

The Past: A Not so Distant, Foreign Land

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The past remains integral to us all, individually and collectively. We must concede the ancients their place.... But their place is not simply back there, in a separate and foreign country; it is assimilated in ourselves, and resurrected into an ever-changing present. (Lowenthal, 1985)

The recently concluded debate in the Philippine Senate over whether or not to ratify the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the United States is proof that somehow, at least in the minds of most Filipino leaders, the past is indeed a different country. Rather than hark back to that distant past, our legislators seemed to argue that we ought to deal with the present and all that it demands of us. For now, they emphasize, the present is one in which Filipinos are unable to defend themselves, pointing to Chinese incursions in the contested Spratly Islands. Hence the need, shameful as it might appear, to rely on United States military and logistical support.

In fact, many of the pro-VFA arguments were pathetic repetitions of old arguments raised by the pro-bases senators in the 1991 debate that ended in the removal of American military bases from the Philippines. This was so because the onerous provisions of the bases treaty, which the Senate had roundly rejected, were resuscitated in the VFA; for example: the provision on jurisdiction over American soldiers who commit crimes while in the Philippines, which practically exempts them from Philippine law once the U.S. commander issues a "duty certificate"; the deafening silence on the entry of nuclear weapons into the country, which are banned by the Philippine Constitution; the non-enforcement of the constitutional requirement that the agreement be ratified by both sides, not just ours; and so on.

This time the Catholic Church took an outspoken, unequivocal stance against the approval of the agreement. Telephone calls to radio stations and talk shows also registered strong public opinion against the VFA. It was evident that the doomsday scenarios which the people had heard in the old bases debate – that the Philippines would not survive without the bases – proved unconvincing. As Bishop Teodoro

Bacani explained, he fell for this argument once (in 1991) and would not be fooled by it again.

On the other hand, rumor has it that the long queue of Filipinos applying for U.S. visas is a response to the relative laxity of American consular officials in order to attract support for the VFA – an explanation vehemently denied by the U.S. embassy. Nonetheless the queue goes on. “Visas for America” has become the new meaning of VFA.

How is it that the very same provisions rejected eight years ago are overwhelmingly approved today? It cannot be because the present Senate consists of a different bunch. In fact, some of the most vociferous opponents of the bases treaty are today’s most ardent advocates of the VFA. Politics, or more accurately, political exigency (pleasing the Palace) is, of course, an obvious reason but perhaps too easy an answer to what is, I believe, a far more complex question. Perhaps the answer has to do with how we, as a people, assimilate our past and resurrect it into the complicated reality of the present.

In a sense it appears that we have not yet resolved how we should look upon the United States. In 1898 our leaders believed the Americans had come to our shores as allies in the struggle against Spain. Months later, these friends turned out to be enemies desirous of our land and our people. Throughout the forty-or-so-year period of American rule, the relationship remained double-edged. On the one hand, the colonial government offered measures to sweeten the pain of occupation: elections were allowed, free public school education was established, Filipinos were appointed to high government posts in the judiciary and the executive branch. Never mind that only the monied and educated *ilustrados* could vote; that education was used as a tool of colonization; or that the Filipinos given official positions quickly became more American than Americans in thought and in deed. On the other hand, the basic freedoms of press and assembly were denied for more than a decade of colonial rule. All resistance to the U.S. occupation was forcefully quashed, and the rebels made to appear in the public eye as plain brigands. How the United States figured then depended on which Filipino one spoke to.

The war period was another occasion for ambivalence. While the rest of Southeast Asia used the Japanese occupation as an opportunity to refuse the re-entry of old colonial rulers, the Philippines welcomed

the United States as liberators. Shortly after the war, the U.S. government rehabilitated Filipino leaders who had collaborated with the Japanese, while suppressing organizations which had resisted Japanese fascism in favor of a truly sovereign Philippines. Communism became the post-war enemy, and to forge an alliance that would presumably protect democracy in the region, the newly independent Philippines entered into economic and military arrangements with the United States that kept their old unequal relationship alive.

The rejection of the bases treaty remains the single most visible, solid assertion of Philippine sovereignty. But the history of this assertion has been in some ways a boring, uncreative resurrection of past events. Many of the arguments raised in the 1991 bases debate were a replay of those made in the Philippine Senate in 1947, when the parity amendment was approved. (This amendment lifted the restriction in the 1935 Constitution on the ownership, development and exploitation of land and other natural resources by Filipinos and Filipino-owned corporations.) According to advocates of the parity amendment, parity (like the U.S. bases) would mean more jobs, security and peace. On the other hand, argued the anti-parity bloc, allowing the Americans to own our land and resources was tantamount to economic prostitution.

So we either remember our past and recall it only too well that we simply repeat it, or we keep creating ways to transform the continuous struggle for sovereignty in response to ever-changing needs and demands. Clearly some, like the leaders of the Catholic Church, have learned the lesson of the past, while others opted to look away from that seemingly distant, foreign country. Here the youth have an obvious advantage; unlike their elders, they do not carry the baggage of the past. I recall how one of my more challenging moments during the anti-bases campaign in the early nineties was explaining why I favored the rejection of the bases treaty to a retired provincial public school principal who had been schooled by the U.S. and was eternally grateful to it for the education he had received. (Our discussion ended happily; he accepted my arguments.) In contrast, more than 90 percent of my first year students here in the university had opinions on the bases that were opposite their parents'. It could be that the past is such a distant country to our youth that they do not feel bound to it in any way. But it could also well be that young Filipinos have a greater ability to assimilate the past into the present they are creating or wish to create. The optimist that I am, I prefer to believe the latter. □

Reference

David Lowenthal (1985). *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge University Press.