

PUBLIC LIVES

Philippines: On the 1898 proclamation of independence

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One hundred twenty-four years after our elders proclaimed the Filipino people's independence from Spanish colonial rule [1], we may perhaps view with more understanding, and even admiration, the seemingly strange manner in which they performed that defining act. More specifically, why they invoked "the protection of the Powerful and Humanitarian Nation, the United States of America," even as they were declaring their emancipation from Spanish subjugation.

Were they merely expressing a readiness to trade one colonial master for another? If so, then it was logical that Spain would cede the country to the new power, the United States of America, in exchange for a few million dollars — instead of acknowledging the freedom that the Filipino people had justly earned.

The situation was clearly far more complex than that. Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo, under whose leadership the June 12, 1898 proclamation of independence was conceived, was certainly no fool when it came to American intentions. He and his companions in the Hong Kong junta anticipated America's moves in the Pacific region and its wish to take over the possessions of a weakened Spanish empire. They saw in that strategic plan an opening they could use to speed up the revolution against Spain. And for this, they needed to disarm the new conquerors through fawning gestures of flattery.

They were under no illusion that the United States would forgo the opportunity to take possession of the entire archipelago once its ships destroyed the limping Spanish armada in the battle at Manila Bay. Indeed, they saw that they were racing against time to establish the first organs of a new government in as many provinces as the revolutionary forces could cover. By doing so, they aimed to show the American public and the rest of the world that a colonized people that had successfully liberated themselves were equally worthy and capable of self-rule.

The Americans, of course, saw what Aguinaldo was up to, and they played along — until they could bring in enough US troops into the country. They would not be inveigled into supplying arms they might later use against the US itself. Assigned to review the captured documents of the revolution, US Capt. John R.M. Taylor (whom historian Renato Constantino accurately dubbed a "quasi-lobbyist" for annexation) portrayed it thus in his voluminous work, "The Philippine Insurrection Against the United States":

"The insurgents were not to have American rifles placed in their hands to fight the battles of the United States. The soldiers of the United States were to be charged with that duty, and Aguinaldo saw that he was not to be given the opportunity of employing American rifles against the soldiers of the United States as his friends in the militia were about to employ Spanish rifles against Spain... The arms he received from Hong Kong on May 23 enabled him to begin an insurrection, not as an ally of the United States, but on his own account."

One week before the proclamation in Kawit, Aguinaldo's forces had gained enough ground in the surrounding provinces to justify holding a formal ceremony proclaiming the country's independence from Spain. Invitations to Admiral Dewey and other American officers were sent. But, of course, these were simply ignored. The affair's organizers had to make do with the presence of "a citizen of the U.S.A., Mr. L.M. Johnson, a Colonel of Artillery."

Taylor writes about this event with an air of contempt: "From this time on there was no question as to the intentions of Aguinaldo and his followers. There did remain, and continued to remain, a grave doubt whether Aguinaldo really represented the people of the Philippines, and whether he would be able to keep his bit in their mouth.... 'Colonel' Johnson, ex-hotel keeper of Shanghai, who was in the Philippines exhibiting a cinematograph, kindly consented to appear on this occasion as Aguinaldo's chief of artillery and the representative of the North American nation."

Summoned to serve Aguinaldo as adviser, Apolinario Mabini arrived in Kawit on June 12, just in time to listen to the reading of the Act of Proclamation. The 34-year-old "sublime paralytic" must have at once noted some of the awkwardness and inconsistency in the longwinded document written in Spanish by Ambrosio Rianzares Bautista. In a June 23 proclamation signed by Aguinaldo, Mabini excised all reference to the United States and replaced "Dictatorial Government of the Philippines" with the simpler "Revolutionary Government." Mabini read America's moves with great accuracy. But he could neither save the revolution nor the fledgling republic established at Malolos on Jan. 23, 1899. Barely two weeks later, the Philippine-American War began.

It is extremely useful to revisit these crucial events in our nation's history because, while our founding fathers were flawed individuals, most of them rose to the occasion with all the wisdom and moral strength they could muster — like all great heroes do — when summoned by a purpose larger than them. Aguinaldo, in particular, was at the center of these momentous events. But he had received such a bad rap from history for his role in the murder of the Bonifacio brothers and of Antonio Luna that it took more than 50 years before he could offer an account that tried to express "the purity of my intention."

Many of our heroes died young; others like Aguinaldo, who died at 95, lived long enough to see the country's passage through another war — a war that once more tested our leaders' ability to discern the nation's true interests at different stages in a rapidly changing world.

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P.S.

- Philippine Daily Inquirer / 05:02 AM June 12, 2022:
<https://opinion.inquirer.net/153858/the-1898-proclamation-of-independence>

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Footnotes

- [1] <https://thecorpusjuris.com/constitutions/declaration-of-independence.php>