Telling the Real Story to America

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I am deeply honored to have been invited to your celebration of the successful corrective plaque campaign at the Minnesota State Capitol. Like so many Filipino Americans in the United States, I followed your campaign closely and was delighted when I heard that the corrective plaque would finally be installed on February 4. The import of this corrective plaque goes far beyond Minnesota. Your success is a milestone in the struggle to tell the real story about America and the Philippines.

Because of your campaign, Minnesotans now know of America's war of colonial conquest in the Philippines. But the first interactions between Americans and Filipinos did not begin there. The earliest contacts were marked by friendship and peace dating back to the 1500's. The first Filipino visitors to America were sailors on Spanish galleons in search of trade and adventure as early as 1587. The first Filipino immigrants were probably sailors who stayed in California and lived with the Coastal Miwok native Americans after their galleon was shipwrecked off the coast of Point Reyes, California in 1595. Other Filipinos arrived in the three centuries that followed. One of them, Antonio Miranda, was one of the 44 founders of the city of Los Angeles in 1781. The first permanent Filipino settlements were in the area of Barataria Bay in Louisiana. The settlements were probably built in the 1800s or earlier. In their small way, the first Filipino immigrants contributed to the history, culture, and industry of North America before 1898. Then came the tragedy of the Philippine American War.

The war created a new relationship based on geopolitical power, economic imperatives, and the subjugation of a people. Filipinos began as allies against Spain but when they resisted annexation, they became enemies depicted in popular media as treacherous savages or, as Senator Albert Beveridge put it, a "barbarous race" incapable of self-government. The racist portrayal of Filipinos during the war can be seen in the political cartoons of the period. On exhibit in the Capitol North Hall is a small sampling of cartoons from Minnesota newspapers and two national magazines from 1899 to the early 1900's. The cartoons demonize the Filipino enemy as pickanninies, devious savages in grass skirts, animals, or children in need of punishment.

The "end" of the war was officially declared on July 4, 1902 (although military campaigns continued until 1913 especially against the Moro peoples in the south). In 1904, the U.S. government and the U.S. Colonial Administration in the Philippines funded a project, at a cost of over $1 million, to bring 1,200 Filipinos to the St. Louis World's Fair in Missouri.

The directors of the World's Fair were eager to justify the costly annexation of the Philippines. They did so by reinforcing racist stereotypes and manifest destiny. The World's Fair organizers promoted the notion of different levels of culture, with the United States as the pinnacle of enlightenment (the highest level of culture) and indigenous Filipinos and other native peoples as examples of the two lowest levels—savagery and barbarism. Scantily clad tribal Filipinos were shown climbing trees or hunting with bows and arrows. Cordillera natives were displayed in a classroom singing "My Country 'Tis of Thee" to show that

American education was capable of civilizing Filipinos. The most photographed native at the Fair was an Aeta from Luzon who was billed as the "missing link" between ape and homo sapiens. About 19 million Americans, a fourth of the population, came to see Filipinos depicted as savages at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair.

The racist portrayals of Filipinos had a profound impact on the early Filipino immigrants of the 1900's. By 1903, Filipinos started arriving in large numbers in the United States to fill the void in farm labor when the entry of cheap labor from China and Japan was halted. The year before, the U.S. Congress passed the Cooper Act which made it illegal for Filipinos to own property, operate a business, live in a white residential area, vote, or become a naturalized citizen. In the decades that followed, tens of thousands of Filipinos came to do the backbreaking work in the agricultural fields of California and Hawaii, or to work in the canneries in the Pacific Northwest. Not surprisingly, many fell victims to blatant racial discrimination: many were denied housing, forced to live in barns, and barred from restaurants, stores, and recreational facilities. Fueled by the conditions of the depression in the 1930s, anti-Filipino race riots took place in many towns where Filipinos were killed or forcibly driven away by racist mobs. Filipino dwellings and clubhouses were raided or bombed. The writer Carlos Bulosan wrote at that time: "I feel like a criminal ... and the crime is that I am a Filipino American."

It is not surprising then that Filipinos, like their counterparts in the Philippines, fought back. Filipinos formed labor unions and joined with Mexican and other workers to fight for better wages and working conditions. Filipinos formed mutual aid societies and cooperatives, published their own newspapers and literary journals, built their own hospital, opened their own stores, and challenged racist laws in the courts. In 1930, the racist killing of Fermin Tobera, a 22-year old Filipino farmer in California, sparked rallies by Filipinos in both the United States and the Philippines. One cannot do justice in a few minutes to such a rich history of survival, resistance, and struggle for freedom and justice by Filipinos during and after the Philippine American War. Sadly, few Americans know this history. But the times are changing.

Today, there are an estimated 2.4 million persons of Filipino descent in the United States, the second largest Asian population in the country. Filipino Americans continue to be a nearly invisible group, despite the numbers, the common history, and the contributions of Filipinos to the labor and civil rights movements. One disturbing effect of cultural invisibility can be seen among a few young Filipino Americans so alienated from their ethnic history and roots that they prefer to see themselves as anything but Filipino. But times are changing and Minnesota's corrective plaque campaign is a wonderful example of that.

Throughout many cities in the United States, one finds memorials to the Spanish American and Philippine American Wars. Some are in the form of a plaque. Others, as in San Francisco's Union Square, are in the form of a statue. Yet others, such as in Cheyenne, Wyoming, are in the form of war trophies. In the case of Warren AFB in Cheyenne, Wyoming and a U.S. base in Korea, the war booties are three 19th century bells seized from the church of Balangiga, Samar, during the Philippine American War. The case stems from an incident in September 1901 when 36 U.S. soldiers camped in Balangiga were killed during a surprise attack by Filipino units. In retaliation, General Jacob Smith instigated a "kill and burn" policy in which hundreds of homes were put to the torch, and where the age limit for killing was set at 10 years old. An estimated 50,000 Filipinos were killed in Samar, one of the bloodiest chapters of the Philippine American War.

Around the time the Minnesota Corrective Plaque campaign began, another campaign was launched to return the Balangiga church bells. The Bells of Balangiga campaign has faced stiff opposition from the U.S. military which refuses to release the church bells. But times are changing. The success of the Minnesota campaign will encourage others to support the Bells of Balangiga campaign and will inspire many more to fight for a telling of our history through more corrective plaques and through coverage in history textbooks. This is the significance of your victory in Minnesota.

In January 1900, a political cartoon in the *Chicago Chronicle* showed President McKinley with his foot on a locked book, adamantly refusing to hand over the key that would have opened the book to the American people. The book was entitled "True History of the War in the Philippines." Times have changed since 1900. The successful Minnesota campaign, the ongoing Balangiga campaign, the cartoon exhibit, and many other educational activities are providing the keys to unlocking the hidden history that has been kept from the American people.

Filipino Americans, like all Americans, must be aware of our cultural and historical roots and learn the lessons that history teaches us, if we are to contribute positively to the constant and inevitable transformation of this nation of immigrants. Learning and teaching our history is not just a need for us as a community but our responsibility to society as a whole. For this, we are grateful to the Filipino American community in Minnesota and to all the members of the corrective plaque campaign for leading the way. As Minnesota has shown, we *will* tell our story and the cultural mosaic that is America, of which we are all a part, will be the better for it.

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