

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 6

“White Man’s Burden”

Transcript

(Provided by listener Joseph M.)

[music: Fanfare]

In August of 1898, Spain and the United States agreed to an armistice in their war, and the two sides settled down to negotiate a final agreement. As summer passed into fall and the negotiations with the Spanish dragged on, the public mood in the United States shifted increasingly in favor of taking control of the Philippines. Also, there were midterm elections coming up in November 1898, and the Republicans wanted to claim credit for a victory over the Spanish. And if you’re going to be claiming victory, it’s a little too nuanced to try to argue, “Yeah, that war was great and all and boy, we sure won a great victory in Manila, but we don’t actually want to take control of the Philippines, do we?” The voters rewarded the Republicans at the polls, and afterward President McKinley told his negotiating team to tell the Spanish the Philippines are now part of the package and are non-negotiable.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 6: White Man’s Burden

As the treaty negotiations continued in Paris, back in the Philippines, the Spanish administration was gone from Manila, the US Army had moved in, and the city was a mess. The Americans did what Americans do best, they organized. They built roads, they opened schools and clinics. Every afternoon, Army bands performed concerts in the park for the benefit of the native Filipinos. And every time they played “There’ll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight” Filipino men took off their hats. Because by now they were sure that this tune had to be the US national anthem.

[music: “There’ll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight”]

Yeah, that never gets old.

But the good works happening in Manila obscured a deeper problem. Tensions between the Americans and the Filipinos were rising. Americans, with the casual racism of the time, which took it for granted that white-skinned people were better than dark-skinned people at... just about anything, looked down on the Filipinos, and there were incidents of violence. US General Elwell Otis, who was the new military governor of the Philippines, demanded that Filipino forces withdraw beyond a certain perimeter around Manila. Aguinaldo reluctantly agreed. But at the same time he was regretting his past cooperation with the Americans. He had devoted two years of his life to fighting the Spanish and ejecting them from the Philippines. And when it finally happened, he wasn't allowed to attend the surrender ceremony. No Filipinos were represented at the peace talks. Maybe he should have gone ahead and taken Manila before the Americans got there. But it was too late now.

Aguinaldo fell back on a strategy of organizing a Filipino government, and hoping that the United States and the rest of the world would have no choice but to recognize it. He moved his base of operations from Cavite to Malolos, a town north of Manila where there were no Americans. Aguinaldo and representatives from across the archipelago put together a legislature and drafted a constitution for a Philippine Republic.

But this is where the movement begins to split. At this time Filipino society was a small number of elite families and a large population of poor and uneducated people. This is an imbalance that will continue to plague the country for the rest of the 20th century. You may have noticed that Aguinaldo and many of the leaders of the revolt against the Spanish are themselves middle-class, educated, property-owning people. To people like them, democracy meant that they should be running the country. I mean, you can't expect a bunch of illiterate peasants who live in grass huts to be put in charge of things, now can you? But these elites, with their wealth and business interests, are often the first ones who want to cut deals with the Americans. War and revolution are bad for business. But you have to grant Aguinaldo and his followers this much, they created a constitutional republic, with free elections, even though there was a property requirement to be eligible to vote. And constitutional protections for civil liberties. We're talking about the first attempt to put together a real constitutional democracy in Asian history.

In December, the Spanish and American negotiators had agreed upon a draft treaty to be submitted to the Spanish Cortes and the American Senate. With tensions rising between the Americans and the Filipinos, Admiral Dewey suggested to the White House that the President issue a proclamation defining American policy in the Philippines. President McKinley issued such a document on December 21, and it was a disaster. It contained carefully constructed legal language about how American sovereignty was now replacing Spanish sovereignty, and American law was supreme in the Philippines, and went on about how Americans would now be collecting taxes in the Philippines, even though the final treaty has not yet been ratified. It had very little to say about the rights of Filipinos. The American military commanders in the Philippines were so embarrassed by the document they presented Aguinaldo with an edited

version that cut out some of the worst language. But Aguinaldo got his hands on the original proclamation, read it, saw the edits, and drew the conclusion that war with the Americans was now inevitable.

The sad part of this story is that Aguinaldo and his new government had a great deal of popular support in the Philippines. And there was probably room here for some negotiated agreement, where the new Filipino government would agree to become a protectorate under the United States, with Filipinos controlling their own internal affairs, and the US in charge of defense and foreign policy in the Philippines. And they were saying this, but no one on the American side was paying attention.

The final treaty arrangement held that Spain would give up all of its possessions in the Caribbean, and also Guam and the Philippines in the Pacific, and in return, the United States would pay Spain 20 million dollars. House Speaker Thomas Reed remarked bitterly, “We have bought 10 million Malays at two dollars a head unpicked, and nobody knows what it will cost to pick them.”

What had begun as a war to free Cubans from Spanish oppression is somehow morphing into an American occupation of the Philippines. In the United States an Anti-Imperialist League had formed during the war and now it was agitating against ratification of the treaty. Its members included such prominent Americans as the former President Grover Cleveland, Jane Addams, Mark Twain, William James, and proving once and for all that politics makes strange bed-fellows, steel magnate and ardent union-buster Andrew Carnegie and American Federation of Labor President Samuel Gompers. Carnegie, by the way, offered to pay the US government twenty million dollars out of his own pocket to give him the Philippines so that he could grant them independence. Even Rudyard Kipling weighed in on the argument, in the form of a poem, submitted to an American magazine and published in February, 1899.

*Take up the White Man's burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go send your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need
To wait in heavy harness
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child
...
Take up the White Man's burden—
And reap his old reward:
The blame of those ye better*

*The hate of those ye guard—
The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah slowly) toward the light:
"Why brought ye us from bondage,
"Our loved Egyptian night?"*

In other words, forget all that talk about how colonies are good for the economy, how they enhance national prestige, how our navy needs coaling stations to operate in Asian waters. It's really all about sacrificial servanthood in the image of Christ. Right? The idea had appeal in the nation founded by Puritans.

The Senate was scheduled to vote on the treaty on February 6, 1899. A two-thirds vote was required for ratification, and in the days leading up to the vote it was not clear whether McKinley and the Republicans had them. Then William Jennings Bryan came to town. The man who lost to McKinley in the 1896 election was seen as the most likely Democratic nominee in 1900. Bryan reasoned that the occupation of the Philippines was likely to go south and therefore provide a great campaign issue in the next Presidential election. But to the astonishment of his party, Bryan therefore lobbied Democratic Senators to vote for the treaty, on the Machiavellian logic that America had to be plunged into a quagmire before William Jennings Bryan could come along and rescue it. Opponents of the treaty were appalled, but Bryan's intervention may have been decisive. The treaty was ratified by a narrow margin. A few weeks later, Speaker Reed would shock Washington by announcing his retirement at the end of that Congressional session.

But by the time the war with Spain was officially over, the war with the Philippines had already begun. The tensions between the Americans occupying Manila, and the Filipino forces around the city broke out into open combat on Saturday evening, February 4, two days before the treaty ratification. We know that an American fired the first shot, because we know his name: Willy Grayson. We know this because Grayson himself acknowledged it, later he would file with the war department for a bonus. He didn't get it, it seems the US government doesn't pay bonuses for starting wars. Once the shooting started the restless American forces broke out of their enclave in Manila, meaning to take the country once and for all.

Although Aguinaldo foresaw the war, the Filipinos were unprepared when it started. By Monday, the day of the treaty ratification, thousands of Filipinos were dead, as well as 59 Americans. Aguinaldo requested a truce, but he was rebuffed. The Americans were finished talking. Americans like to call this war the "Philippine Insurrection". But an insurrection is a revolt against an established authority. To the Filipinos, the Americans never were an authority; they were a foreign occupation force. At this point there are about 24,000 American soldiers in the Philippines. One force led by General Marcus Miller was sent to pacify other islands in the archipelago. Two other American forces remained in Luzon. General Anderson's contingent

headed south, while the other, under the command of General Arthur MacArthur, the father of Douglas MacArthur, about whom we will certainly be saying more later, headed north toward Aguinaldo's headquarters in Malolos, along the one rail line in the country.

The American forces pushed forward against strong Filipino resistance. Things seemed to be going well at first, but then American commanders confronted the ugly truth about guerilla warfare. Pushing forward is one thing, controlling the territory you've taken is something completely different. As soon as the Americans moved on from their latest conquest the Filipinos returned and took it back. Washington puzzled over Otis's reports from the front lines. He was claiming victory after victory, while at the same time begging for reinforcements. By the end of March, MacArthur's units had conquered Malolos, Aguinaldo's capital. The McKinley administration all but declared victory, but of course all the half-devil and half-child Filipinos had to do was pack up their government and move it to another town. You know, like the Continental Congress did when the British took Philadelphia?

As the spring passed into summer, and the heat and humidity passed into the Philippines, American morale plummeted. General Otis kept on announcing victory after victory, along with implausibly inflated Filipino casualty figures until the reporters in Manila no longer took him seriously. Anyone who is familiar with America's experience in the Vietnam War, some 60 years later will find all of this sounding very familiar. There were now 60,000 American soldiers in the Philippines. And yet in spite of all the supposed victories, America controlled no territory outside a 30-mile radius around Manila. Filipino troops simply melted away when Americans moved into a town, and popped back up after they left. The climate was debilitating, and the soldiers' equipment inadequate.

General Otis's response to the bad press was to threaten some of the reporters with courts martial. The cable connection to Hong Kong was restored, but Otis would only allow friendly reporters to use it. Undeterred, the others would hop a boat to Hong Kong and file their dispatches there. The Pittsburgh *Post* polled Pennsylvania soldiers returning from the war that summer, and reported that over 90% of them opposed it.

At this point in American history African Americans were permitted to serve in the US Army, and there were many career African-American soldiers. But they served in segregated, all African-American units, commanded by white officers, because African Americans weren't permitted to be officers. The Army liked to send the African-American units to the Philippines because people at the time believed that African Americans were more resistant to tropical diseases than were white Americans. This is of course because this was a period of endemic racial stupidity. One such African-American unit when it was debarking at Manila, reportedly was confronted by a white soldier who asked, "What are you guys doing here", although he didn't say guys. One of the African-American soldiers responded, "We're here to take up the white man's burden."

Inevitably, as the war dragged on, bloodily and inconclusively, casualties mounted on both sides, and so did hatred. You may know the Civil War song, “Tramp, Tramp, Tramp, the Boys Are Marching”? American soldiers in the Philippines repurposed it, this little ditty was sung to the same tune, it’s also the tune to the twentieth-century Sunday School song “Jesus Loves the Little Children,” if that helps.

*In that land of dopey dreams, happy, peaceful Philippines
where the boloman is hiking night and day
Where Tagalos steal and lie, where Americanos die
There you hear the soldiers sing this evening lay*

*Damn, damn, damn the Filipinos, cross-eyed kakiack ladrones,
Underneath our starry flag, civilize 'em with a Krag,
And return us to our own beloved homes*

The word *ladrón* is Spanish for bandit. “Civilize 'em with a Krag” refers to a Krag-Jorgensen rifle that was the standard issue US Army rifle at the time. I can’t tell you what songs, if any, the Filipino soldiers were singing about Americans.

MacArthur continued his advance north along the railroad line. And Aguinaldo stayed one town ahead of him. From Malolos to San Fernando, to Tarlac, to Bayambang. By the end of the year, MacArthur had reached the port town of Dagupan, which was the far end of the rail line. And this is pretty much the end of the conventional war in the Philippines and the beginning of all-out guerilla war. Having run out of towns in which to set up his government, Aguinaldo retreated into the boondocks, which is the Tagalog word for the mountainous interior of Luzon, and yes, the origin of our English word *boondocks*, and instructed his troops to use hit-and-run tactics against the Americans.

As 1899 passed into 1900, Aguinaldo was pinning his hopes on a Democratic victory in that November’s Presidential election. Ironically, this would mean that Aguinaldo was rooting for William Jennings Bryan, the man who had worked to ratify the treaty. In the United States, the anti-imperialist movement was appalled at the thought of Bryan, whom they thought of now as a turncoat, being their representative in the Presidential campaign. Andrew Carnegie offered a \$25,000 campaign contribution to anyone else who would run as an alternative candidate on the Democratic side, but no one emerged. Admiral Dewey, who by now was something like a rock star in the US, was considered as a candidate, but success in Manila had gone to his head. Dewey played hard to get, then condescendingly announced that he had thought it over and decided that, well yeah, it looked easy enough to be President that he could manage it. This odd behavior kind of punctured his trial balloon before it ever got off the ground. And so the election would be a

rematch of McKinley vs. Bryan as in 1896. The Democratic Party platform of that year taunted Republicans by throwing in their faces a paraphrase of a quote from their most popular President, “No nation can long endure half-republic, and half-empire.”

In the Philippines, the war was becoming increasingly vicious. Filipino guerillas would hide among the rural population, smile and wave at the American soldiers as they passed by, then grab rifles and head into the jungle. The Filipinos built camouflage pits with sharpened bamboo spikes at the bottom, and tripwires that would fire spears at the unwary. Again, if you’re familiar with the story of the Vietnam War, all of this sounds very familiar. They were known to castrate American prisoners, and there were reports of American POWs being buried up to their necks, and a trail of sugar being laid from a nearby anthill to the hapless prisoner’s head. Death was slow and gruesome.

On the American side, soldiers gave up trying to distinguish enemy soldiers from civilians and would massacre whole towns indiscriminately. Concentration camps, that Spanish innovation that had so appalled American public opinion, were now American strategy. Filipino civilians who refused to give Americans information on guerilla movements were subjected to torture, including the notorious so-called “water cure,” where the victim’s head would be placed in a bucket of water, or water poured down their throat to the point of drowning. Americans pursuing Aguinaldo almost captured him, he got away, but they nabbed his mother, and his four-year-old son.

In America, the anti-imperialists were publicizing the atrocities in the Philippines. They published pamphlets, financed with Carnegie’s money, in which they juxtaposed high-minded quotations from imperialist politicians about the noble cause of civilizing the Filipinos with accounts of wartime barbarity. The pro-imperialists shot back with accusations that the anti-imperialists were supporting the very people who were shooting at American soldiers, and asking how this was different from treason. Aguinaldo and the leaders of his government were city folk, they grew weary of hiding in the jungle and began defecting to the Americans. Aguinaldo endorsed Bryan for president, a move which probably cost Bryan votes, McKinley was reelected comfortably.

In March 1901, the Americans caught a lucky break, they captured a Filipino courier with a message from Aguinaldo desperately pleading for reinforcements. They put together a group of 80 Filipinos who were working for the Americans and sent them to Aguinaldo’s headquarters, along with 5 American officers who were playing the role of captured prisoners. When they reached Aguinaldo, the Filipinos killed his guards and the American officers arrested him, and confiscated his beloved sword.

Three weeks after his capture, and after pressure from his former supporters and his family, Aguinaldo made a public statement accepting American sovereignty over the Philippines and retired to Cavite. This was not the end of the war, but it was the beginning of the end. It would

drag on for another year, but the first Philippine Republic was over. By July 4, America had established a civilian government with Ohio Judge William Howard Taft as the first civilian Governor of the Philippines. Taft declared the Filipinos America's "little brown brothers," and the US government proclaimed amnesty for all Filipinos who fought in the conflict.

President McKinley once said privately that he thought his State Department could have resolved this dispute with Spain over Cuba peacefully had it not been for the Congressional rush to war. Similarly you can see opportunities for the Philippines conflict to have been settled by negotiation. In the end, this forgotten war lasted far longer than the Spanish-American War, and cost many more American lives, as well as the lives of hundreds of thousands of Filipinos. And for better or for worse, for the rest of the twentieth century, the fate of the Philippines will be closely intertwined with the fate of the United States. We will certainly be revisiting the complicated relationship between these two countries as we continue with the *History of the Twentieth Century*.

We'll have to stop there for today, but I hope you'll join me next week on the *History of the Twentieth Century* as we visit France and take a look at what's going on in that country. Spoiler alert: impressionist paintings, political violence, Eiffel Tower, anarchist bombings, beautiful music, appalling anti-Semitism. All that and more, next week on The History of the Twentieth Century.

Oh, and one more thing. Emilio Aguinaldo was only 31 years old when he was captured. The US would recognize Philippine independence when he was 77. He would eventually live to the age of 92, passing away in 1964. A few years before his death, the US ambassador to the Philippines would call on Aguinaldo and present him with a special gift, the return of his beloved sword.

[music: Closing Theme]