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Notes and Comments

George Kennan and the Philippines

FREDERICK F. TRAVIS

George Kennan's interest in the Philippine Islands was primarily a professional one and was of brief duration. It began in December 1900, when the editor of the *Outlook* asked Kennan to undertake a special investigation of conditions in the Philippines. It ended in March 1902, after Kennan published a short report concerning the charges of cruelty on the part of American soldiers against the native population of the islands. Yet, in spite of its brevity, Kennan's interest in the Philippines is worth noting for several reasons: he was by 1900 a widely known and respected journalist; the *Outlook* in the early years of the century was at the peak of its importance, enjoying a largely influential readership numbering about 100,000; and that period of time was a crucial one in the relations between the United States and the Philippine Islands. It was precisely because of the crucial nature of those relations that the *Outlook* had chosen to make a special investigation of conditions in the islands just at that time, and the editor, Dr. Lyman Abbott, had chosen Kennan for the project because the venerable editor held Kennan in great esteem.

The United States had acquired the Philippines under the terms of the Treaty of Paris of 1898, ending the war with Spain, begun earlier that year ostensibly to liberate the island of Cuba from the yoke of Spanish colonialism. Even though the United States Senate had ratified the treaty in February 1899, the ultimate disposition of the islands had still not been decided by the end of

1900. Meanwhile Filipino nationalists, led by Emilio Aguinaldo, had transferred their hostile feelings and actions from being against the Spaniards to being against the Americans. By the end of 1900 American military forces had not succeeded in defeating Aguinaldo's forces; the second civil commission, this one chaired by future President William H. Taft, was in the islands investigating the situation in order to help shape future government policy, and ultimately to establish a civil government under American auspices; and at home many American citizens were confused about the course of events in the Philippines and about the nature of American actions and intentions there.

The *Outlook* wished to clarify the issues for its readers, and to that effect Abbott instructed Kennan as follows:

We want to ascertain from the official records, and from conversation with public officials, exactly what are the present conditions in the Philippines. We do not wish to go into past history, to investigate the question how we got into the present difficulties, or who is responsible for them. We want to consider only the present and the future. We do not care in the least whether the facts ascertained make for or against the administration; whether they make for or against the position heretofore taken by THE OUTLOOK. We want to state the absolute truth, whoever it hits, whatever it affects. As far as possible we should like, also, to know what leading men in the administration, or among its supporters in Congress, think respecting these facts, and respecting the future, and respecting the policy which the Government ought to pursue; but our main object is to ascertain and report to our readers the facts.

There is no man in the country who can do this work as well for us as you can.¹

Kennan clearly was about as free as possible to conduct an objective investigation. One may view his findings as representing in his mind an objective judgment on conditions in the Philippines and on possible courses of future action for the United States in the islands. On the other hand, he was subject to his own apparently unfelt cultural bias, an ethnocentrism that was the product of his heritage and previous experience. George Kennan was a classic example of an uncompromising American democrat and

1. Lyman Abbott to George Kennan, 28 December 1900, George Kennan Papers, Library of Congress.

rugged individualist, and the published results of his investigation reflect that bias.²

His study of conditions in the islands appeared in three parts in the *Outlook* in late February and early March 1901. Judging from the aforementioned letter from Lyman Abbott to Kennan, and as Kennan asserted at the beginning of the series, he had undertaken the investigation "without political or partisan bias of any kind."³ Yet the tone of the series is condescending; it is that of a superior examining an inferior, of a dominant but well meaning parent attempting to deal with a recalcitrant child. This is manifest in Kennan's conclusion about "Filipino character."

From all of the evidence that I have been able to gather, I am of opinion that the Filipinos, properly so called — that is, the Tagalogs and Visayans of Luzon, Samar, Panay, Negros, and Leyte — are, in the words of General MacArthur, a "sensitive, intelligent, generous, and flexible people." They have many childlike impulses and characteristics, and, as a subject race, they have taken the impress of bad Spanish example; but they are not wholly depraved; they are not naturally ferocious or cruel; and they fight very much as they might be expected to fight in the circumstances of the case. The great mass of the people, under normal conditions, are impulsive, in a certain sense childish, imitative, fond of display, untrustworthy — as a badly trained child is untrustworthy — and subject, at times, to waves of emotional disturbance which are utterly foreign to the Anglo-Saxon temperament, and which have been described by a clear-sighted army officer in a letter to the War Department as "crazes," or paroxysms of "Malay fever." On the other hand, they are sensitive, impressionable, generous, fairly tractable and well disposed, easily governed if treated with kindness and justice, brave, sober, industrious, and eager to learn. If we can only win their confidence, we may do almost anything with them that we like. . . .⁴

The entire analysis reflects the same ethnocentric perspective, although Kennan at one point demonstrated the critical ability that had won him much acclaim as an investigative reporter. Following the appraisal of their character he addressed the question of the capacity of the Filipinos for self-government. He concluded

2. Frederick F. Travis, "George Kennan and Russia, 1865-1905" (Ph. D. dissertation, Emory University, 1974).

3. George Kennan, "The Philippines' Present Conditions and Possible Course of Action — I," *Outlook* 67 (23 February 1901), p. 439; see also issue of 2 March 1901, pp. 487-94; and issue of 9 March 1901, pp. 576-84.

4. Kennan, *Outlook* 67, p. 443.

that "the Filipinos, if now left wholly to themselves would probably fail — at least for a time — to set up and maintain a strong, stable, or orderly government."⁵ Kennan then almost overcame his cultural bias as he continued:

Whether, however, their government would not be as good as any that we can give them, in the present disturbed state of the islands, is a question. We are powerless, at present, to prevent the torture and burying alive of natives within two miles of our garrisoned posts; and there seems to be little probability that we shall be able to restore and maintain order throughout the archipelago for many months, perhaps many years, to come.⁶

That insight notwithstanding, Kennan stopped far short of going on to call for an American withdrawal, so that such an observation was the exception rather than the rule in the analysis.

Much of the series concerned Filipino aspirations and the extent of the support for the Aguinaldo led nationalists, who were generally viewed by Americans, including Kennan, as insurgents. Of the former, Kennan concluded that what the Filipinos most wanted was "a definite, authoritative, and absolutely trustworthy statement of American aims and intentions," something the Congress should provide forthwith. Nothing, he thought, was more important if the fighting were to be ended.⁷ On the latter question he tended to be dubious of the optimistic reports of the Taft Commission; he gave more credence to official reports from general officers in the field, to personal letters from officers in the field, or to statements given to him personally by officers recently returned from the field. Those sources tended to indicate that Aguinaldo's forces enjoyed considerable support among the population and that "insurgent" activities were far more numerous and widespread than Taft's reports indicated.⁸

On the other hand, Kennan found the civil and political situation "much more encouraging and satisfactory."⁹ In this regard he praised the Taft Commission for its "sagacity and good judgment," pointing especially to its efforts in court reorganization, in

5. *Ibid.*, p. 444.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, p. 445.

8. *Ibid.*, I., pp. 444-47; II., pp. 487-93.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 493.

establishing a new code of civil and judicial procedure, in investigating the question of the friars and their landholdings, in devising a new scheme of taxation, in increasing revenues to make possible expenditures on public roads, harbor improvements, and public education, and in winning the confidence "of a part of the Filipino people, including a number of Aguinaldo's former leaders."¹⁰

The final part of the series considered "suggestions from various sources as to the best policy to be pursued in the Philippines."¹¹ After first making clear that his instructions from the *Outlook* prevented him examining the historical background to the situation, and thus from addressing questions such as the wisdom or justice of American acquisition of the Philippines, Kennan addressed the question strictly on the basis of "the existing state of affairs, without reference to the manner in which such state of affairs has been brought about."¹² From that perspective, then, Kennan pointed out that it was "the almost unanimous opinion" of the men who were then in the field or who had recently returned from the field, that withdrawal from the Philippines at that time was "not only inadvisable but practically impossible." As he explained:

The Filipinos may be capable of organizing and maintaining, without our aid, a stable and independent government; but, even if this be conceded, we are nevertheless bound to protect the pro-American native party that we have brought into existence; to keep the promises that we have made to them as well as to Spain; to meet the obligations that we have deliberately incurred; and to do generally what we have undertaken and agreed to do. It is, therefore, the judgment of most unprejudiced observers, at home and in the field, that, for a term of years at least, we *must* stay in the Philippines, and *must* exercise there the powers of government. It will cost us, perhaps, some thousands of lives and tens of millions of dollars to do this, but to do it we are virtually bound.¹³

That Kennan favored such a policy is clear. He devoted the remainder of the article to a consideration of various policies that would most quickly bring peace and stability – and presumably the benefits of American civilization – to the islands. In that dis-

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 493-94.

11. *Ibid.*, III., p. 576.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, p. 577.

cussion one other issue arose that sheds light on his approach to the problems in the Philippine Islands in particular and to imperialist questions in general.

Kennan concluded the series with a discussion of the extent of cruelty on the part of American soldiers in their treatment of the natives. Reports had reached the United States of the use of torture in compelling prisoners to speak and of the killing of unresisting Filipino prisoners and wounded. Kennan deplored such atrocities but stated his belief that they were neither general practices nor sanctioned by many American officers. It was enough, however, to shake his confidence in what Americans were doing in the Philippines, as is obvious from the concluding statement of the series:

If we cannot subdue and pacify the Filipinos without resorting to murder, torture, and reconcentration, we are evidently engaged in an enterprise from which we shall never derive either satisfaction or honor.¹⁴

That conclusion again was not a call for the termination of the American presence in the Philippines, and while on that occasion the reports of American perpetrated atrocities had unsettled Kennan, a year later he was far more reconciled to such occurrences. In a summary of the charges of American cruelty in the Philippines, he set the infrequency — as he saw it — of American atrocities against the systematic — as he saw it — brutality and torture of the “insurgents.” He concluded:

That any American officer or soldier should have killed a Filipino prisoner, or should have resorted to torture as a means of obtaining information, is a matter for profound regret; but in the light of the records of . . . 298 court-martial cases such action is hardly a matter for surprise, when it occurs only occasionally here and there. It is easy to understand how an ordinarily humane officer or soldier might regard himself as justified in dealing summarily, and even cruelly, with Filipinos who make war by burning other Filipinos at the stake, cutting out their tongues, tasting their blood, or burying them alive.¹⁵

Because of his prominence, and the influential position of the

14. *Ibid.*, p. 584.

15. George Kennan, “The Charges of Cruelty in the Philippines,” *Outlook* 70 (22 March 1902), p. 712.

Outlook, Kennan's major series on the Philippines in 1901 must be considered as important in building American public support for the policies of the McKinley administration at a crucial time. Granted that Kennan had not held back on information that pointed to the more unpleasant side of American actions in the Philippines, on balance he had spoken well of the integrity and honor of the military forces there; he had praised the work of the Taft Commission; and he had implied that while there might be some questions about how the United States had become involved in the Philippines, he had concluded that once it was there it had to stay and finish the job properly and with honor. That is, it had to stay as a trustee of civilization looking after the benighted Filipinos until such time as they – in the judgment of their unsolicited benefactors – were sufficiently civilized to go their own way. Granted also that the Treaty of Paris had already been ratified and that McKinley had won reelection in November 1900, nevertheless, the anti-imperialists had organized to protest the more drastic military policies in the Philippines openly adopted after that election, and eventually their activity led to a Congressional investigation of American atrocities in the islands.¹⁶

The McKinley administration definitely was concerned about the anti-imperialist activity. On 21 January 1901, Secretary of War Elihu Root wrote to Taft in the Philippines complaining about the "lying stories" being spread by "malicious persons" which were getting the public "excited."¹⁷ It was just at that time that Kennan was beginning his investigation, and the generally favorable disposition of both the *Outlook* and Kennan toward the foreign policies of the administration was well-known in official circles. Thus, it is not surprising to find that on the very next day after the just mentioned letter from Root to Taft, Root received instructions from the president to lend Kennan "every possible means" for the latter to obtain the information he needed for his work on the Philippine question.¹⁸ That Root fully complied with

16. Daniel B. Shirmer, *Republic or Empire: American Resistance to the Philippine War* (Cambridge, Mass: Schenkman, 1972), pp. 225-40.

17. Elihu Root to William H. Taft, 21 January 1901, Elihu Root Papers, Library of Congress.

18. Secretary to the President George B. Cortelyou to Elihu Root, 22 January 1901, William McKinley Papers, Library of Congress.

those instructions is obvious from Kennan's private correspondence as well as from his statements to that effect in the *Outlook*. No pains were spared to insure that Kennan could report that the administration was hiding nothing. He regularly perused official reports that were not to be made public; he received early access to reports that were to be made public; and he consulted private correspondence and various other information that was available on the subject in the files of the War Department.¹⁹

The complete openness of the administration on this occasion probably is attributable to one of two factors, or perhaps to both. Possibly, the administration felt that its policies in the Philippines were fully justifiable even from a moral point of view and that an honest appraisal of all the available information would support those policies. Certainly, the administration felt that given Kennan's and the *Outlook* management's general perspective on such issues, any investigation by Kennan undertaken on behalf of the *Outlook* would yield satisfactory results from the administration's point of view. Whatever their thinking, the administration must have taken pleasure from the result. Even though Kennan's articles were not unqualifiedly favorable, the very fact that they raised difficult questions and yet still generally tended to favor the government's policies made them even better. Here was a thoroughly researched, critical analysis which concluded that on balance the United States had not done so badly in the Philippines and certainly was helping the progress of the Filipino to civilization.

What Kennan's judgment concerning that complex situation has to say to us now is not so clear. After the recent involvement of the United States in another war against nationalist guerillas in another Asian country, in Vietnam, one is tempted to draw parallels, as some have done.²⁰ Yet one might as easily point to differences in the two situations — history does not, after all, repeat itself absolutely. Introducing such complications may only obscure the major issues, so let us here be content to try

19. George Kennan to Lyman Abbott, 25 January 1901; 30 January 1901; George Kennan to Mrs. George Kennan, 24 January 1901; 26 January 1901; 30 January 1901; 1 February 1901 (George Kennan Papers, Library of Congress).

20. Howard Zinn, "Preface" to Schirmer's *Republic or Empire*, pp. ix-x.

to understand Kennan's appraisal of the Philippine situation in 1901, the reasons behind his judgment, and what his conclusions may tell us about Americans like himself at the turn of the century. The first two points were considered above; let us now turn to the third.

Kennan's viewpoint was that of a self-made man for whom the dream of America had come true. Born in a small village in Ohio, he never completed high school and yet he achieved fame and if not fortune at least the comforts of an upper middle class existence. He associated with famous men, was respected in his field, and believed deeply in the abstract concepts embodied in the natural law philosophy of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, the ideals upon which his nation was founded. Liberal democracy theoretically reflected this doctrine and thus represented the natural order of government.²¹ He believed further in the Enlightenment idea of progress and the perfectibility of man. Thus, mankind was destined to progress toward the natural order of things until liberal democracy had spread its blessings over the entire world.²² If in the process of spreading those blessings a period of American tutelage was sometimes necessary, he would not shrink from the prospect. On the other hand, Kennan was no wildeyed, flag waving superpatriot, intoxicated by the brew of presumed superiority. And Rubin Weston has contended convincingly that not only much imperialist sentiment, but also much anti-imperialist sentiment was based not upon humanitarianism, but upon racism; yet even Weston exempts Kennan from that charge.²³

Kennan was ethnocentric, but he was also noble; he believed sincerely that his country had something good, something morally superior, to offer the world. It may be that overzealousness stemming from such feelings more often than not has resulted in harm

21. While much that Kennan wrote makes this point clear, he used the argument directly in 1907 as justification for condemning the Russian government. See also George Kennan, "Russian Despotism," *Outlook* 85 (30 March 1907), pp. 751-55.

22. Sometimes Kennan's faith was shaken, but he tenaciously clung to the belief that man was "progressing" even if the progress was imperceptible during the lifetime of one man. See also George Kennan to James Harrison Wilson, 22 November 1910; 22 December 1910 (James Harrison Wilson Papers, Library of Congress).

23. Rubin Francis Weston, *Racism in U.S. Imperialism: The Influence of Racial Assumptions on American Foreign Policy, 1893-1946*. (Columbia, 1972), p. 149.

rather than good; and it may also be that as a nation the United States has not yet learned this. But to judge Kennan and the nobler proponents of imperialism of his generation by a later, more cynical age would be perhaps to fall victim to the same impulse that lay behind their appraisal of the world and of America's position in the world. In the final analysis it would seem that the study of George Kennan's views of the Philippines and Filipinos serves primarily as a sharp reminder that we must not seek to apply a universal, timeless standard of measurement in assessing the worth either of diverse societies or of the people who live in them.