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The Taft Era in the Philippines

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Review Article

*The Taft Era in the Philippines**

As the author himself remarks in the introduction to this book, his is not the first work to treat of the "Taft Era" during the American period in the Philippines. Earlier works, however, such as those by Elliott and Forbes, were written by men deeply involved in the formulation and execution of American policies, and during a time too close for more objective evaluation of these policies. The principal modern study covering the period, that of Grunder and Livezey, besides possessing certain deficiencies due to lack of direct knowledge of the Philippines, was professedly written as an account of the origin and formulation of American policy towards the Philippines, not of its implementation or its reception by Filipinos. Professor Salamanca, without neglecting the factors which went into American policy-making, has rather focused his study on the Filipino reaction to American colonial rule during this period over which the figure of William Howard Taft looms so large, from his first entrance into the Philippines as head of the Second Philippine Commission to the end of his term as President of the United States in 1913.

After giving a sketch of Philippine society in its various aspects just prior to American occupation, the author devotes a chapter to the formulation of the main lines of American

* THE FILIPINO REACTION TO AMERICAN RULE 1901-1913. By Bonifacio S. Salamanca. Hamden, Connecticut: The Shoe String Press, Inc., 1968. 310 pp.

policy as contained in McKinley's "Letter of Instruction" to the Taft Commission in 1901. The succeeding Republican administrations in the United States professed to be implementing the guidelines laid down in this document. Salamanca emphasizes its importance to his subject, and prints the most relevant portions of it in an appendix, pointing out that it was substantially the work of McKinley's Secretary of War, Elihu Root, working in conjunction with Taft.

The succeeding four chapters trace the efforts of the colonial regime to implement these guidelines and the reception their efforts met from Filipinos, in the four fields of political institutions, educational policy, religious problems, and economic policy. A final chapter discusses the promise of future independence implied in the "Letter of Instruction," but never clearly and unequivocally enunciated by the Republican administrations.

The study is broadly based, not only on the relevant published literature, but on a large number of collections of unpublished papers of the principal Americans responsible for the formulation and execution of colonial policy for the Philippines. The author emphasizes the important role Filipino aspirations and desires had in shaping, and even altering at times, the direction of that policy, at least where vital American interests were not affected. American Republican administrations and their colonial representatives were under considerable pressure from Anti-Imperialists and other Americans who questioned their country's colonial venture, first, to show that the Philippines had been pacified and American rule accepted by the Filipinos, and later, to give evidence that the purpose avowed in McKinley's "Letter of Instruction"—that the country be prepared for self-government as quickly as possible—was being fulfilled. Given the conditions prevailing in Filipino society at the time, this inevitably meant gaining principally the cooperation of the elite, first through the Federal Party, later through both parties in the Assembly. With an electorate limited to a tiny minority of the population, the result was to set up political institutions, based on the American model indeed, but serving to entrench an elite, relatively small in number, in control of

the political institutions, rather than to promote a broadly democratic Filipino participation in the colonial regime. Similarly, in consequence of the ignorance of their rights on the part of the masses of the people, the machinery of local justice, too, remained under the control of the *caciques* and *ilustrados*.

American administrators of the Taft era were not unaware of this problem, but put their faith in the second major thrust of their policy, that of providing universal education, as an eventual cure to the elite monopoly of the machinery of government. Salamanca points out a certain naiveté in this assumption, for although American educational policy was generally received with enthusiasm by Filipinos everywhere, the Americans failed to realize that the roots of *caciquismo* were more social, and especially economic, rather than due simply to ignorance on the part of the masses. It would seem to this reviewer that though this is no doubt correct for the period dealt with in the study, in the longer run, the seeds were being sown which would make possible fundamental social and economic changes as well.

Given the role that economic interests had played in the American decision to annex the Philippines, it is not surprising that these interests played a large part in determining American economic policy, most notably in the question of free trade, which rapidly brought about a dominant role for the United States in the Philippine market. The vocal opposition of the Filipino Resident Commissioners as well as that of the Philippine Assembly to the law providing for free trade is well-known. Most prominent was the argument that by tying the Philippine economy to that of the United States, it would inevitably delay complete independence. What is not so well-known, but is carefully documented here, is the fact that most of this opposition was "pure rhetoric on the part of both the Assembly and the Resident Commissioners." The point is of importance in connection with the real attitude toward "immediate independence" spoken of below.

A more disinterested aspect of American economic policy was the effort to introduce a more adequate and equitable

system of internal taxation. Here the opposition of the Assembly and Commissioners was real and effective. Though both the internal revenue laws and the land tax were eventually accepted, Filipino opposition was efficacious in delaying their implementation for a number of years, and even contributed to the replacement of Governors Wright and Ide. Only when the real worth of these measures was gradually perceived were they carried out fully.

Most notably unsuccessful was American agrarian policy, in spite of the attention given by the Philippine Commission to the Friar lands problem. Considerably less than half these Friar lands were actually under cultivation, and the government found it difficult to dispose of several large vacant tracts it had purchased from the Friars. Similarly, such measures as the registration of Torrens titles met with little enthusiasm, nor did a homestead law, based on American practice and with little understanding of Philippine conditions, receive any significant response from Filipino farmers. Even less successful was the program for the sale of public lands. As Salamanca observes, the government purchase of the Friar lands had been determined by political considerations rather than any comprehensive and well thought out land reform policy. This political objective having been obtained, neither Filipino demand nor American determination was sufficient to bring about any significant achievement in this field during the Taft era.

No issue more dominated Philippine politics from the earliest years of colonial rule than that of independence. Except for the short-lived and highly impractical statehood plank of the Federal Party, the independence issue stood high on the priorities of every party and faction. Some earlier historians have suggested that not all of those who stood publicly for "immediate independence" were really desirous that their publicly-voiced aspiration actually be granted. Salamanca documents this claim carefully, notably with regard to Quezon and Osmeña, both of whom he shows to have been actually opposed not only to immediate independence, but even to any fixed date for eventual independence. Rather, he suggests, the Filipino elite desired an authoritative declaration on the part of the

United States that it would ultimately grant such independence. The failure of the Republican administration to make such an explicit pledge operated to radicalize and popularize the issue, and make any other public stand than one for immediate independence politically suicidal after 1907. The political ends sought by the elite having been largely satisfied by the American regime, and free trade having brought a large degree of material prosperity, many of them would have been quite content to put off the grant of independence to a far distant date, had such an unequivocal statement that it would be given been forthcoming.

The study under review is the fruit of wide and diligent research in many sources as yet little explored, and is a substantial addition to our knowledge of this crucial period in Filipino-American relations. It is much to be regretted, therefore, that it has been published merely as a photo-offset reproduction of the original dissertation, itself apparently completed in 1965, and therefore not taking into account important recent studies. Not only has this resulted in a large number of misprints, but the great amount of information consigned to the footnotes at the back of the text makes the book difficult reading, particularly since the footnotes are so abundant. Moreover, the effort of the author to present divergent points of view on particular questions is often carried to an extent which leaves the reader in doubt as to the book's position on a particular question.

More substantial points which ought to be questioned are the following: The chapter on religious developments is rather loosely connected with the rest of the book, inasmuch as it deals rather with the growth of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, and to a lesser extent with that of Protestantism, than with any Filipino reaction to a specific American policy. Moreover, though the author's use of the books of Whittemore and Rivera on the Aglipayan movement can perhaps be his intention to present a different point of view than that of the Archútegui-Bernad documented study, the use of the Whittemore and Rivera works for their undocumented and often highly improbable assertions on questions of fact, is less understandable.

In the section of this chapter dealing with Protestantism there is a noticeable lack of depth which might have been gained by acquaintance with recent works by Gowing and Deats.

A persistent problem which runs through the book is the failure to provide a clear and consistent definition of the terms *elite*, *cacique* and *ilustrado*. The first of these terms is generally used to include the other two, which are distinguished from each other early in the book (pp. 12-13), but do not always seem to maintain this distinction. The increasing amount of research into the formation of social and economic classes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by such studies as Wickberg's and others points to a considerably more complex situation than that assumed generally in the book. Without being able to go further here into a matter which still needs a great deal of research, I would question any substantial identification of the political leaders of the early twentieth century with a *cacique* class finding its roots in the hereditary *principalia* adopted by the Spaniards from the pre-conquest days. Again, though there was no doubt a frequent connection between economic affluence and the education which brought into being the *ilustrado* class of the late nineteenth century, such a striking exception as Mabini, to name the most prominent, prevents any identification of the two groups as a whole. Finally, whatever limits one may put to the size of the Filipino middle class at the turn of the century, it seems clear that there were rather wide differences of socio-economic level among those who made up the articulate elite whose reaction to American rule is studied here. Thus, in discussing the question of whether the Filipino upper class joined the IFI (p. 107), it does not seem meaningful to offer as evidence the fact that many local political leaders and school teachers were declared by Bishop Rooker to be "professed haters of the Catholic Church". To include together public school teachers and such wealthy figures as members of the Philippine Commission like Legarda, Pardo de Tavera, etc. makes the term *elite* quite unhelpful for generalizations. In this connection it might be added that being a "professed hater of the Catholic Church", or even an open

promoter of Aglipayanism, as was, for example, Buencamino, did not necessarily imply actually joining the Aglipayan schism.

One final point which ought to be made is that the study of Filipino reactions to American colonial policy, is, with a few exceptions like the pages devoted to Ricarte and Sakay, generally a study of the small percentage of politically articulate Filipinos at this time. The author admits this limitation, due in great part to the dearth of reliable data on the reactions of other strata of society, but minimizes its importance, due to the structure of Filipino society at the time, in which the upper classes largely determined the responses of those below them. No doubt there is a good deal to be said for this view, and the difficulty of arriving at reliable data is real, particularly since the research for this study was done in American libraries and depositories. Nonetheless, as some more recent studies on the Tagalog literature of the early twentieth century have shown, there was a substantial body of protest through the medium of literature and drama against American rule in this period. Much of it would also seem to be closely associated with the nascent labor movement, often joining a mildly socialist rejection of the existing socio-economic structures to a fervent nationalist rejection of colonial rule. It would seem that local sources might offer more data along these and other lines on different reactions to the American regime than those manifested by the articulate segment of Filipino society with which the American administrators generally had contact.

In spite of these reserves, I believe that the work of Professor Salamanca is of great value, not only for the solid results of his research, but for the numerous directions for further research to which it points. It is to be hoped that the author himself will pursue further his investigations into the period, to provide historians with a fuller synthesis of an era on which he has already cast valuable light.

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