension of the agreement. Most of the people in the media and in the nation's leading universities, however, want them removed.¹ Almost every politician of national standing who has spoken about the bases has also advocated their removal. To date President Corason Aquino has refused to commit herself on the issue.

American diplomats and military leaders here, when they speak about the bases, advocate their retention. One gets the impression that they would be greatly chagrined at their removal. Voices from Washington share that sentiment. Usually such spokesmen stress the advantages the bases bring to the Filipinos.² Even those Filipinos who hold high positions and are friendly to the U.S. listen to these arguments with amused skepticism. Obviously they convince nobody.

Perhaps the time has come to ask a different question. Is there an American case, as distinct from a Filipino one, for a removal of the

1. This writer has been present at lectures in the Ateneo de Manila University and at the University of the Philippines about the bases. Sentiment was all but unanimous that the bases must be removed, and at the earliest possible moment. Much the same view can be found in the columnists of the nation's leading newspapers, e.g., Joaquin Bernas in the *Manila Chronicle*.

2. Speech of former U.S. ambassador to the Philippines reported in the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, Monday, 25 September 1989.

bases? Has the time come when Americans, for reasons of their own, should want the bases removed?

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

American involvement in the western Pacific is as old as the American Republic. Yankee merchants were trading in Canton, and Yankee whalers were roaming the Pacific late in the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century that involvement deepened. Although not a participant in the Opium War or the Treaty of Nanking (1842) that ended it, the United States profited from them. By the treaty of Wanghsia (1844) which the U.S. signed with Manchu China, the Americans got everything Great Britain got at the Treaty of Nanking and more. This without firing a shot. Although the treaty of Wanghsia prohibited the Americans from trading in opium, a prohibition inserted into the treaty at American insistence, American merchants did traffic in opium, and the U.S. government did precious little to stop them.³

Again, in the period from 1856 to 1860, when China found itself at war with Britain and France, the U.S. did not participate. Following a directive of President Franklin Pierce, the United States joined Britain and France in pressuring China to observe the existing treaties (Nanking, Whampoa, and Wanghsia) but this pressure stopped short of the use of armed force. The United States escaped any responsibility, therefore, for the destruction of the Summer Palace in Peking, which the British burned just before the close of hostilities in reprisal for a violation of diplomatic immunity. This act of wanton destruction, an act in Chinese eyes reminiscent of earlier barbarian invaders, was never forgotten.⁴

China's present claim to Taiwan (Formosa) is not new. When Rev. Peter Parker, with the support of the crusty Commodore Matthew Perry, wanted the U.S. to establish a protectorate over the island, the American Secretary of State, Lewis Cass, at the behest of President Buchanan (1857-61), vetoed the project. The U.S. did not want to challenge China's claim to it.⁵

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, when the European powers, England, France, Germany, and Russia, along with Japan, extorted spheres of influence from China the United States, wisely, as events proved, stayed out of the general looting.

3. Tyler Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1941), p. 168.

4. William Langer, ed., *Encyclopedia of World History*, 5th ed. (London: George Harrap & Co. Ltd. 1972), p. 911.

5. Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia*, pp. 285-91.

This policy of stopping short of military intervention in the western Pacific was unfortunately changed in 1898 when the U.S., caught up in the imperialist fever of the day, crushed a Filipino independence movement and established its control over the Philippine Islands. The anti-imperialists in the U.S., who had vigorously opposed the seizure of the Philippines, soon had the bitter satisfaction of seeing some of their prophecies fulfilled. During the Boxer Uprising in China (1899-1901) the U.S. dispatched troops there to help the other powers suppress the Uprising. For the first time since its foundation the United States was involved in one of those military expeditions against China which were all too frequent in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. And, as modern students of history have been made aware, the measures taken by the powers to suppress the Uprising were every bit as brutal, and perhaps more so, than the measures taken by the Boxers to foster it. As the anti-imperialists had warned, America's western Pacific empire would involve her in Asia's wars.⁶

JAPAN IN THE PACIFIC

By the last decade of the nineteenth century Japan had achieved a high degree of modernization and embarked on an aggressive policy toward China and the building of an empire of its own in the western Pacific. Consequently it began to view the U.S., a nation it once considered friendly, as a rival. Even in 1905, when American efforts brought an end to the Russo-Japanese War on terms favorable to Japan, the Japanese view of America did not change. They saw the treaty as a piece of American deceit that deprived them of the fruits of their victory over Russia.⁷ Hostility between the two nations continued to deepen until it yielded poisonous consequences later in the century.

Japan, seizing the opportunity presented to it by the involvement of the major powers in World War 1, made its infamous Twenty-One Demands on China. Even when the Lansing-Ishii agreement mitigated these and other encroachments on China, America's efforts won it no friends among the Chinese who saw the agreement as a betrayal, although it had been Woodrow Wilson's policy to protect China against Japan's aggressiveness.⁸

6. Robert Beisner, *Twelve Against Empire: The Anti-Imperialists, 1898-1900* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968).

7. Howard Beale, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America to World Power* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1956), pp. 253-334

8. Akira Iriye, *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American-East Asian Relations* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, Harvest/HBJ Books, 1967), p. 128.

At the Paris peace conference in 1919, when all the other victorious powers wished to give the Japanese a mandate over all the formerly held German islands north of the equator, the U.S. resisted. Forced to yield, Woodrow Wilson tried to have the island of Yap internationalized because it was vital for cable communications with the Philippines. Again he was forced to yield to Japan, but Japan did not forget American opposition.⁹ At the same time America's concessions to Japan's other encroachments on China aroused Chinese anger against America, which had seen itself as China's protector. Anyone searching for advantages that two decades of activism in the western Pacific had brought to America would have been hard put to find them. But worse was to come.

The Washington Conference (1921-22) yielded a panoply of treaties that were meant to relax tensions in the Pacific, e.g., mutually guaranteeing the insular possessions of Great Britain, France, Japan, and the U.S., restricting the fortifications in the Pacific, and the size of navies worldwide, renewing the guarantees of Chinese administrative and territorial integrity, and reiterating the Open Door Policy. But they did little or nothing to check Japan's deepening suspicion of the U.S.¹⁰

Paradoxically America's policy of involvement in the western Pacific stood in marked contrast to its policy of isolation with regard to Europe, a region that was much nearer and with which its cultural ties were much stronger. It stood aside from the French-German quarrel over the Ruhr. It did not involve itself in the Italian-Greek quarrel over the island of Corfu. It played no part in the revision of the Russian-Polish border. The contrast in America's two policies is explained, in part, by its island empire in the western Pacific. America saw its vital interests involved in this region, much further from its national boundaries than was Europe, but did not see them involved in Europe at all. A more searching scrutiny of these policies might have asked why U.S. interests were more closely linked to the borders of China than they were to the borders of Poland, why Manchuria was more important to the U.S. than was the Saar?

In the early 1930s, when Japan seized Manchuria and then cynically recognized it as an independent empire (Manchukuo), the Lytton Report, commissioned by the League of Nations, condemned the Japanese action. The U.S., although not a member of the League,

9. A. Whitney Griswold, *The Far Eastern Policy of the United States* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938), pp. 259-68.

10. Samuel Morison, Henry Commager, and William Leuchtenberg, *A Concise History of the American Republic*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 586.

accepted the report and pledged support of its recommendations. This led to the Stimson Doctrine whereby the U.S. refused to recognize Japan's conquests in China. This doctrine won wide approval for the U.S. But it seems that no one examined what the consequences of this nonrecognition might be, especially if Japan resumed its aggressions against China, which it soon did. On the other hand the U.S. remained aloof from contemporaneous events in Europe, where Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany were engaged in adventures similar to Japan's.

Japan's reply to worldwide condemnation was to withdraw from the League and to abandon the restrictions of the Washington Naval Treaty. Its resentment was directed particularly against the U.S., while in the U.S. antagonism toward Japan became stronger and stronger.

In 1941 Japan, taking advantage of France's defeat in Europe, took over French Indo-China. Its undeclared war against China had further strengthened American hostility, so the ultimatum which the U.S. sent was almost the logical conclusion of four decades of American policy in Asia. The ultimatum demanded that Japan withdraw from Indo-China and China, or its oil supplies from the U.S. would be cut off.¹¹

Since the U.S. was the Saudi Arabia of that day the ultimatum had teeth. Without U.S. oil Japan either had to find an alternative source or see its war machine sputter to a stop. Recently historians have raised questions about the way the word China was understood in the ultimatum. There was a peace party in Japan, a weak one of course, but since the Japanese understood China as referring to all of China including Manchukuo, the peace party was easily brushed aside. On the other hand the American statesmen probably did not intend to include Manchukuo in their ultimatum.¹²

At any rate, war broke out between the two countries over something more than semantic ambiguities. Four decades of smoldering hostility over opposing policies in the western Pacific made war between the two countries all but inevitable. The only way they could have avoided war was either for the U.S. to abandon its active role in the western Pacific or for Japan to abandon its design for a Co-Prosperity Sphere in Asia, the expression it used to describe its expansion into China and ultimately into other Asian countries. Because neither nation would dream of doing so, war came.

11. Edwin O. Reischauer, *Japan, the Story of a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 1974), pp. 206-9.

12. John Toland, *Infamy* (New York: Doubleday and Co. Berkeley Edition, 1982), p. 287, note.

World War II ended in the Pacific with the total defeat of Japan, followed quickly by the dissolution of the French, Dutch, and British empires. Russia, in the final hours of the war, taking advantage of Japan's imminent unconditional surrender, declared war on Japan and so rebuilt its position in the Pacific to what it had been under the Tsars before the Treaty of Portsmouth. It went further. It made the fateful decision to seize the Kurile Islands. Although the Soviet Union had a strong position on the littoral of the western Pacific, it had no navy, so for the time being it did not play a very active role in the region. The U.S. reigned supreme.¹³

Of all the colonial powers, the U.S. was the only one to liquidate its empire gracefully. In an atmosphere of Philippine-American friendship, the Philippines regained its independence. In the euphoria generated by the liberation from Japan and the fulfillment of the generations-old dream of independence, only a few Filipinos pointed to the agreement giving the U.S. a ninety-nine-year lease on the military bases as an infringement on national sovereignty. Over the following years the agreement was modified to the point where it is now. The U.S. has six bases in the Philippines, two large ones, Clark Field for the Air Force, Subic Bay for the Navy, and four smaller ones. Unless the agreement now in force is renewed or revised, the bases will have to be closed at the end of 1991. How should the U.S. deal with the situation?

The western Pacific is not what it was when the U.S. first conquered the Philippines. Nor what it was when two powers, Japan and the U.S., in their struggle for mastery in the region, went to war with each other in 1941. Nor what it was in 1945 when the U.S. was the sole power in the region. All the colonial empires are gone, and in their places are independent nations, most of them quite populous and intensively sensitive about any infringement on their sovereignty. China will remain under the control of the Communists for the foreseeable future and continue to follow a foreign policy different from, if not hostile to, that of the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Japan is now one of the world's economic powers, enjoying a prosperity undreamed of in the heady days of its Co-Prosperity expansion.

THE NEW WESTERN PACIFIC WORLD

In this new western Pacific world should the U.S. follow the sort of policy it did from 1898 to 1941, when it sought to be a power in the

13. John Blum, et al., *The National Experience, Part Two, A History of the United States Since 1865*, 6th ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985) p. 760.

region? Or the policy it followed after World War II, when it played as it has continued to do, thanks to its bases in the Philippines, the region's policeman? Before any answers are given to these and similar questions, Americans would do well to consider some sobering facts.

Three times during the last forty-eight years the U.S. has gone to war in the western Pacific. In those wars, i.e., the war against Japan, the Korean War, and the war in Vietnam, more than 213,000 young American men died and some 447,113 lived out the remainder of their lives with wounds of varying severity.¹⁴ Whatever the wisdom, or lack of it, behind America's policies in the western Pacific, its male youth has paid a high price for them.

As Americans look around the contemporary world of the western Pacific there are situations they should view, not with alarm, but with great caution, before they decide they wish to continue their country's role as the region's policeman, a role all but inseparable from their retention of bases in the Philippines.

In spite of the small area of the two Kurile Islands, Kunashiri and Etorofu, retained by Russia since 1945, Japan regards them as Japanese territory and wants them returned. This is an emotional issue for many Japanese. Russia, on the other hand, has been intransigent about retaining them.¹⁵ Twice before in this century these two nations have gone to war with each other over territorial disputes on the western littoral of the Pacific. No third war is, in any realistic sense, imminent. But its possibility cannot be absolutely ruled out.

In 1904 Japan took advantage of Russia's internal turmoil to resolve the question of Korea to its satisfaction. In 1945 Russia took advantage of Japan's defeat to regain the Tsarist position and more. Today Japan has a force of naval destroyers in the Pacific larger than that of any other nation. It has the industrial capacity to build a modern armed force in a year or two. The samurai tradition with its code of Bushido, powerful in Japanese society for 1,000 years, is not dead. Today Russia is beset by many problems, which will probably get a lot worse before they get better. Not the least of them is the problem with its subject minorities in Asia whose growing populations are becoming more restive. Might some future Japanese leadership see this as an opportunity to resolve its differences with Russia? This question is asked, not in any alarmist spirit, but to provoke a sober assessment of the situation.

14. John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), p. 300; *The World Almanac and Book of Facts, 1987* (Pharos Books, 1987).

15. Reischauer, *Japan, The Story of a Nation*, p. 277.

The two Koreas are as hostile to each other today as they were in 1950, when first North and then South Korea tried to unify the country by force. Neither succeeded but in the bloody stalemate 54,000 young Americans lost their lives and another 103,284 survived with wounds that inflicted various kinds of incapacity. Today each side possesses a powerful armed force, and neither one accepts the division of the country as permanent. Should the fighting between the two of them be resumed, is it in the best interests of the U.S. to be involved again?

The Vietnam War is such an immensely complicated and emotional subject that it cannot be treated in any satisfactory sense here. But it is well to recall that the U.S. drifted into that war because it saw itself as the policeman of this part of the world. When there are constabulary duties to be done, the grim fact is that policemen get killed. That war took the lives of 58,021 young Americans and left another 153,303 to go through life with wounds of varying severity. In these respects the Americans who fought in Vietnam were probably not much different from their fathers who fought World War II.

But unlike their fathers, who came home to a hero's welcome, they came home to a nation that rejected them and treated them as outcasts. Although this attitude was not characteristic of the nation as a whole, it was found in enough influential sectors to leave the Vietnam veterans understandably bitter. American society has not yet recovered from the wounds of that war. How did such a tragedy ever happen? Volumes have been written in an attempt to answer that question. But had American presence in the western Pacific been far less prominent than it was, would we have been involved in it? What should we do to prevent it from ever happening again?

Mainland China and Taiwan are as far apart as ever on the reunification of the two Chinas. Both want it, but each on terms unacceptable to the other. Neither side has renounced the use of force to resolve the conflict. Should war be begun by either side could the U.S. stay out of it?

The bases are in the Philippines, where a growing and influential minority is bitterly opposed to their retention. Just what are the obligations of the U.S. to the Philippines, should the Philippines be involved in war with one of its neighbors? The question is not just academic, and the response to it is not as clear as one might wish. The Philippines has not completely renounced its claim to Sabah, the rich Malaysian province in eastern Borneo. In the recent past two incidents occurred between the two countries that might presage future trouble. A group of Filipino fishermen was arrested by the Malaysians for intruding into Malaysian waters and held for about thirty

days. During the same period, because of an erroneous reading of maps, several Filipino leaders became convinced that Malaysia had illegally taken Philippine territory. Both incidents provoked a surprisingly bellicose reaction in the Philippine media and among some Filipino leaders.

This writer was present with a group of prominent Filipinos who recently visited the U.S. Air Force base at Clark Field. In the briefing given to the group by Major General Snyder, commander of the Thirteenth Air Force stationed at Clark, the question was raised by some of the visitors about what use the Philippines had been able to make of the base during its period of tension with Malaysia, and what use it could make of it in the event of a future conflict with its neighbor. General Snyder, who impressed his guests as a person of intelligence and sensitivity, did not provide answers that entirely satisfied them. The Americans might put the questions to themselves in slightly different form. Do they want to be involved in any future conflict between the two countries?

Out in the south China Sea is a group of islands known by various names. Most geographical atlases call them the Spratleys. Right now at least five Asian countries, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines claim some or all of them. The number of the islands, it seems, varies from high tide to low. At the moment each nation seems content to press its claim by nothing more menacing than words, although Vietnam did send armed forces to occupy some of them at one time. Should those islands assume an importance they do not now possess, e.g., provide access to minerals, etc., the war of words could easily escalate. What would be the obligation of the U.S. to its Philippine ally which sees some of the islands as part of its national territory? The present agreement, which gives the U.S. its bases in the Philippines, also commits it to defending Philippine national territory. Are Sabah and some of the Spratleys part of that territory? Could the Philippines invoke the agreement and so involve the U.S. with some other Asian nation in a dispute over these territories?

The only place in the world where nuclear weapons have been used in war is in the western Pacific. And this region has also been extensively used, by outside powers, as a testing ground to make them even more deadly. Understandably the nations of the region are determined to make their part of the world nuclear-free. Only France, using the remnants of its colonial empire, persists in testing nuclear weapons in this part of the world. This French obtuseness to the desires of the peoples of the region has provoked deep resentment. It is not likely that France, insisting that the tests pose no danger to anyone, will accept the suggestion of the Pacific nations to move the

safe tests to the Mediterranean where they will be close to the shores of France. It is possible that the nations of the region, acting in concert, might one day use force to stop the French tests. Here again the Americans should ask themselves if this is a conflict they want to be involved in? If they retain their bases in the Philippines, will they be able to stay out of it?

Happily the potential flash points listed here are far from anything like immediate ignition. But it is the art of statesmanship to anticipate the future, few and feeble as the tools for that enterprise may be. They are the only ones we have. A military absence of the U.S. from the western Pacific could pay ample dividends, as it once did.

CONCLUSION

It has been my objective throughout this article to avoid examining the motives Filipinos have for removing the bases. They have been powerfully stated by those most competent to state them, Filipinos. This article, however, was given its final form during the recent attempted coup d'état (30 November to 6 December). I looked out my window and saw, first rebel planes bombing Camp Aguinaldo, headquarters of the Philippine Army two miles away, and then government planes bombing rebel strongpoints near the camp. The next day I saw Phantom jets of the U.S. Thirteenth Air Force from Clark Field sweep overhead on their way to a support mission requested by President Aquino. The American planes fired no weapons, but their threat to do so persuaded the rebel pilots, who had been carrying out their attacks unopposed, to land at a nearby airfield where their planes were destroyed by jets of the Philippine Air Force. It does not seem that any of the rebel pilots were killed or injured in this attack, although one PAF pilot was killed, whether by groundfire or the explosion of his own bombs is not clear.

Argument over the American intervention will be long and loud. Even some of Pres. Aquino's loyal supporters are severely critical of her request for American intervention, regardless of the grounds the agreement with the U.S. may have given her for it. How important was the American intervention? Here again opinions differ. For some the intervention was the decisive factor in reversing the rebel tide which had been rising. For others it was totally unnecessary and only further divided a nation already torn by bitter strife. But the intervention does reinforce one argument Filipino critics advance for the removal of the bases. Their presence makes all but inevitable American involvement in Filipino internal affairs. Many Filipinos oppose this. Should Americans do the same?

What is urged here is a military withdrawal, and only a military withdrawal. Withdrawal in any other sense is not only undesirable but impossible. Most of America's overseas trade is with nations on the rim of the Pacific.¹⁶ But is military presence necessary to protect it? Without access to America's consumer market the economies of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines would be seriously harmed. Loss of imports from these countries would be harmful to the U.S., but their retention would hardly justify a war.

America's influence in the region is not just economic. The political and moral force of the U.S., however vague that may be, is strong. Asian students throng to America's universities, and this trend should be welcomed. America's moral support for democracy, rights of human persons, free trade, etc., is a powerful factor in helping to secure these goals. But to secure these and other goals military force is not necessary and may even be an obstacle to them. American military withdrawal would be a powerful motive for the nations of the region to push further what they have already begun, providing for their own security. And obviously they have good reasons for doing so. One more reason would help.

16. Editorial, *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 28 June 1989.