A Complicated Legacy: The Battle Of Bataan In U.S. Cold War Propaganda

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On April 14, 1959, the United States Information Agency issued a patriotic poster in the Philippines commemorating the anniversary of the Battle of Bataan. "Seventeen years ago today," it read, "Filipino and American soldiers… heroically fought side by side to preserve the common ideals of freedom and democracy."[1] This message was surrounded by imagery invoking a sense of brotherhood between the two nations – American and Filipino flags waving proudly side-by-side, photographs of marching troops clad in full regalia, and the decorated caskets of soldiers from both sides.[2] With these mixed images of glory, loss, and camaraderie, the United States sought to remind Filipino citizens of the Battle of Bataan in order to "rekindle in our hearts the significance of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."[3] In examining the historical context of this poster, its underlying message becomes clear: by commemorating a battle that, although technically a major loss, inspired collaboration with the U.S. and the defense of American values such as democracy and freedom, the United States hoped to preserve its increasingly strained relationship with the Philippines in the wake of communist threats, nationalist fervor, and social unrest that emerged in the late 1950s.

The Battle of Bataan was fought between allied Filipino and American forces against the Japanese during the beginning phases of World War II in the Pacific. On December 24, 1941, U.S. General Douglas MacArthur declared the Philippine capital, Manila, a demilitarized open city and began to withdraw his troops to the narrow peninsula of Bataan as a defensive strategy.

1 "Bataan Day Poster – 1959," April 14, 1959, The National Archives Catalog, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/6948935?q=*:*Bataan#.Vmfnara8Da8.link.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.

Despite the region's geographic disadvantages (it was essentially a cul-de-sac that trapped MacArthur's forces), Bataan possessed a rugged countryside ideal for defense, in addition to stockpiled ammunition, medical supplies, and provisions that MacArthur had gathered in preparation for a siege.[4] These provisions proved to be inadequate; however, and soldiers were forced to live on half-rations that barely kept them from starvation. On January 9, 1942, Japanese forces under General Homma Masaharu attacked Bataan in what they assumed would prove an easy victory, but MacArthur's troops managed to neutralize this first attack after a month of fighting. On March 11, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered MacArthur to evacuate the Philippines, leaving command of his troops to Maj. General Jonathan Wainwright. Wainwright realized the situation was hopeless, as his troops were near starvation and the promised aid had not arrived. When the Japanese re-launched their attack on April 3rd, Wainwright commanded a predictably futile counteroffensive before his front-line commander, Maj. Gen. Edward King, surrendered on April 9th rather than witness the senseless slaughter of his men.[5]

The tragedy of Bataan was far from over. After King's surrender, 78,000 Filipino and American soldiers became prisoners of the Japanese, who forced them to march approximately sixty miles to a captured American prison camp in what became known as the Bataan Death March.[6] The Death March was the result of four major conditions: the weak physical state of American and Filipino troops, the unpreparedness of the Japanese to receive them, the "contempt" in which Japan's military held its prisoners, and the "cruelty and callousness" of the average Japanese soldier.[7] Soldiers were forced to march continuously through hot and hostile jungle terrain, denied food and water, routinely beaten, and executed for collapsing or falling behind, among other forms of horrific abuse. Because the ancient Japanese warrior code, known

4 Alan Axelrod and Jack A. Kingston, *Encyclopedia of World War II* (New York: Facts on File, 2007), sv. "Bataan, Fall of," 152.

5 Ibid.

6 Axelrod and Kingston, 150.

7 Stanley L. Falk, introduction to *Bataan Death March: A Survivor's Account*, by William E. Dyess (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), ix.

as Bushido, regarded surrender as dishonorable, such mistreatment was condoned and even encouraged against prisoners. General Homma was later tried for war crimes after his surrender to the U.S. in 1945, but not without ruthlessly claiming the lives of between 7,000 and 10,000 Filipino and American soldiers lost in battle.[8] The Battle of Bataan, therefore, resulted not only in defeat, but also in a sizeable and tragic loss of life.

The Battle of Bataan was a military defeat of spectacular proportions – an unnecessary tragedy born from overconfidence and carelessness.[9] Why then, would the U.S. seek to rekindle this memory in the Philippines? Despite the fact that Bataan was technically a failure, it served a far more complex symbolic value within the historical memory of both Filipinos and Americans. The soldiers at Bataan, although technically part of the U.S. Army, were in reality over eighty-five percent Filipino. Despite the disadvantages of youth, poor training, and inadequate supplies, these men willingly went to war against the Japanese alongside the U.S. to protect their shared values of liberty and happiness.[10] For Filipinos, the Battle of Bataan was not only a physical struggle; it also represented an ideological battle against Japanese Occupation and its resulting hardship and oppression. According to Antonio Nieva, a Filipino Bataan veteran and survivor of the Death March, in the years of WWII the Battle of Bataan represented an "unofficial yet very real national shrine in the hearts of the Filipinos," and even in defeat, its soldiers were regarded as a "personification of valor."[11] Thus, the Battle of Bataan entered the canon of historical memory as a testament of bravery, freedom, and democracy. In his article on the Philippine experience of WWII, Ricardo José discusses the nuances of historical memory and how past events such as Bataan are remembered within the shifting narratives of past and present. According to José, war memories are determined more by one's present-day perceptions rather

8 Axelrod and Kingston, 151.

9 Donald J. Young, *The Battle of Bataan: A Complete History* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2009), 5-6.

10 Young, 6, 9.

11 Antonio A. Nieva, *The Fight for Freedom: Remembering Bataan and Corregidor* (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day, 1997), ix.

than shadows of the past.[12] In 1959, therefore, when the United States issued a commemorative poster marking the anniversary of the Battle of Bataan, they chose to remember the battle not as a defeat, but as a poignant symbol of brotherhood between the Philippines and America, when these two nations came together to defend their common values of freedom and democracy.[13] In 1959, preserving and promoting such an image became critical in the wake of social unrest and anti-U.S. sentiments that emerged in the Philippines.

The first major period of turmoil prior to 1959 was the Huk Rebellion – two separate peasant-based struggles against foreign involvement in the Philippines.[14] The first phase of this movement began in 1942, when officers of the Communist Party of the Philippines (PKP) and peasant guerillas from Central Luzon established the People's Anti-Japanese Liberation Army, or Hukbalahap, to organize resistance against Japanese Occupation.[15] By the middle of 1942, 625,800 Japanese soldiers were stationed in the Philippines, where they controlled the population through propaganda, forced labor, starvation, torture, and other violations of basic human rights.[16] The Filipino Huk campaign, combined with U.S. military aid, proved successful in overthrowing their oppressors, and Japan surrendered to the Allies on September 2, 1945.[17] The second phase of the Huk Rebellion took a more sinister turn towards the United States. On January 4, 1946, the U.S. established the Philippine Republic, which reinforced its colonial relationship with the Philippines under the guise of granting independence. Reluctant to abandon its interests in the Pacific, the U.S. persuaded Philippine leaders to accept postwar aid in return for permitting the establishment of military bases and parity rights for Amer-

12 Ricardo T. José, "War and Violence, History and Memory: The Philippine Experience of the Second World War," in *Contestations of Memory in Southeast Asia*, ed. Roxana Waterson and Kwok Kian-Woon (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2012), 186.

13 "Bataan Day Poster."

14 Vina A. Lanzona, *Amazons of the Huk Rebellion: Gender, Sex, and Revolution in the Philippines* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 6.

15 Ibid., 37.

16 Ibid., 32.

17 Ibid., 37.

ican companies operating freely in the country.[18] In order to create a sense of normalcy, therefore, the new state "restored prewar political and economic institutions that reinforced Philippine dependence on the US in economic, political, and military terms."[19] The Huks responded to these oppressive attempts to restore pre-war land arrangements by reorganizing under a new name – the People's Liberation Army, or HMB – and mobilizing the peasantry to fight against imperial influence once more.[20] The HMB was formed, according to the party, "by the people because of the people," with the aim of resisting the American imperialists and the feudal policies that had led to the suffering of millions of farmers.[21] They rapidly gained support from 1946-1950, eventually increasing their number to twenty thousand armed soldiers.[22]

Besides posing a direct threat to their presence, the Huk rebellion was particularly unsettling to the U.S. because the movement's history was heavily influenced by Communism – a highly concerning detail given existing Cold War anxieties.[23] Most of the Huk leaders were also high-ranking PKP leaders, communist ideology was circulated among its followers, and their practical goals, such as extension of land ownership and a larger share of the crop among peasants, were exemplary of such an ideology.[24] To Americans and the closely entwined Philippine government, this promise of a communist society not only explained the success of the movement – it represented a significant threat to the political order.[25] With the rise of communism in China and Vietnam, the U.S. became determined to staunch its spread to the Philippines, which, because of the rapidly growing strength of the HMB, was seen as "the weakest link in their Asian offshore island of defense."[26] Consistent with Cold

18 Lanzona., 79.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 77.
21 Ibid., 82.
22 Ibid., 7.
23 Ibid., 80.
24 Ibid., 80, 82.
25 Lanzona, 82.
26 Renato Constantino and Letizia R. Constantino, *The Philippines: The Continuing Past* (Quezon City, Philippines: The Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1978), 223.

War policy, therefore, the Philippine and U.S. governments demonized the Communist Party and began instating a military program to defeat the rebels.[27]

As part of their plan to reinstate power over the Philippines, the U.S. helped install Ramon Magsaysay to the presidency on December 30, 1953. In return for this aid, Magsaysay served as a political puppet for the U.S., vowing to protect American investment interests in the Philippines and smother the rising tide of nationalism.[28] By the late 1950s, he had fulfilled their joint goal of suppressing the Huks through land reform programs and military repression.[29] He also approved efforts to protect American economic interests in the Philippines, such as safeguarding trade and investment privileges.[30] All seemed to be going relatively well for the U.S., until March 17, 1957, when Magsaysay died in an accidental plane crash, and the conservative Nacionalista candidate Carlos P. Garcia won the subsequent election.[31] Unlike other Philippine presidents, Garcia owed nothing to the U.S. for his election, and was thus independent-minded rather than loyal to the Americans.[32] Furthermore, he was sympathetic to the Filipino nationalist movement. Within a few months of his installment, Garcia had instituted a number of policies that deeply troubled American authorities, the most important of which was an economic resolution known as the Filipino First policy. On August 21, 1958, the Philippine National Economic Council adopted a resolution which "[encouraged] Filipinos to engage in enterprises and industries vital to the economic growth, stability, and security of the country," with the eventual goal of attaining a "substantial share of the commerce and industry of the country."[33] The American media responded to this threat by issuing a propa-

27 Lanzona, 7.

28 William J. Pomeroy, *The Philippines: Colonialism, Collaboration, and Resistance!* (New York: International, 1992), 210.

29 Lanzona, 7.

30 Pomeroy, 209.

31 Ibid., 215, 217.

32 Ibid., 217.

33 Pomeroy, 217-218.

ganda campaign against Garcia. *Time* and *Life* magazines, for example, both of which were widely circulated in the Philippines, depicted the president as a "nonentity who had stepped into the man-sized shoes of the Philippine National Hero Ramon Magsaysay."[34] In addition, a U.S. News and World Report published in February 27, 1959 attacked the Filipino First policy as "extreme nationalism" and indistinguishable from communist propaganda.[35] Ironically, therefore, the U.S. fear of Filipino nationalism that emerged during the Cold War had strengthened the very force that it sought to suppress.

In examining the historical context of early 1959, it becomes clear what message the U.S. hoped to achieve by commemorating the seventeenth anniversary of the Battle of Bataan. In the time this poster was produced, the Philippines was in a state of political and social upheaval. The nationalist policies of President Carlos Garcia and the communist uprising of the HMB posed a severe threat to U.S. interests in the Philippines, especially when combined with Cold War anxieties. By the time the Cold War deepened, Filipinos had grown increasingly disillusioned with the United States. Instead of viewing the U.S. as allies who had fought beside them to overthrow Japanese oppression, Americans were increasingly depicted as "selfish imperialists" who had plunged the Philippines into war to serve their own interests and promote their own ideals of freedom and democracy.[36] The commemoration of the Battle of Bataan during this troubled time is an example of the purposeful manipulation of historical memory – the remembrance of one story rather than another.[37] By promoting Bataan as a symbol of Filipino-American unity and sacrifice, such propaganda downplayed the empty promises of aid and selfish errors of MacArthur that resulted in defeat; instead, it served to strengthen Filipino faith in the United States.[38] In the wake of growing communist and nationalist insurgence, bolstering such faith was imperative to maintaining ties between the U.S. and the Philippines.

34 Ibid., 219.

35 Ibid.

36 José, 187.

37 Roxana Waterson and Kwok Kian-Woon, *Contestations of Memory in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2012), 2.

38 Constantino, 50-51.

In reality, however, this goal was far more nuanced, for the Bataan-Corregidor defense created a legend not of American-Filipino unity but of Filipino loyalty to the U.S.[39] Despite its noble front, American involvement in the Philippines was based not on protecting the interests of the Filipino people, but on "preserving U.S. interests that Filipinos were expected to defend."[40] The 1959 poster commemorating the seventeenth Battle of Bataan is a prime example of this pseudo-brotherhood. By promoting the united defense of freedom and democracy, this poster sought to bolster Filipino support of the U.S. in order to preserve their own interests during in the upsurge of nationalist fervor that threatened to loosen their control.

The Battle of Bataan holds a complicated legacy within the shifting canon of historical memory. Although Bataan was technically a defeat with sizeable and tragic losses, it emerged as a symbol of brotherhood between the U.S. and the Philippines as they united in defense of freedom and democracy. The 1959 poster commemorating the seventeenth anniversary of Bataan capitalizes on this legacy, highlighting the courage, unity, and common values of soldiers from both nations. Promoting this idealized image of U.S.-Filipino relations became necessary during the Cold War, when the foreign threat of communism spread to the Philippines during the Huk Rebellion. When Huk insurgents turned against the increasingly imperialistic United States during the second phase of the rebellion, Americans became especially alarmed. The rise of nationalist sentiment and anti-U.S. policies during the Garcia administration only furthered this anxiety. As part of their attempt to bolster their relations and preserve their interests in the Philippines, the U.S. issued propaganda such as this poster to remind Filipinos of their former unity and common sacrifice. By memorializing the Battle of Bataan as a noble campaign where Filipino and American soldiers marched together in defense of freedom, the United States hoped to utilize historical memory as a tool to preserve their continued presence in the Philippines.

39 Pomeroy, 107.

40 Ibid.

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