

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 5

“Islands or Canned Goods”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Commodore Dewey had won a decisive victory in Manila Bay, but before the attack he had cut the telegraph cable linking Manila to Hong Kong. This meant there was no quick way to communicate the news of his victory to the rest of the world. Back in America, people waited with mounting anxiety for news of the outcome. As the days passed, some began to give credence to the Spanish propaganda that was suggesting that the Asiatic Squadron had been driven off. Once Dewey was confident of his position in Manila Bay, he sent the smallest and fastest of his ships, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Hugh McCulloch, back to Hong Kong. It arrived late in the day on May 7, almost a week after the battle.

Aboard was an American journalist, Edwin Harden, who immediately filed a dispatch. The Hong Kong Telegraph Office refused to recognize Harden's press credentials, so he was forced to pay the full rate. There was no Trans-Pacific cable at that time, so the message had to travel from Hong Kong to Singapore to India to Aden to Egypt to Gibraltar to Ireland to New York. What may have been the most expensive telegram ever sent arrived in the New York Herald at three o'clock in the morning. Americans were jubilant, but President McKinley later said privately that if Dewey had just sailed away after he had defeated the Spanish fleet, “what a lot of trouble he would have saved us.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 5. Islands or Canned Goods.

At the end of episode 3 we left Emilio Aguinaldo in Singapore. Commodore Dewey had just sent a telegram to Spencer Pratt, the U.S. consul in Singapore, that said send Aguinaldo to Hong Kong right away. Recall that Aguinaldo believes that Commodore Dewey is on board with independence for the Philippines. Aguinaldo did indeed hustle back to Hong Kong as fast as he could, and you can imagine how he felt when he got there and discovered that war between the United States and Spain had broken out while he was en route and Commodore Dewey and the Asiatic Squadron had already left for Manila.

He reached out again to the U.S. consul in Hong Kong, Rounsenville Wildman, whom you may remember from episode 3 (I pronounced his name wrong back then, I apologize for that). Wildman agreed to a deal with Aguinaldo to purchase weapons as an agent for the Filipino rebels using some of that Spanish money that Aguinaldo was sitting on in Hong Kong. Wildman took a large down payment, but never produced any weapons. In 1901, when Wildman's term as consul in Hong Kong was over, he and his wife and their two young children traveled back to the United States on the steamer *Rio de Janeiro*. It struck rocks in San Francisco Bay and sank, taking with it 120 passengers and crew, including the entire Wildman family. What happened to the money, no one seems to know. If you know the answer to that please email me at historyofthetwentiethcentury@gmail.com.

But when the Revenue Cutter *McCulloch* returned to Manila after delivering the news of Dewey's victory in Hong Kong, Aguinaldo was on board. On May 19, 1898, Aguinaldo climbed on board *U.S.S. Olympia* wearing that Spanish sword to meet Admiral Dewey for the first time. And yes, I said *Admiral* Dewey; he finally got his promotion.

The American Ambassador to Britain John Hay had proposed to the State Department that the British be enlisted to assist in negotiating with Spain. American army expeditions were being outfitted for both Cuba and the Philippines at this point, but the McKinley administration was still hoping for a quick end to the war, but in this context the Philippines became a problem. It would be difficult enough to convince the proud Spanish to give up on Cuba, how were they going to react if the Americans were to add Philippine independence into the mix? This was sure to complicate any peace negotiations.

Making matters worse, the lack of a cable connection to Manila meant that it would take a week or more to get a message to Dewey and get his response back. In fact, Dewey had been meeting with Aguinaldo for weeks before anyone in Washington found out about it. Four years later, Dewey would testify before a Senate committee that he had made no promises to Aguinaldo. Aguinaldo tells a different story. He says that Dewey told him the United States was a rich country, had no interest in colonies, and that Aguinaldo should not doubt American support. Whatever Dewey did say to Aguinaldo, we know he sent a message to Washington that said, "in my opinion, these people are far superior in their intelligence and more capable of self-government than the natives of Cuba."

It's important to remember that, so far, the American presence in the Philippines is merely a squadron of cruisers in Manila Bay. The Spanish still have a garrison of 10,000 soldiers in Manila, although admittedly they now have no hope of reinforcement or resupply. Dewey requested 5,000 soldiers, which he considered sufficient to take Manila, but hardly anyone in Washington agreed with him on that. The command of the American ground forces in the Philippines was assigned initially to Major General Wesley Merritt. The United States had been expanding its navy in recent years, but its army still numbered fewer than 30,000 soldiers, and

most of these would be needed in Cuba. The U.S. had not fought a conventional war in 33 years, and most of the regular soldiers' only combat experience was against Native Americans in the West. The government put out a call for volunteers, but the fighting ability of the new recruits was... questionable.

General Merritt queried the President on whether his mission was simply to oust the Spanish from Manila, or whether he was to occupy the entire archipelago. He received a characteristically ambiguous answer from President McKinley that the mission was to "eliminate the Spanish garrison, and to maintain order in the islands for as long as they were in American possession." He did not say whether that possession would be temporary or permanent. Merritt pondered the problems of occupying the entire archipelago and seems to have been the first American to realize that the Army might have to fight not only the Spanish, but the Filipinos as well.

The War Department agreed that Dewey's request was too small, and assigned Merritt 15,000 soldiers. The Department had to charter transport ships to deliver them to the Philippines because at this time the military didn't have any of their own, because this is the first time America would be sending a fighting force across an ocean. The first soldiers left San Francisco on May 25, under the command of Brigadier General Thomas Anderson, escorted by the Navy cruiser *Charleston*, commanded by Captain Henry Glass. As the force was en route, Captain Glass received orders to divert to Guam and first capture that island.

Meanwhile, back in the Philippines, Aguinaldo returned back to his native Cavite and began to organize native Filipinos. Filipino soldiers in the employ of the Spanish defected en masse to Aguinaldo. They quickly liberated Cavite, and in a matter of weeks captured every Spanish garrison in the archipelago except for Manila. On June 12, Aguinaldo formally declared the independence of the Philippines. Filipinos today call this the First Republic. Admiral Dewey was invited to the ceremony but did not come. He seems to have barely noticed. Aguinaldo even picked out a national anthem for the new Philippine Republic, and that song was played at the independence ceremony. It is also the national anthem of the Philippines today; "Lupang Hinirang", "Chosen Land".

[music: "*Lupang Hinirang*" ("*Chosen Land*")]

"Beautiful land of love, o' land of light, in thine embrace 'tis rapture to lie, but it is glory ever when thou art wronged, for us, by sons, to suffer and die."

On June 20, *U.S.S. Charleston* and the troop transports it was escorting arrived in Guam. The Spanish garrison on Guam did not know that they were at war with the United States. When *Charleston* began firing on the fort in the harbor a Spanish boat came out to meet *Charleston* with a Spanish officer aboard, who came to apologize for the fact that the fort was not returning what the Spanish mistook to be a salute. Captain Glass explained to the Spanish officer that their two countries were at war, took prisoner the handful of Spanish soldiers stationed on the island,

raised the American flag over the fort, and appointed the one U.S. resident on the island as interim governor, until such time Washington could send a formally appointed replacement, and asked him to keep an eye on the place.

By the end of June, the American convoy reached Manila. By then, the Filipinos had 30,000 men under arms and Manila under siege. Now when I say “under arms” what I mean by that is that most Filipino soldiers did not have access to actual firearms; the Filipinos just didn’t have enough of them to go around. Many were armed with the ubiquitous bolo knife, which is a Philippine agricultural tool similar to a machete. The American soldiers set up camp when they arrived on the island with Filipino support, and General Anderson met with Aguinaldo. Aguinaldo again asked him about American support for independence, and Anderson gave him more vague assurances just as Wildman, and Pratt, and Dewey, had before him.

Aguinaldo was growing impatient. He wanted Filipinos to capture the city of Manila on their own, and present the Americans with a *fait accompli*, but it was going to be difficult with Filipino soldiers being so lightly armed, and more and more Americans were arriving every day. They were friendly enough, but Aguinaldo just was not getting the kind of unambiguous public support for Filipino independence that he was looking for.

On July 4, the Americans held a celebration for Independence Day and they invited Aguinaldo, but their invitation was addressed to *General* Aguinaldo and not *President* Aguinaldo, which he interpreted as a snub, and so he stayed home.

Also on July 4, 1898, the United States Congress passed a resolution to annex Hawaii. “Hawaii? How did Hawaii get into this,” I hear you ask. Well, I will tell you. The Hawaiian monarchy had been overthrown in a coup back in 1893; leadership of that coup was mostly in the hands of naturalized Hawaiians who were, by birth, American or European. And the coup was supported by the U.S. ambassador to Hawaii, who deployed American Marines in support of the coup.

The new Hawaiian government immediately asked for American annexation, but their timing wasn’t so good. The coup took place in January 1893; this was just a couple of months after Grover Cleveland defeated Benjamin Harrison in the 1892 presidential election. Harrison, the Republican, was pro-annexation, but Cleveland, the Democrat, was opposed to annexation, so in January 1893, Harrison, still President (he would remain President until March 4) but the new Congress had already been sworn in, so Harrison just didn’t have the votes to ratify a treaty in the Senate, and didn’t have enough time to work on it.

After the new President Grover Cleveland came into office, the annexation of Hawaii moved off the agenda for four years, but in 1897, following the election of the Republican William McKinley, the annexation of Hawaii moved back onto the agenda. The problem again was that there was still enough Democrats in the Senate to prevent the annexation treaty from being

approved by the two-thirds vote that the United States Constitution to ratify a treaty, so the matter was left hanging for a time.

But by the summer of 1898, the Republicans had come up with a new idea: annexation of Hawaii did not necessarily have to be effected by treaty, which required two-thirds vote in the Senate, it could also be effected by a Joint Congressional Resolution, which would require only a majority vote, albeit in both houses of Congress. The pro-annexation Republicans used the ongoing war against Spain as evidence that the United States needed Hawaii as a naval base in the Pacific in order to fully prosecute the war against Spain and possible future wars in the Pacific. The vote was taken on the symbolically significant of July 4, 1898, and both houses of Congress voted in favor of annexing Hawaii. In the House of Representatives, the only Republican to vote against annexation was the Speaker, Thomas Reed.

In Cuba, the United States had landed soldiers on the island, and they were fighting the Spanish army. One of these soldiers was Theodore Roosevelt, who had resigned from the Navy Department and enlisted in the Army on the outbreak of the war. The destruction of the Spanish Caribbean fleet on July 3 pretty much sealed Spain's defeat in that theater.

Meanwhile, back in Manila, the situation was growing desperate. The core of the city was packed with refugees from the Filipino revolt, and besieging Filipino forces had cut off the water supply. The Spanish knew they would have to surrender, but the prospect of surrendering to the Filipinos, who they thought of as savages and barbarians likely to pillage the city given half the chance, was unthinkable. Moreover, there was the Spanish sense of honor; surrender meant an automatic court martial, and let me think about how I'm going to defend myself at my court martial: "Your Honors, I had no choice but to surrender to the Filipinos, the very same backward people my predecessors have successfully kept under control for over 300 years," or... "Your Honors, I had no choice but to surrender to the Americans because they were better equipped and had greater numbers and their navy was preventing us from getting any resupply or reinforcements." ...yeah, I just might go with the second thing.

So, by the beginning of August, the full American force had arrived, and General Merritt was in command. General Merritt was a veteran of the wars against Sioux in the American West, and he seems to have regarded the Filipinos as just another kind of Sioux, to be brushed aside when they got in the way. He also criticized Admiral Dewey for meeting with Aguinaldo, something which Merritt himself refused to do. But he had a problem; he had orders to capture Manila. He also had orders to avoid conflict with the Filipinos, but since the Filipinos were laying siege to city, he either had to fight his way through them, which was against his orders, or talk to them, which was against his principles.

He got a lucky break when the Spanish in Manila contacted the Americans through the Belgian consul with a proposal; they were willing to surrender, but there were two conditions: first, they

would surrender only to Americans, not the Filipinos; second, there had to be at least a certain amount of fighting, so it wouldn't look like they gave up too easily. Merritt agreed to the Spanish terms, but there remained the problem of what to do about the Filipino siege. Merritt delegated one of his subordinate commanders, Brigadier General Francis Greene, to contact the Filipinos with an offer: the Americans were prepared to give over some modern artillery pieces, a very attractive offer to the lightly-armed Filipino army, in exchange for permitting American soldiers to take over one sector of the siege line. Aguinaldo asked this request be made in writing. Greene replied that time was of the essence, the Americans needed to take those positions *right now* and the written request would come later, along with the artillery pieces; the Filipinos withdrew. American soldiers took their places. Aguinaldo never got his written request or his artillery pieces.

On August 13, as per the agreement with the Spanish, the fake attack began. Dewey's ships lobbed shells at Manila, deliberately miscalculating the range so the shots did little damage. On cue, the Spanish raised a surrender flag, and those American soldiers now on the siege line marched into the center of the city as their band played, you guessed it...

[music: "*There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight*"]

Get it? It's funny because, you know, "hot time in the old town tonight", we're attacking a town, yeah, you get it, ok. Moving on then...

The operation went smoothly enough, there was one hitch though; there was a Filipino unit that saw Americans advancing into the city and tried to join in, drawing Spanish fire on themselves and also on nearby Americans. The Americans would not permit Filipino forces to enter the capital, and when Spanish forces formally surrendered the city, no native Filipino was present. The Americans asked Aguinaldo to keep his forces out of the city, and he agreed.

And unfortunately, the whole operation proved to be unnecessary, as Spanish and American negotiators had agreed to an armistice just a few hours earlier; once again, because Dewey had cut the cable, the news took several days to reach Manila. When the Spanish negotiators found out that the Americans had taken Manila *after* the armistice had been agreed to, they were indignant and demanded that American forces withdraw from Manila. They did not.

The war was over now, and all that remained was to negotiate the peace treaty. The Spanish would have to give up Cuba and Puerto Rico, that was a give-in. But what about the Philippines. Bear in mind, the Philippines is a large country, it has a population of about 9 million at this time, and that's against less than 2 million for Cuba and Puerto Rico and Guam put together. The United States itself has a population of just 76 million at this time; could it really absorb 9 million Filipinos? Perhaps America would be better off with just a naval base in the Philippines, or maybe the island of Luzon, where Manila is, and someone else can have the rest of the country.

Yeah, but who's that "someone else" gonna be? Are the Filipinos ready for self-government? And even if they are, how long would an independent Philippines last before some other colonial power tried to grab them for itself? Even before Manila was taken by the Americans, other countries, notably Japan and Germany, were sending naval vessels into Manila Bay to "observe". If America passed on the opportunity to take control of the Philippines, how long until the Japanese Emperor or Kaiser Wilhelm decided to move in?

The legal and constitutional issues here get a little tricky. The United States government has the power to annex new territory and make it part of the United States; that had been established all the way back in the time of the Louisiana Purchase, now almost a hundred years ago. But when America made the Louisiana Purchase, the residents of New Orleans became U.S. citizens, and that happened with every subsequent annexation of new territory; whoever lived there became Americans, up to and including the annexation of Hawaii just last month. No one in the United States government was seriously granting U.S. citizenship to 9 million Filipinos, who at the stroke of a pen become something like 12% of the population of the country; uh, how many Filipino Congressmen does that work out to? No no, the idea was to control the Philippines, but not to incorporate them into the United States.

But is there a constitutional basis for this? There's nothing in the U.S. Constitution that supported a two-tiered approach where some people under American jurisdiction, with the full rights and privileges that entails, while other people... not so much. Hey, whatever happened to "all men are created equal"? Anyone? Anyone?

We'll have to stop there for today. If you like *The History of the Twentieth Century* I hope you'll take a moment to visit the iTunes Store and leave us a rating and review. This will help other people find our podcast who hopefully will like it as much as you do.

Next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century* the United States debates whether or not to take possession of the Philippines, and in the Philippines tension between American and Filipino forces breaks out into open warfare. That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. At this time, the American humorist Finley Peter Dunn had a popular syndicated column about a fictional Irish pub in Chicago where its equally fictional proprietor, Martin Dooley, and his customers would expound on the issues of the day. With regard to the Philippines, one of Dooley's customers, Mr. Hennessy, said, "I know what I'd do; I'd hoist a flag over the Philippines and take in the whole lot of them!" "And yet," replied Mr. Dooley, "it's not more than two months since you learned whether they were islands or canned goods! Your backyard is so small, your cow can't turn 'round without buttin' the woodshed off the premises, and you wouldn't go out to the stockyards without taking out a policy on your life. Suppose you were standing at the corner of State Street and Archer Road, would you know what car to take to get to the Philippines? If your son Packy where the Philippines is, could you give him any good

idea whether they was in Russia or just west of the tracks?” “Maybe I couldn’t,” replied Mr. Hennessy haughtily, “but I’m for takin’ ‘em in anyhow.”

[music: Closing Theme]