The Filipino World War II Veterans Equity Movement and the Filipino American Community

Satoshi Nakano

Introduction

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Act (hereafter INA) of 1990, which gave Filipino World War II veterans[1] the right to acquire U.S. citizenship, soon brought about a wave of elderly Filipino migrants into the United States, a number of which had reached twenty-eight thousand by 1998. The U.S. media first covered their naturalization as very patriotic and moving stories, but before long, they found that most of those elderly newcomers live alone, jobless, poverty-stricken, and, in some cases, even homeless. In spite of being naturalized U.S. citizens, those Filipino veterans are not eligible for the bulk of veterans benefits including old age pensions and free medical care in veterans hospitals, and thus have been given little choice but to live on scanty Supplementary Security Income (hereafter SSI) payments. Filipino American activists soon took up these issues as an urgent social crisis and also considered their solution as an ideal "empowerment" opportunity for Filipino Americans. Vigorous campaigns ensued, and the issue came to receive considerable attention at the federal level, resulting in the so-called "SSI Extension Act" of 1999, which was the first major achievement of the Filipino veterans "equity movement."

This article will first provide a brief historical overview of "equity" issues related to Filipino World War II veterans, which have existed for more than half a century.[2] Then the discussion will turn to a question of how the Filipino American community has reacted to these issues, focusing on different and even conflicting strategies pursued by Filipino community activists over the question of whether, or to what extent, the movement should "Americanize" the issue or keep it "Filipino" in character, as if it were a matter of choosing between the two conflicting national identities.

This article is a development of a paper presented at the 7th International Conference on Philippines Studies at the International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden, Netherland, 17 June 2004. The author is grateful to Dr. Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr. for organizing the panel and the thoughtful comments on the paper from the floor.

[1] See chapter 2 on the term as defined by U.S. law. The term is referred to as distinct from veterans of the Filipino 1st and 2nd Infantry Regiments, which will be discussed in chapter 5.

[2] For more details and extensive discussion on this phase of the issue, see Satoshi Nakano, "Nation, Nationalism and Citizenship in the Filipino World War II Veterans Equity Movement, 1945–1999," *Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies* 32, no. 2 (December 2000): 33–53. Available from Hitotsusbashi Digital Archives.
<http://hda1.lib.hit-u.ac.jp/cgi-bin/retrieve/sr_bookview.cgi/AZ00001249/Front/link/hjsoc0320200330.pdf> (December 14, 2005).

1. Historical Background

U.S. Census 2000 numbered the war veteran population of the United States at 26.5 million as of 1 April 2000.[3] The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (hereafter USDVA) is the largest federal agency second only to the Department of Defense and $44.3 billion was allotted from the federal budget for veterans affairs for FY 2000.[4] The lion's share of federal spending for veterans and their families is used for education, death and disability compensation, old age pensions, burial costs, and medical care. Aged veterans living below the poverty line are eligible for a pension amounting to $722 a month as of 1998, as well as free medical care at veterans hospitals throughout U.S and in many foreign countries. In contrast, SSI payments amounted to only $505 a month in 1998.[5]

In principle, the U.S. veterans benefits are applicable regardless of nationality, provided that he or she is a former member of the U.S. armed forces, currently being granted to foreign-born citizens of 66 countries around the world.[6] Filipino veterans of World War II, however, have separately been given a controversial status all the way since the end of World War II. Here lies the core of the whole issue.

(1) U.S Veterans Benefits and Filipino World War II Veterans

The term has been defined under U.S. law as former soldiers who were born in the Philippines and were residing in the Philippines when they were enlisted. To be considered veterans of World War II, they are required to have served in active duty and been honorably discharged at any time between September 1, 1939 and December 31, 1946. They have been further broken down into the following four general categories: (1) veterans of the Philippine Scouts, which was established in 1901 by the U.S. colonial government as an auxiliary force; (2) veterans of the Philippine Commonwealth Army, which was established by the Philippine Commonwealth government to assume responsibility for national defense after independence; (3) veterans of officially recognized anti-Japanese guerrilla units in the Philippines active during the Japanese Occupation; and (4) veterans of the New Philippine Scouts, which was recruited by the U.S. Army after October 1945 under a special provision restricting the veteran status of its members. Standing outside these four categories are a small number of Filipinos who were directly inducted into the U.S. Armed Forces.[7]

---

[3] Department of Veterans Affairs, "Census 200 Veteran Data," *Veteran Data and Informatio*, March 26, 2004. <http://www.va.gov/vetdata/Census2000/index.htm> (December 14, 2005).

[4] U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Facts about the Department of the Veterans Affairs," *VA News Release*, 29 January 2000. <http://www.va.gov/pressrel/FSVA2000.htm> (December 14, 2005).

[5] U.S. Congress, House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Human Resources, *Supplemental Security Income Fraud and Abuse*, 106th Congress, 1st sess., 3 February 1999, 44.

[6] U.S. Congress, House Committee on Veterans Affairs, *Hearings on Benefits for Filipino Veterans*, 105th Congress, 1st sess., 22 July 1998, 34.

[7] U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "VA Benefits for Filipino Veterans," *Fact Sheets, Program and Issue*,. 27 September 2005. <http://www1.va.gov/opa/fact/filipvet.html> (December 14, 2005).

The vast majority of "Filipino World War II veterans" were members of the Philippine Commonwealth Army and anti-Japanese guerrilla units, neither of which had been directly formed or recruited by the U.S. military. The Philippine Independence Act, however, required all the citizens of the Philippines to pledge allegiance to the United States until independence, and authorized the President of the United States to order the induction of Commonwealth Army troops into the U.S. Armed Forces if necessary at any time during the pre-independence period. Then in July 1941 President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the merger of the Commonwealth Army and U.S. Armed Forces stationed in the Philippines, thus forming the U.S. Army Forces in the Far East (hereafter USAFFE) under the command of General Douglas MacArthur. After the war broke out in December 1941, Filipino and American troops literally shared the same fate at Bataan, Corregidor, the "Death March," and so forth. Though USAFFE surrendered to the Japanese Army in May 1942, a considerable number of American and Filipino officers and enlisted men refused to surrender and continued fighting underground. Through 1943 many of these anti-Japanese guerrillas renewed or newly established liaisons with the U.S. Army Command of the Southwest Pacific Area and placed themselves under the command of Douglas MacArthur.

Both the U.S. and Philippine governments praised these anti-Japanese guerrilla forces as strategically indispensable. On 28 October 1944, Commonwealth President Sergio Osmeña issued Executive Order No. 21 inducting "recognized guerrilla units" into the Commonwealth Army. This Order was generally understood as inducting qualified guerrillas into the U.S. Army, since the Commonwealth Army was then a part of the U.S. Army, thus making them eligible to receive military salaries and full veterans benefits. Although there are no official statistics, the figure 200,000 has been often cited as a rough estimate of the total World War II Filipino veteran population that survived the War. Of that number, 12,000 belonged to the "old" Philippine Scouts, and 120,000 were "original" members of the Commonwealth Army. The remainder, or around 70,000, were members of authorized guerrilla groups and the New Philippine Scouts.[8)]

(2) Issues of Immigration Privilege

One important benefit for non-U.S. citizen veterans is a package of specific privileges enabling them to acquire permanent residency or even citizenship. In 1942 Congress amended the Nationality Act of 1940 to provide for the naturalization of non-citizens serving in the U.S. Armed Forces "during the present war." The law exempted some of the usual naturalization requirements and enabled those servicemen to be naturalized without appearing before a naturalization court in the United States, directing the Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (hereafter INS) to send authorized officers to overseas military posts to naturalize non-citizen servicemen on the spot. The deadline for applying for such privileges was later set at 31 December 1946.[9)]

[8)] U.S. Congress, House, *Hearings on Benefits for Filipino Veterans*, 26.

According to the official accounts, the law was at first interpreted by the U.S. Government as applicable to all the Filipino veterans, while the Philippine Government allegedly expressed its concern regarding the risk of mass emigration. The U.S. government itself most probably may have wanted to avoid the mass immigration of Filipinos. Thus the only applications from former members of the Philippine Scouts, who were considered to have been an integral part of the U.S. Armed Forces even before the war, were accepted while other applications were turned down in every possible way. Given least publicity, the information about the nationality act, was kept virtually unknown to the vast majority of the Filipino veterans at the time. Nevertheless as many as 4,000 Filipino veterans, or one-third of those eligible Philippine Scouts veterans, applied and were granted U.S. citizenship by the end of 1946, indicating that the fear of mass emigration certainly was not groundless.[10)]

During the mid-1960s Filipino World War II veterans began their legal struggles to recapture the immigration privileges once denied them. After quarter century of court cases giving one different decision after another to Filipino veterans naturalization suits, the Supreme Court concluded that a court by no means has "the power to confer citizenship in violation of the limitations imposed by Congress" in *INS v. Pangilinan*.[11)] The decision, however, euphemistically recommended Congress enact some remedial measures by stating that "the congressional command here could not be more manifest."[12)] Since the decision left the plaintiffs vulnerable to deportation, Congress responded quickly.[13)] With no congressmen or senators of Filipino ancestry, such members as Senator Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), Congressmen Tom Campbell (R-Cal.) and Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.) sponsored a bill to permit Filipino veterans special naturalization. House hearings were held in September 1989, at which the [Bush] administration made no argument against the bill,[14)] and the item was then incorporated into the INA 1990, which became law in November of that year.

It should be noted that the congressional advocates of a special naturalization bill thought it is "unlikely that many of these veterans will choose to move to America in the twilight of their lives."[15)] They also tried to separate a naturalization bill from veterans benefits equity issues, arguing that naturalization will not "make them eligible for federal benefits which they do not receive."[16)] The INA 1990 also stipulated that the law "shall not be construed as affecting the rights, privileges, or benefits of" Filipino veterans coming to the United

---

9) Ch. 199, 56 Stat. 182.

10) Nakano, 37–39.

11) 486 US 875 (1988).

12) Diane E. Murphy, "Courts Lack Authority to Grant Citizenship to Filipino War Vetarans," *Suffolk Transnational Law Journal* 13 (1988): 841–854.

13) Marie C. Blanco (Legislative Assistant for U.S. Senator Daniel K. Inouye), Interview by the author, the Hart Office Bldg., Washington, D.C., 12 January 2001.

14) U.S. Congress, House Committee on the Judiciary, *Hearings on Immigration Benefits Based on U.S. Military Service*, 101st Congress, 1st sess., 21 September 1989, 46.

15) Ibid, 44.

16) Ibid, 43.

States.[17]

What really happened, however, was an influx of elderly veteran immigrants far beyond anyone's expectations. The fever generated the bill was remarkable indeed. By 1998, over twenty-eight thousand out of the surviving seventy thousand Filipino veterans eligible for immigration privileges had been naturalized, and some seventeen thousand veterans actually came to live in the United States.[18] Once they began pouring into the United States, the focus of the issue quickly turned to the misery of veteran immigrants and discrimination they suffered, especially with respect to the veterans benefits.

(3) Veterans Benefits Issues and postwar Philippine-U.S. Relations

Origins of discriminative status regarding financial benefits for Filipino veterans also date back to the end of World War II. In September 1945, the then Federal Bureau of Veterans Affairs officially stated that Filipino veterans were eligible for U.S. veterans benefits.[19] However, in February 1946, Congress declared services in the Philippine Commonwealth Army or authorized guerrilla units "*were not to be considered as active military service for the purposes of veterans benefits* (italic added)" in a section of the Supplementary Appropriation Rescission Act of 1946, whose basic provisions still stand after several minor amendments.[20]

Since the law distinguish veterans not by nationality but by individual military service records, Filipino veterans of the Commonwealth Army and guerrilla units will never be eligible for full benefits, even if they change their nationality and become U.S. citizens. Service-connected survivor's pensions and disability pensions have been treated differently because premiums had already been deducted from their paycheck. U.S. Congress, however, enacted that even these pensions should be paid but only at half their value; that is, as if one dollar were equivalent to one Philippine peso, instead of two, which actually were equivalent to one dollar until 1962. The reduced rate of benefits was justified as they were "based on the different economic conditions in the Philippines and the United States."[21]

For decades veterans benefits equity had been exclusively the concern of Filipino veterans in the Philippines, who were demanding a repeal of the Rescission Act. There was also a strong resentment among the Philippine public opinion to the insulting language of the Rescission Act, not considering the anti-Japanese guerilla struggle as *active military service*. The U.S. government was also concerned that the issue may jeopardize postcolonial Philippines-U.S. relations. President Harry S. Truman stated on the occasion of signing the Rescission Act "they fought with gallantry and courage under the most difficult conditions" and "I consider it a moral obligation of the United States to look after the welfare of the Filipino

---

[17] Section 405, PL 101–649.

[18] U.S. Congress, House, *Hearings on Benefits for the Filipino Veterans*, 192.

[19] U.S. High Commissioner to the Philippine Islands, *Annual Report of the U.S. High Commissioner to the Philippine Islands* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1947), 65.

[20] 38 USC 107.

[21] U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "VA Benefits for Filipino Veterans."

Army veterans," and promise that the matter would be deliberated by the two governments.[22]

While the bilateral government talks soon started and several remedial measures were enacted by the U.S. Congress, the issue was to drag on for decades. In 1948, Congress approved the construction of a veterans hospital in Manila;[23] funeral benefits and burial flags were provided for in 1951.[24] Meanwhile the Philippine government and Congress decided to provide their own veterans benefits at reduced rates under the Philippines GI Act.[25] The Philippine government, however, soon fell into chronic fiscal trouble and repeatedly asked for financial assistance, which would be for decades a source of frustration for the U.S. government.[26] In 1962, further economic crisis and inflation made it impossible for the Philippines to maintain its exchange rate, as the peso was devaluated from 2 to 3.9 pesos to the U.S. dollar. This resulted in a sharp decrease in survivor and disability pensions, which were still being paid at the reduced rate of one peso to the U.S. dollar. Then the Philippine government asked that the calculation basis be changed from one-peso-to-the-dollar to fifty-cents-to-the-dollar. The U.S. government met President Marcos' demand in 1966, out of a desperate desire for "more flags" to join and support the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam.[27]

Throughout these years of bilateral talks and congressional actions, the consensus between the two governments about unfairness of the Rescission Act gradually faded, and the U.S. government came to consider the issue as just one more item of the Philippine government's endless demands for financial assistance. It should also be noted that series of remedial measures repeatedly taken by the U.S. Congress over decades made it difficult to solve the issue by a simple repeal of the Rescission Act. On the Philippines side, however, veterans organizations continued to seek not only remedies but repeal and the government has successively assigned residential commissioners on veterans affairs to the Philippine embassy in Washington, D.C., keeping the veterans benefits issue a regular item in bilateral talks.[28]

In the United States, the contradiction between the Rescission Act and immigration privileges had long been invisible since the INS in the early postwar years accepted only such applicants as former members of the Philippine Scouts, who were eligible for full veterans benefits. During the 1990s, however, focus of the issue suddenly turned to the status of newly naturalized Filipino American veterans in the United States, to which veterans organizations in

---

[22] U.S. High Commissioner, 65–69.

[23] 62 Stat. 1210.

[24] 65 Stat. 32–33.

[25] 78 Phil. Code §1–15.

[26] Milton Walter Meyer, *A Diplomatic History of the Philippine Republic* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1965), 18–20, 43–44, 100–101.

[27] Robert M. Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags": The Hiring of Korean, Filipino, and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1994), 83–88.

[28] Lt. Gen. Raul S. Urgello (Special Presidential Representative/ Head, Office of Veterans Affairs), Interview by the author, Embassy of the Philippines, Washington, D.C., 10 January 2001.

the Philippines show mixed reactions. They welcomed the issue as gaining unprecedented publicity in the U.S. Congress, though they suspected and feared that the whole issue would end up saving only naturalized veterans, not those who remain the Philippine citizens.[29] The following discussion will prove they were right.

2. Filipino American Community Encounters the Issue

According to the U.S. Bureau of Census, population of the Filipinos[30] in the United States reached 1,850,314 in 2000, ranking as the second largest Asian population group in the United States next to Chinese descendents (2,432,585),[31] and continues to increase rapidly. Among countries of origin for lawfully admitted immigrants to the United States during 1998 to 2001, the Philippines ranks fourth, accounting for 160,000 entries, standing along with the two most populous countries in the world, India (180,000) and China (170,000), next to Mexico (660,000), a border country of 97 million people.[32] Despite being such a sizable ethnic group in the United States, Filipino Americans have long been said to lag far behind Japanese and Chinese Americans in terms of their presence in the U.S. public sphere, being often labeled as "an invisible minority." Many Filipino community activists think that such "invisibility" is a problem that needs to be overcome, and thus show keen interest in political, economic and cultural "empowerment."[33] It was under such circumstances Filipino Americans encountered an issue virtually unknown to the American public, even in their own communities.

---

[29] Francisco T. San Miguel (Secretary General, Veterans Federation of the Philippines) and Maria Esperanza H. De Ocampo (President, Sons and Daughters of Hunters-ROTC, Inc.), Interview by the author, Veterans Federation of the Philippines National Headquarters, Manila, 12 February 2001; Atty. Rafael R. Estrada (President, Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor, Inc.), Interview by the author, Camp Aguinaldo, Quezon City, 12 February 2001.

[30] In this paper, the term "Filipino" refers to those who regard the Philippines as their homeland or themselves as of Filipino ancestry. When it is necessary to draw a further distinction, such terms as "native-born Filipino Americans" for Filipino Americans of the second generation and after, "naturalized Filipino Americans" for immigrants with U.S. citizenship, "non-naturalized Filipinos" without such, and the" 1.5 generation" for those who immigrated in their childhood by the age 12, will be used. The term "Filipino American community" will be used as a generic name referring to Filipinos as composing an ethnic group in U.S. society, regardless of citizenship. On the usage of the term "1.5 generation," see Ruben G. Rumbaut and K. Ima, *The Adaptation of Southeast Asian Refugee Youth: A Comparative Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1988).

[31] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Profiles of General Demographic Characteristics 2000* (May 2001), 1. <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/dp1/2kh00.pdf>(December 14, 2005).

[32] U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Annual Report: Legal Immigration, Fiscal Year 2001* (August 2002), 6. <http://uscis.gov/graphics/shared/aboutus/statistics/IMM2001.pdf> (December 14, 2005).

[33] William Branigin, 18 October 1998. "A Face for an 'Invisible Minority'; Filipino Americans, Nation's Largest Asian Group, Seek to Flex Their Political Muscle," *Washington Post*, A06. Database online. Available from ProQuest.

(1) The "Captive Veterans" Affair: 1993

There were many Filipino veterans with neither enough legal knowledge nor savings to come and stay in the United States and they were easily to be exploited by the crooks or fraudulent immigration consultants. It's just good business, even if the veterans have no prospect for gainful employment after settling in the United States, since the crooks can lend them money at high interest rates, mortgaged by their SSI checks, which are payable to the bearer on demand.

In December 1993, the ordeal of Filipino veterans gained the first media attention by a shocking story of "captive veterans" carried by the *San Francisco Examiner*, which reported that seventeen Filipino World War II veterans had been placed in *de facto* captivity by one Castalino Dazo, who called himself a Filipino American immigration and naturalization consultant working out of Richmond, California.[34] Dazo allegedly locked up the old men in three houses, including his own residence, in order to secure their SSI checks and held them in virtual slavery as house servants by chaining and beating them, feeding them dog food, and otherwise abusing them as the occasion demanded. The news article was written by the *Examiner* staff writer Steven A. Chin, who later won a top national award from the Asian American Journalists Association for his coverage on the story,[35] but it was Rick Rocamora, a naturalized Filipino American freelance photographer, who first investigated the affair and then approached his friend Steven Chin to carry the story.

According to Rocamora's account, he went to the San Francisco Marriott in September 1993 to cover the naturalization ceremony held there and found several veterans carrying flyers distributed by Dazo, whose name he had already known as a notorious immigration consultant. Then he traced the flyers and found the "captive veterans" in Richmond.[36] Thanks to the article, during the following month Rocamora successfully organized a rescue mission joined by Filipino American volunteers, including Lourdes Tancinco, herself a naturalized Filipino American and immigration lawyer, and Contra Costa County local authorities.[37] With the help of Tancinco, the rescued veterans filed suit against Dazo and in February 1995 the ten of them were granted damages amounting to 237,000 U.S. dollars.[38]

Following this the *San Francisco Chronicle, Los Angeles Times* and other major Pacific

---

[34] Steven A. Chin, 19 December 1993. "Like Prisoners and Slaves: Filipino vets' tales of captivity," *San Francisco Examiner*, B01.

[35] 31 July 1994. "National Asian Group honors Examiner reporter," *San Francisco Chronicle*, C04. Database online. Available from LexisNexis.

[36] Rick Rocamora (Freelance Photojournalist). Interview with the author, San Francisco, 3 January 2001.

[37] Steven A. Chin, 21 January 1994. "Filipino veterans freed; Rescue effort in Richmond," *San Francisco Examiner*, A1.

[38] 17 February 1995. "Jury Awards $ 237,700 To Abused Veterans," *San Francisco Chronicle*, D04. Database online. Available from LexisNexis.

[39] Benjamin Pimentel, 16 March 1994. "Vets Face Troubled Lives in U.S.," *San Francisco Chronicle*, A19. Database online. Available from LexisNexis; John Hurst, 2 January 1995. "Filipino Vets' Dream Fades in L.A. Slums," *Los Angeles Times*, B01. Database online. Available from ProQuest.

Coast newspapers began reporting the sufferings of elderly, poverty-stricken Filipino veterans throughout the region,[39] while local Filipino American community activists who had become aware of the problem began organizing community support to help these senior citizens, while launching "equity" campaigns for the recognition of Filipino World War II veterans as eligible for the full range of U.S. veterans' benefits.

(2) San Francisco Veterans Equity Center

The most successful community support and equity movement at the local level has so far been organized by the San Francisco Veterans Equity Center (hereafter SFVEC), which was inaugurated in November 1999 with the financial help of San Francisco city government to provide "culturally and linguistically appropriate services" to meet the urgent needs of Filipino veterans. The Center offers such services as a free legal clinic, health education, educational forum, the "Mano Po Lolo Program (an inter-generational program for students and Filipino veterans to participate in recreational activities and field trips)," and other programs to meet the everyday needs of the Filipino veterans living in San Francisco and other cities in the Bay Area.[40]

The board of SFVEC includes Lourdes Tancinco as its president and Rick Rocamora as one of its directors, both of whom have become respected local Filipino figures since their involvement in the "captive veterans" affair. Herself a Filipino immigrant to the United States, Tancinco began practicing immigration law the same year that the "captive veterans" affair occurred. She runs an immigration law office with her husband near the Powell Street BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) Station, where many Filipino veterans around the Bay Area gather on their way to the nearby Social Security Administration office and Filipino grocery stores. On the walls of the Tancinco's office hang several of Rick Rocamora's highly acclaimed photographs from his *Second Class Veterans*, portraying the lives Filipino veteran immigrants and recording the rescue mission of 1993.[41]

Rick Rocamora came to the United States immediately after graduation from U.P., only a few months before Marcos declared martial law in 1972. Then "[a]fter 18 years of corporate work in sales and management, he quit his job in 1990 to pursue a new career in photography." He is now one of the most acknowledged documentary photographers in the Bay Area. As a firm social justice advocate, he has produced and been commissioned to produce such works as *It is about Time*, documenting Japanese American survivors of wartime internment camps, *Freedom and Fear: Bay Area Muslims After Sept. 11* and *Caged: Manila's Invisible Children*,

---

[40] San Francisco Veterans Equity Center, *Boucher*, 2001; Louisa Antonio (Executive Director, SFVEC), Interview by the author, SFVEC, San Francisco, 3 January 2001.

[41] Atty. Lourdes Santos Tancinco (Immigration lawyer), Interview by the author, the Tancinco Law Offices, San Francisco, 5 January 2001.

[42] Rocamora, Interview; Rick Rocamora, "About Rick Rocamora," *YO! Photography Workshop* (December 15, 2005). <http://www.pacificnews.org/yo/photo/rick.html>

which documents street children who have been incarcerated in jails, youth "rehabilitation" centers, and mental hospitals in Manila.[42)]

(3) Naturalized Filipino Americans and the Issue

Rocamora and Tancinco are the kind of naturalized, highly educated Filipino Americans who have so far taken the lead in the movement for Filipino veterans' rights. At the time of my visit to SFVEC in January 2001, the office was being run by such naturalized Filipino Americans as Louisa Antonio. These people are indispensable, since veteran immigrants seek the help of well-intentioned, friendly people capable of communicating with them in their vernacular languages, on the one hand, while negotiating effectively with American society on their behalf regarding complicated matters dealing with the paperwork in order to receive SSI payments and health care or to sponsor their family for immigration if they are eligible.

The predominance of naturalized Filipino Americans, however, is a significant feature found not only in the movement, but also among the whole Filipino population in the United States both in numbers as well as social and political influence. According to *Census 2000*, the two-thirds (122 million) of the Filipinos in the United States are "foreign-born,"[43)] and are highly varied in the time and age of immigration and nationality. Among them, the "first wave" prewar immigrants are generally referred to as the "manong" generation, whose significance in the community's history will be discussed later. Then there are not so numerous "second wave" immigrants of the early post World War II years, followed by the long line of "third wave" immigrants, amounting to thirty to forty thousand annually since the 1970s and thus

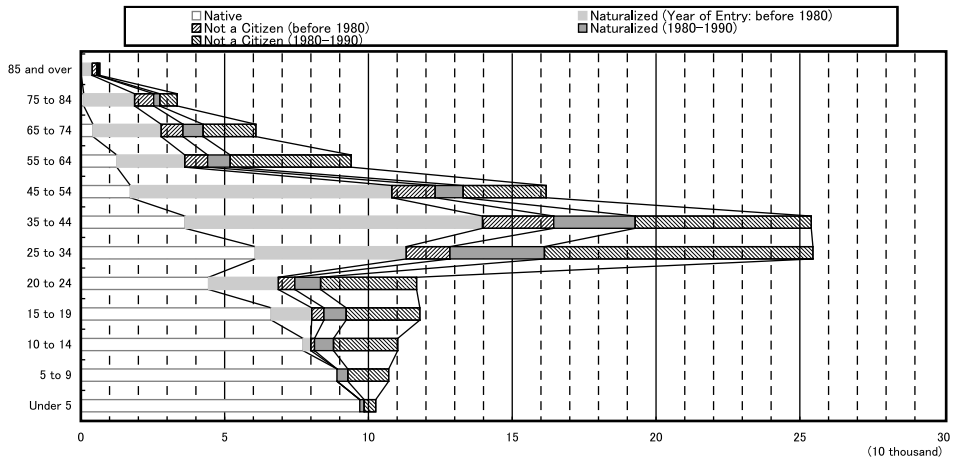

Figure 1 Filipino Population in the United States in 1990
Source: USBC 1993, 10–11.

43) U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Profile of Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2000*, December 2001, 12. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p23-206.pdf> (December 15, 2005).

occupying the vast majority of the "foreign-born" Filipino population. Census 1990 shows a conspicuously high percentage of naturalized Filipino Americans having immigrated before 1980 among the age groups between ages 35 to 54 (See Figure 1). Though the number of "native-born (U.S. born)" Filipinos is naturally increasing among these age groups, they will hardly gain numerical predominance in the near future, due to the high rate of new immigrants from the Philippines whose average age has continued to be the early thirties.[44]

Detailed statistical tables based on *Census 1990* shows that the median household annual income of the "foreign-born" Filipinos in 1989 was $45,289 and their percentage "below poverty level" was 4.6%, while the median income of the "native-born" Filipinos was 37,943 dollars and their poverty rate 8.3%. The median income of the naturalized Filipino Americans who immigrated before 1980 was 49,571 dollars and their poverty rate only 3.1%, figures nearly equal to Japanese Americans, one of the wealthiest ethnic minorities in the United States.[45] As to the level of education, only 17.1% of "native-born" Filipino Americans over 25 years old held bachelor's degrees, while 34.3% of the "foreign-born" population did. Among the 4,012 Filipino doctoral degree holders in the United States, 88% of them were "foreign-born."[46] Among Filipinos teaching at universities in the United States in 1998, 92 of the 108 respondents to an inquiry were born in the Philippines.[47] Though the "native-born" population includes pre-adult population whose income and educational attainments naturally tend to be statistically lower than the older "foreign-born" members, these figures indicate a definite predominance of naturalized immigrant Filipinos over the native-born in numbers, income and educational background, thus demanding that they take the lead in community affairs.

(4) Veterans as the Second "Manongs"

Another interesting aspect found in the way the Filipino American community encountered the issue is that the veteran immigrants came to play sort of similar role to that of the first generation "manongs" in the community movement during the 1970s. The "manongs" were predominantly single male immigrant laborers who came to the United States during the 1920s to 1930s, struggling to survive during a time of heavy racial discrimination and the Great Depression. This generation has its best narrator in Carlos Bulosan (1911–56), the author of *America is in the Heart* (1946), a widely recognized classic in Asian American literature, which vividly portrays the miserable ordeal of a Filipino boy in the United States.[48] Another "manong" was Philip Vera Cruz (1904–94), an exceptional labor leader who organized

---

[44] Commission on Filipinos Overseas, "Number of Registered Filipino Emigrants by Age: 1981–2003," Statistics. N.d. <http://www.cfo.gov.ph/emigrants_age.htm> (December 15, 2005).

[45] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of the Population: Asian and Pacific Islanders in the United States (1990 Census CP-3-5)*, 10 August 1993, 150–151. <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen1990/cp3/cp-3-5.pdf> (December 15, 2005).

[46] Ibid, 80–81.

[47] Alfred A. Yuson, *Fil-Am; The Filipino American Experience* (Makati City: Publico, 1999), 112–114.

[48] Carlos Bulosan, *America is in the Heart* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973; c1946).

the United Farm Workers (hereafter UFW) with Cesar Chavez, the legendary Mexican American labor leader.

The reprint of *America is in the Heart* by the University of Washington Press in 1973 marked the rediscovery of "manongs" by an emerging Filipino American community movement groping for symbols that could be widely shared among its ranks. That was when it found the "manongs," old men then mostly over seventy, still working as California's farm workers, whose social security and health care rightfully became an urgent community issue. Organizing volunteer labor to construct the "Paolo Agbayani Retirement Village" for the aged Filipino members of the UFW in Delano, California became a milestone of the whole Filipino American movement history.[49] The service and care for "manongs" was looked upon as precious opportunities for young Filipino Americans to strengthen their "Pinoy" consciousness by listening to "manongs" life stories as well as by learning to show "respect for elders" as a traditional Filipino virtue. An oral history of Philip Vera Cruz, which was dictated by those student volunteers who encountered him during the "Agbayani Village" project, has been regarded as another important narrative of "manong" experiences along with Bulosan's since its publication in 1992.[50]

The majority of Filipino veteran immigrants of the 1990s were in their high teens to early twenties at the time the Pacific War broke out, or a decade or two younger than the "manongs" whose wave of immigration was blocked by the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934. This made the veteran immigrants appear before the Filipino American community exactly when the "manongs" were departing away with a close resemblance to the "manongs" in such misery as revealed by the "captive veterans" affair. Besides being poverty-stricken elders, the veteran immigrants and "manongs" share the image of "living past" for the Filipino American community with their way of life, cultural traits, and vernaculars, which qualify them as a symbol of an ethnic community, imagined as a group of people having a common past and homeland. In this way the veteran immigrants draw enormously sympathetic reactions from the whole Filipino American community as "second manongs."

(5) Veterans as the Same Immigrants

One more source of compassion for the veterans is the fact of their being immigrants who lived postwar Philippine society, the similar experience of the dominant group within the Filipino American community.

Filipino Americans have generally been regarded as one of the most fully assimilated

---

[49] Jesse Quinsaat, ed., *Letters in Exile: An Introductory Reader on the History of Pilipinos in America* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1976), 122–145.

[50] Craig Scharlin and Lilia V. Villanueva, *Philip Vera Cruz: A Personal History of Filipino Immigrants and the Farmworkers Movement* (Los Angeles: UCLA Labor Center & UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1992).

[51] Robert M. Jiobu, *Ethnicity and Assmilation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 105.

ethnic groups in the United States,[51] as shown by their 61% ratio of naturalization, which is far beyond the national average (41%) and one of the highest among the major ethnic groups in Census 2000.[52] The high ratio of naturalization, however, should also be considered in the light of incentives for immigrants to place themselves in more advantageous positions to sponsor their families for immigration to the United States. In other words, their assimilation through naturalization is inseparably related to their transnational way of life, like the head and tail of a coin.

Naturalized Filipinos therefore know that the veterans came to the United States exactly for the same reasons as they themselves did. Although the veterans interviewed (most probably in English) at their naturalization ceremonies spoke in unison about their joy of realizing their dreams to become American citizens,[53] it is hard to believe their stories at face value. A few years later, one Filipino American journalist capable of conducting interviews in Tagalog successfully captured the voices of veteran immigrants enduring poverty and other difficulties of everyday life in the hope of sponsoring their families or reducing their living expenses to send a part of their SSI allotments home.[54] Though the means of entering the United States may have been very different between the poor veteran immigrants and the more successful naturalized Filipino Americans, they share the same end, i.e., finding a way out of the miserable life that they and their families and relatives were living in the Philippines. It therefore may be said that the community movement for the veterans has an aspect of mutual aid between the rich and the poor among contemporaries or fellow countrymen who have found themselves in the same boat.

3. U.S. Congress and the Issue: 1997–2004

It is, however, their being not the Filipinos but the American veterans that could gain sympathy from the general public. In other words, only "Americanization" of the issue could make the movement a rare success in Filipino Americans community movement. Ironically enough, here rests the seeds of division within the community over strategies while the movement was about to gain grounds.

(1) White House Demonstration: 1997

The way they successfully "Americanized" the issue was symbolically represented by a demonstration staged in front of the White House on July 12, 1997. Before loud applause and cheers, elderly Filipinos in veteran's uniforms and caps marched in parade shouting such slogans as "WE ARE AMERICAN CITIZENS!" "WE WANT JUSTICE!" "EQUITY NOW!"

---

[52] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *We the People: Asians in the Untied States*, December 2004, 9. <www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/censr-17.pdf> (December 15, 2005).

[53] Andrea Ford, February 7, 1992. "Promised Kept - 50 Years Later Immigrants," *Los Angeles Times*, B01.Database online. Available from ProQuest.

[54] Benjamin Pimentel, December 14, 1997. "DREAMING OF HOME," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Z01. Database online. Available from ProQuest.

Then a dozen of them chained themselves to the iron fences in front of the White House Garden, being joined by young Filipino American activists as well as Congressman Bob Filner (D-Cal.). All of them were soon gently arrested by the police. The sensational nature of the scene and the fact that a Congressman was arrested made the demonstration a must for major TV network news programs that evening.[55]

This well planned event was organized by the American Coalition for Filipino Veterans (hereafter ACFV), a non profit organization based in Washington, D.C., which has so far been very successful in gaining concrete results from the Congress and the administration. The president was Patric Ganio, a World War II veteran of Bataan and the Death March, while Eric Lachica, a naturalized Filipino American who immigrated at the age of high school years as well as a son of the World War II veteran, is practically running the organization as the executive director. Being a characteristically pragmatic single-issue lobbyist, Lachica has taken "step-by-step" strategy aiming at improving conditions of the veterans' lives by series of remedial measures acted by the Congress or administrative considerations in veterans' favor, using his wide bi-partisan personal connections with Congress, administration, and media.[56]

As shown in the above event, ACFV's publicity strategy is to demonstrate that the claimants for benefit equity are more than anything else U.S. citizens and the question is a civil rights matter, in which the essential equality of citizens in the U.S. society became the focus. In this regard Congressman Filner's involvement is symbolic, since he is a known civil rights advocate who once joined the Freedom Rides movement of 1961 and was jailed in a southern state prison. He was elected from a Congressional District of Chula Vista, California, covering the southern border with Mexico as well as U.S. Pacific Fleet Base in National City. The district's population is divided into Latinos, Africans, Asians, and Whites, and Filipino Americans account for as much as 15%, the largest percentage in any continental states congressional districts and second only to Hawaii's. Filner found out about the issue during his door-to-door election campaign. Upon election, he chose to join the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, out of consideration for large veteran population residing in the San Diego area in hope of expanding support for him among more moderate or even conservative voters in the district. It is no wonder the issue was an ideal item for Filner's agenda, since it is not only an important local issue but it could also be a national issue through which he can demonstrate his image as a civil rights advocate as well as a patriotic American working for the veterans who fought in the past "good war."[57]

---

[55] American Coalition for the Filipino Veterans, Filipino American Veterans in Action, 1941–99 [video], 1999.

[56] Eric Lachica (Executive Director, ACFV), Interview by the author, Washington, D.C., 12 August 1999.

[57] Sharon Schultze (Senior Administrative & Legislative Assistant for Congressman Bob Filner), Interview by the author, the Rayburn Building, Washington, D.C., 13 August 1999; Rita M. Gerona-Adkins, "The Passion of Bob Filner," *Filipinas*, November 2003, 1–3.

(2) Equity Bills in the U.S. Congress

As Filipino veterans equity issue gained considerable publicity, so called "equity bills," proposing repeal of the Rescission Act of 1946, were repeatedly introduced and increasingly received endorsement. The number of co-sponsors in the House reached 209 during the 105th Congress (H.R. 386, 1997–1998) and series of congressional hearings were held.[58] In 2000 the Democratic Party platform declared their support for "efforts of the Filipino American Veterans who fought in World War II to obtain equity."[59] The number of Republican endorsers in Congress was also increasing, while all of the major national veterans organizations, such as the American Legion and Veterans of the Foreign Wars, had already endorsed the bill.

Proposed repeal, however, has not been passed by the Congress to this date. While it is always difficult to get any bills passed if they would bring any increase in government spending, the obstacles the equity campaign encountered are something inherent in the very nature of the issue. First of all, there has been consistent opposition voiced by those senior members of Congress who have been familiar with the long history of Philippines-U.S. bilateral talks on this issue, arguing that the U.S. Congress has had already given more than enough benefits to all of the Filipino veterans through series of congressional actions. One of them was late Congressman Bob Stump (R-Ariz. 1927–2003), who chaired the House Veterans Affairs Committee from 1995 to 2001. It is generally very difficult to send a bill to a plenary session of the Congress overriding opposition of the committee chairperson.

Another obstacle resides in the very fact that the equity campaign has gained support especially via the "Americanization" of the issue by focusing on the miseries of the *Filipino American* veterans who are not eligible for the bulk of U.S. veterans benefits even though they are U.S. citizens. Seen in this light, a simple repeal of the Rescission Act would be "too much" because it would allow equal benefits to all the Filipino veterans of World War II regardless of their current nationalities, a majority of whom remain the citizens of the Philippines after all. A partial repeal of the Rescission Act, which would allow full benefits only to the naturalized veterans, would equally be impractical because it would conflict the basic principle of U.S. veterans benefits system, which judge his/her eligibility for the benefits solely by their military service records, not by their nationalities.

Thirdly, though the issue is basically about the entitlement of the Filipino World War II veterans for the benefits in light of their service records, some members of the Congress seemed equally or even more interested in a question of the essential motivation of the Filipino veterans' fight against the Japanese during World War II. At the House hearings, Bob Stump argued that "while Filipino forces fought bravely and certainly aided the U.S. in the war effort, in the end they fought for their own and soon to be independent Philippine nation," while Bob

---

[58] U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Veterans Affairsl, *Hearings on Pending Legislation Before the Committee*, 105th Congress, 1st sess., 25 July 1997; U.S. Congress, House. *Hearings on Benefits for Filipino Veterans*.

[59] Democratic Party, *The 2000 National Democratic Party Platform*, 15 August 2000, 42. <www.democrats.org/pdfs/2000platform.pdf> (December 15, 2005).

Filner and other advocates of the equity bill countered Stump's argument by emphasizing that the Filipino veterans defended the Philippines as a U.S. territory, which means they defended the United States for the sake of the United States.[60]

In this way, the more the U.S. Congress became interested in the issue, the more difficult it became for the congressional advocates to maintain their previous position demanding a simple repeal of the Rescission Act, since the vast majority of Congress saw the issue as a matter of civil equality among U.S. citizens. Given the fact that nearly five veterans die everyday in the United States,[61] more of the naturalized veterans groups and their advocates in Congress leaned toward compromise whenever any substantial relief measures could be hammered out.

(3) The SSI Extension Act and After: Schism in the Face of Success

Once it became certain that the Filipino Veterans Equity Bill would die by the end of the 105th Congress from failure to override Stump's opposition, the SSI Extension Act (H.R. 4716) was introduced during the last days of the session in October 1998, and was then re-introduced in the newly elected 106th Congress early the next year. The bill proposed to allow Filipino American World War II veterans currently receiving SSI to continue to receive those payments in the Philippines after certain reductions. The Act was then incorporated into the Foster Care Independence Act (H.R.1802) and substantially discussed in the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the House Committee on Ways and Means. At House hearings held in February 1999, Eric Lachica argued that the Act would provide humanitarian relief for an estimated 7,000 elderly Filipino American veterans "who are poor, lonely, and isolated in the United States, and are financially unable to petition their families to immigrate to the United States, and therefore, want to rejoin them in the Philippines." He also put emphasis on the effects of reducing the current SSI payment for those veterans, saying "it would save the American taxpayers millions of dollars annually in SSI, Medicaid, and food stamp payments."[62] The Act was welcomed as "a very rare opportunity" for Congress and the Administration "to do the right things and save money at the same time."[63]

With the strong endorsement of the Subcommittee Chairperson Nancy L. Johnson (R-Conn.), the bill was presented on the floor of the House and passed on June 25, 1999 by an overwhelming majority (380 to 6), which included Congressman Stump.[64] The bill was then referred to the Senate, and on November 19, 1999 the final form of the Foster Care

---

[60] U.S. Congress, House, *Hearings on Benefits for Filipino Veterans*, 3, 37, 55.

[61] Lisa Charlie Ritts, "Time is Running Out: 70,000 Filipino Americans Fought alongside American Soldiers during W.W.II. Approximately Five Filipino Veterans Die Each Day - around 1,500 a Year," *International Examiner* 25, no. 11 (June 17, 1998): 10. Database online. Available from Ethnic News Watch.

[62] U.S. Congress. House. Subcommittee on Human Resources, 40.

[63] Ibid, 48.

[64] U.S. Congressional Record, June 25, 1999, H4987.

[65] American Coalition for the Filipino Veterans, "Immediate Press Release," 17 December 1999.

Independence Act (H.R.3443) passed both Houses, and was signed into law (PL 106–169) by President Clinton on December 14 at the White House, in a ceremony proudly attended by Filipino American veterans.[65]

On May 1, 2000, the first payment pursuant to Title VIII of the Foster Care Independence Act, "Special Benefits for Certain World War II Veterans," was made to naturalized Filipino American veterans who had returned from the United States. As of January 2003, 2,781 of them took advantage of SSI payments in the Philippines, while over 12,000 veterans continue to stay on in the United States[66] (See Table 1 for more detailed estimates for Filipino veterans population as of September 2000). The reduction in the SSI payment was at 25%, resulting in a monthly sum of $380 per month, which is certainly "a dignified income in Manila" today.[67] Shortly after the first "special benefit" payment was made, the California Veterans Benefit Bill, a California state counterpart to the federal SSI Extension bill, passed the California State Assembly and was signed into state law in July 2000. It allows eligible Filipino naturalized veterans who live in California to collect benefits under the State Supplementary Program even if they live in the Philippines. The average benefit received is $215 a month.[68] These laws do not encourage but allow the naturalized veterans to go back and forth between the two countries and receive either SSI or Special Benefits payments depending which country they live. Social Security Administration issued a booklet explaining how to receive all the

Table 1: Filipino Veteran Population - September 2000 Estimates

In United States		
	Receiving VA Compensation	950
	Not Receiving VA Compensation	12899
	Total in United States	13849
In the Philippines (or outside the U.S.)		
	Receiving VA Compensation	4222
	Not Receiving VA Compensation	41828
	Total in the Philippines (or outside the U.S.)	46050
Total		
	Receiving VA Compensation	5172
	Not Receiving VA Compensation	54727
	Total	59899

Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "A Study of Services and Benefits for the Filipino Veterans," 27 July 2000, 7.

[66] Reply to the author's inquiry from the Office of U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in Manila, 17 January 2003.

[67] American Coalition for the Filipino Veterans, "Immediate Press Release," 5 May 2000.

[68] "California votes benefits for vets," *Filipino Reporter*, August 17, 2000, 4. Database online. Available from Ethnic News Watch.

[69] Social Security Administration, *Special Benefits for World War II Veterans* (SSA Publication No. 05-10158, October 2005). Electronic booklet available at <http://www.ssa.gov/pubs/10158.html> (December 16, 2005).

payments these traveling veterans are entitled to receive.[69]

The SSI Extension Act was indeed a turning point for the whole equity movement. Having been successful in securing an important legislative measure for the Filipino naturalized veterans, ACFV and the advocates of its "step by step" legislative strategy are confidently going forward with their realistic approach to improve the lives of those naturalized Filipino veterans and their family.[70] So far they have been very successful. One of their major achievements is the Health Care Improvement Act, first introduced in 2001 by Sen. Daniel Inouye and signed into law by President George W. Bush in December 2003 as PL108–170, which granted the full-fledged eligibility for the Health Care Benefits to those Filipino veterans who are naturalized U.S. citizens or lawfully admitted permanent residents.[71] Other achievements include the application of the "full-dollar" rate instead of 50 cents for each dollar to such benefits as service connected disabilities compensation, burial benefits, and Dependency and Indemnity compensation for the survivors of the veterans killed during military service, all of which are exclusively for the naturalized or permanent resident veterans and their survivors.[72]

ACFV's "step-by-step" approach, however, has become the subject of criticism among not a few of local community activists because of its "success." A major critic is SFVEC, which was organized almost at the same time as the SSI Extension Act passed Congress in November 1999. SFVEC attitudes towards the equity movement adhere more to the basic principle of "full veterans benefits for all the Filipino veterans." Quite naturally they expressed strong opposition to the SSI Extension Act, which for all intents and purposes would encourage the veterans served by SFVEC to leave San Francisco for their homeland. As local community activists, they tend to prefer a more straightforward agenda to ACFV's "piecemeal approach" with a tint of professional lobbyism, even if such a position raises a hurdle for them.

In this context SFVEC, which formed National Network for Veterans Equity (hereafter NNVE), has firmly advocated a repetition of the original equity bill, in other words, a simple repeal of the Rescission Act of 1946, arguing "[t]he Filipino veterans are not begging for a piece of pie. The Filipino veterans are seeking justice!"[73] Though Tancinco withdrew criticism on the Health Care bill and endorsed the bill before the House hearings in 2002, she did not fail to state "the Filipino veterans deserve more" and "we will be back here testifying on the full equity for the Filipino veterans."[74] Before the same House hearings, ACFV president Patric

---

[70] Eric Lachica, Interview by the author, Washington, D.C., 10 January 2001.

[71] 38CFR17.39; 38USC501.1734.

[72] U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "VA Benefits for Filipino Veterans."

[73] Lourdes Tancinco, "[filvetsequity-I] Atty. Tancinco's Analysis of the Veterans Bills in the 107th Congress," filvetsequity-I@yahoogroups.com, 14 July 2001.

[74] U.S. Congress, House Hearings before the Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Veterans Affairs, *Health Care of Filipino World War II Veterans within the Department of Veterans Affairs*, 107th Congress, 2nd sess., 13 June 2002, 32–34.

[75] Ibid, 31–32.

Ganio concentrated his arguments on the health care bill with an emotional speech as one of the World War II veterans humbly asking "what we deserve in light of due justice which this great country stands for."[75]

Barbara Gaerlan discusses that serious political infighting involving the anti-Marcos movement casts quite a shadow on the Filipino community movement today, going as far as to hamper internal unity.[76] Though neither ACFV nor SFVEC makes any connection of past experiences to the present division of opinion over the veterans issue, it is possible that the equity movement is indeed being affected by political affiliations during the past struggles. Whatever the cause may be, discord between ACFV and NNVE (SFVEC), two of the most successful organizations working for the Filipino veterans, is considered to have dampened the momentum of the equity movement, which definitely needs to be united to make their voice heard on Capitol Hill.[77] In the following chapter, the author will discuss how the conflicting notions and strategies cast a shadow over the equity movement for the Filipino World War II veterans, who now function as an emblem of the Filipino American community in their pursuit of the empowerment, by presenting some observations on the bi-annual "Empowerment Conference" of the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA) held in August 2002.

4. The 2002 Empowerment Conference

The Fifth Empowerment Conference organized by NaFFAA, which was organized in 1997 as the voice of "Filipinos and Filipino Americans throughout the United States,"[78] offered the author the single most important opportunity to discover the most current Filipino American political formations, their empowerment strategies, and what priorities are being given to which community issues.[79] The conference was held from August 28th to 30th, 2002 in San Jose, California, a well-known national center of the IT industry with a considerable size of Filipino population, and was attended by more than 500 participants including major local community activists throughout the United States. On August 31st all the parties moved to the Moscone Center, San Francisco's premier convention facility, to hold their first "Filipino Global Networking Conference," which was intended to be a gathering of global Filipino Diaspora, but

---

[76] Barbara S. Gaerlan, "The Movement in the United States to Oppose Martial Law in the Philippines, 1972–1991. An Overview," *Pilipinas* 33 (1999): 75–98.

[77] Rita M. Gerona-Adkins, "Vets Still Can't Speak with One Voice," *Philippine News Online Edition*, March 17, 2004.
<http://www.philippinenews.com/news/view_article.html?article_id=146a4d25e5378b014bfae9d0d84dcd34> (December 16, 2005).

[78] NaFFAA, "NaFFAA description," *About NaFFAA*, 16 Dec 2005.
<http://naffaa.org/2005naffaa/descript.html> (December 16, 2005).

[79] I would like to take this opportunity to thank the NaFFAA and those who kindly allowed me to attend and observe the Fifth Empowerment and Filipino Global Networking Conferences held in 2002. However, the descriptions of these conferences appearing in this paper are the sole responsibility of its author and do not represent the opinions of the NaFFAA or any other conference participant.

turned out to be mainly bi-national (Philippine-U.S.) in composition.

(1) Dual Empowerment Strategy

The dominant subject of the conference was of course political empowerment, which aimed at getting more candidates of Filipino ancestry elected in the coming 2002 mid-year election through bi-partisan efforts on the part of local Filipino communities. Many of the invited speakers were politicians and public officials, mostly native-born and 1.5 generation Filipino Americans, including Mayors Henry Manayan of Milpitas City and Mike Gingona of Daly City (both native-born), State Assemblyman Jeff Coleman from Pennsylvania (whose mother is from Mindoro), Velma Veloria from Washington (who was eleven years old at the time of US entry), and White House associate council and special assistant to the President Noel Francisco (who was one year old at the time of entry). Despite different party affiliations, all the speakers spoke in unison about such dreams as Filipino empowerment in the United States and making a difference for betterment of the community and the nation.

Predominance of naturalized Filipino Americans, however, has in many ways shaped both conferences. The Philippine national flag was hoisted along with the Stars and Stripes at every meeting and the participants sang both the Philippine and the United States national anthems at every event, singing the former louder and with more confidence. Community issues recurrently discussed at the conferences are more related to the interests of Filipinos in the United States than the native-born population such as the job crisis for non-citizen Filipino airport workers brought about by a Congressional act passed in the aftermath of the September 11th incident that requires all the airport security personnel to be U.S. citizens.[80] Also recurrently discussed were the two issues directed not to the United States but to the Philippines; namely, the dual citizenship bill and the absentee voting rights bill, both of which were then under consideration in the Philippine Congress, to be passed and signed into laws within two years after the conference.[81]

The conferences invited such dignitaries from the Philippines as the First Husband Jose Miguel Arroyo on behalf of the President, Senate President Frank Drilon, sponsor of the dual citizenship bill, and Congressman Augusto Sijuco, sponsor of the absentee vote bill. In his speech, Sijuco asserted his confidence in the bill by saying "you are the only hope of the country today!" while Department of Tourism Secretary Richard Gordon asked the audience to send more Filipino Americans for balikbayan (homebound) visits for the success of WOW Philippines project. These speeches were greeted with such shouts from the audience as "Dual Citizenship Now!", "Absentee Vote Now!" This indicated that the conferences were as

---

[80] Anthony D. Advincula, "Pinoy to Lose Airport Jobs," *The Filipino Express*, 17 November 2002, 1. Database online. Available at Ethnic News Watch.

[81] These laws are: Republic Act No. 9189, "The Overseas Absentee Voting Act of 2003," 13 February 2003. <http://www.comelec.gov.ph/laws/ra9189.html> (December 16, 2005); Republic Act No. 9225, "Citizenship Retention and Re-acquisition Act of 2003," 29 August 2003.
<http://www.chicagopcg.com/dual.html> (December 16, 2005).

much rallies for the two Philippine bills as stumping for the coming mid-year U.S. elections. In other words, the Filipino American community movement at the beginning of the 21st century reflects an interest in "dual empowerment," both in the United States and in the Philippines.

It seemed to the author that the immigrant and the "native-born/1.5 generation" Filipino Americans are allowing each other to advocate their respective agendas, cheering each other, while they aim at opposite directions, i.e., being and becoming Americans on one hand and staying Filipino on the other. In other words, they tolerate their diversity within to be united as an ethnic group, since the dual empowerment strategy is considered complementary to each agenda. The "native-born" Filipino Americans, who are of course more interested in their empowerment in the United States, can turn their being Filipinos into a political asset only with the numerical and economic support of naturalized Filipino Americans, while both naturalized and non-naturalized Filipinos in the United States must rely on the "native-born/1.5 generation" who could be elected to public offices in the pursuit of improving their welfare in the United States.

Even if the dual empowerment strategy could be conceived as complementary within the community, it is quite a different matter when such duality is exposed to the outside. The facts that the both conferences attracted VIPs from the Philippines may indicate that the dual empowerment strategy is well accepted in the Philippines. If it is highlighted too much, however, duality could potentially make Filipinos vulnerable to suspicions of the mainstream society in the United States. It is therefore necessary for community leaders to proceed very carefully in order to avoid potential conflicts in their pursuit of dual empowerment. In this regard, the Filipino World War II veterans equity issue seemingly could win over sympathies of mainstream citizens quite easily, while it actually has an aspect as the most sensitive issues that could provoke controversial memories of the colonial past between the two countries, as the following part will show.

(2) Heroes Honored

Both the empowerment conference in San Jose and the Filipino Global Networking Conference in San Francisco treated Filipino World War II veterans with the highest honor and gratitude as the single most important emblem for the whole Filipino community in the United States. At the conference in San Jose, a large banner with the image of veterans photographed by Rick Rocamora was placed at the front of the conference hall, while the veterans themselves, accompanied by companions dressed in Stars and Stripes, started off the program with the presentation of the Colors. One non-Filipino speaker, himself a Vietnam veteran and a San Jose city council member, handed the Flag to one of the Filipino veterans, saying that it was waved in Afghanistan by his daughter, who is in the Air Force. At the Filipino Global Networking Conference, the USDVA Secretary Anthony Principi was invited to speak as highest ranking guest from the Bush Administration. The Secretary praised the veterans and announced several new policies initiated by the Administration to improve their care. Loida

Nicolas Lewis, the NaFFAA's newly appointed National Chairperson, closed her remarks by chanting "What do we want? Equity! When do we want it? Now!" While known as one of the most successful Filipino Americans in the business world, she is also the author of *How the Filipino Veteran of World War II Can Become a U.S. Citizen*, published in 1992.[82]

In the United States, World War II veterans have been widely recognized among every ethnic minority group as an emblem of their patriotic contribution to the nation. One of the most successfully represented may be Japanese American Nisei veterans, or "Go For Broke" soldiers of the 442nd infantry regiment, who went to the frontlines directly from their internment camps in the United States. The success of the Japanese redress movement shows how effectively the stories of minority veterans, especially of World War II, can afford ethnic minorities one effective way to protest against and seek justice for the racial discrimination they have suffered, without contesting American patriotism, but rather using it to their own ends. It therefore is very natural for Filipino American activists to view the Japanese American redress movement as an important model in their struggle for equity and recognition.[83]

(3) Heroes Forgotten

Those Filipino World War II veterans, however, do have at least one aspect which differs from other Asian minority veterans: they were not enlisted in and went to war from the United States, but rather enlisted, served and fought on their own Philippine soil. Meanwhile, there were a small number of Filipino soldiers who, like other Asian American soldiers, went to the front from the United States. They were the soldiers of the Filipino 1st and 2nd Infantry Regiments, who mostly belonged to either the prewar "manong" generation immigrants in the continental United States or second generation Filipinos born in Hawaii. Many of the latter, who were as young as the other Asian American soldiers, were sent to the Asia-Pacific front and engaged in actual combat and other operations, while majority of the "manongs" were already too old to see actual combat. After the training, those "manong" soldiers of the age 38 or older were dispatched to civilian jobs in factories and fields suffering from a shortage of workers (Philip Vera Cruz was one of them).[84]

Filipino American community historians like Fred Cordova and Alex Fabros, Sr. had long endeavored to study and publicize history of these Regiments, which remained relatively unknown compared to the other Asian Americans who fought in World War II. They are of the

---

[82] Loida Nicolas Lewis, *How the Filipino Veteran of World War II Can Become a U.S. Citizen* (Makati City: Bookmark, Inc., 1992).

[83] Louisa Antonio, Interview.

[84] Scharlin and Villanueva, 6.

[85] Alex Fabros (1903-99), himself a veteran of the Filipino 1st infantry regiment, worked for the construction of a monument to commemorate the Regiments in 1984 and was instrumental in the production of the an ABC special, "Unsung Heroes (1995)," that featured the history of the regiments. Also see Fred Cordova, *Filipinos: Forgotten Asian Americans* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Pub. Co., 1983); Ronald Takaki, *In the Heart of Filipino America: Immigrants from the Pacific Isles*, adapted by Rebecca Steoff (New York: Chelsea House, 1994).

opinion that the soldiers of the "manong" generation should be honored on the same level as Japanese American veterans, despite the quiet and sober roles they might have played in the war effort.[85] When Fred Cordova was invited to speak at the Filipino Global Networking Conference as the most respected community historian, he nevertheless had to lament that the story of the Filipino 1st and 2nd regiments had been "almost forgotten among activists." He was frustrated that the history of the "manong" veterans in the community memory has all but been upstaged by another group of Filipino war veterans in recent years.[86]

There might be several reasons for the current under publicity of the "manong" veterans. Firstly, the naturalization benefits provided by the 1940 nationality act was fully applied to the "manong" veterans, enabling most of them to become U.S. citizens as early as in 1943. Secondly, there has been absence of discrimination against them as the U.S. war veterans, enabling them to obtain old age pensions, free medical care at veteran's hospitals, etc. with no red tape. Thirdly, it was during the years of protest against the Vietnam War that the young Filipino community activists discovered "manongs" as the emblem of community movement. The images of "manongs" as war veterans might have not been so attractive in those days. And last but not least, present day Filipino community activists, being mostly naturalized immigrants, actually know very little about the past of the "manong" veterans in the United States, while they are thoroughly familiar with the history of Filipino USAFFE and anti-Japanese guerrilla soldiers since they have long been commemorated as *mga bayani* (heroes) in the postwar Philippine society. Fred Cordova's misgivings may indicate a lack of shared memories between "native-born" and immigrant Filipino Americans, resulting in a fragmented community heritage.

(4) Ang Bayan Ko

While the fragmentation of community memories poses a significant question, a split within the movement among community activists appear even more serious and urgent. During the Filipino Global Networking Conference on August 31st, 2002, ACFV and SFVEC held separate workshops in next-door halls in spite of having been asked by NaFFAA executives to maintain a unified front. SFVEC successfully secured a majority of the veterans by starting its events earlier in the morning and providing free lunches they ordered from the nearby Jolibee.[87] During the afternoon sessions, Eric Lachica of ACFV entered the SFVEC workshop and argued the fruitfulness of his organization's "step by step" strategy, while Rick Rocamora rebutted that ACFV was confusing the veterans by pretending its achievements meant that they were now eligible for monetary compensations as Veterans Benefits, which was not true. Tancinco emphasized that SFVEC's position would not change in demanding nothing less than a repeal of the 1946 Rescission Act and recognition that all the Filipinos that fought for the United States in World War II are entitled to the same benefits as enjoyed by the other U.S.

---

[86] This remark was made at the main hall of Moscone Center on 31 August 2002.

[87] Jolibee is a fast food chain based in the Philippines.

World War II veterans regardless of their nationalities or present location of residence.

A gulf between the two organizations became even conspicuous when one pays attention to the ways each uses the patriotic images in their movements. ACFV preferred to hoist only the Stars and Stripes at their workshop and Eric Lachica was wearing a Stars and Stripes tie. The invited speakers were from the Veterans Administration, the Republican Party, and high ranking Filipino American officials in the U.S. Armed Forces. On the other hand, SFVEC hoisted both the Stars and Stripes and the Philippine national flag at its workshop, playing a recorded version of the Star-Spangled Banner, while singing the Lupang Hinirang (Philippine national anthem) with a fiddler's sentimental accompaniment. What impressed the author most happened at the end of the workshop's morning session. They distributed the lyrics to "Ang Bayan Ko" and sang acappella while the veterans were marching out of the room to the larger main conference hall to join the procession for the Global Networking Conference.

They could say it was not inappropriate to sing "Ang Bayan Ko," since it was sung secretly in protest during the Japanese Occupation. They know, however, the song was originally composed in 1928 as a song for national independence in the face of U.S. colonial rule. It was later sung in protest against the "U.S.-Marcos dictatorship" during the years of martial law.[88] Thus, the singing "Ang Bayan Ko" seems to have revealed such sentiments shared among Filipinos in the Philippines as nationalistic contention with the United States, which is not portrayed as the promised land, but rather as a former suzerain and current neo-colonial power shaping the Filipino past and present *in both homes*. It was in this way that the World War II veterans were represented not so much as American *heroes* as Filipino *victims*.

Conclusion: Empowerment or Penetration?

Success of political empowerment of ethnic communities in the United States today very much depends on the way to solidify and propagate the memories which can be shared both within the community and with mainstream society. Even the painful memories of past wrongdoings committed by the federal government or mainstream society can be shared as far as the efforts for redress and reconciliation can be celebrated as the ones to bring about a greater unity of the society. An ideal case was of course Japanese American redress movement. This rhetoric is possible because almost every appeal for legal and social justice in the United States today is generally understood as *All American*, since *America* as the core symbol of subsuming national integration, is represented as the ideal of justice and freedom, whether it be true or not. Conversely, to be successful, any movement demanding legal and/or social justice in the United States has to be represented as *All American*. It is about these

---

[88] Nicanor G. Tiongson, ed., *CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art, Volume VI: Philippine Music* (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1994), 228–229.

[89] The term was coined by Renato and Letizia Constantino, the leading Filipino nationalist historians of the 1970s to 80's, as the title of the volume of Philippine national history dealing with postcolonial years. See Renato Constantino and Letizia R. Constantino, *The Philippines: the Continuing Past* (Quezon City: The Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1978).

assertions that there is something hard to swallow for Filipino American community activists, especially the naturalized ones.

Because of the colonial past and postcolonial "continuing past"[89] in the Philippine-U.S. relations in terms of military bases, economic dependence, predominance of English as a lingua franca, and so on, justice and freedom for Filipinos in their relationships with the United States have long been understood, at least by nationalist intellectuals, to be achieved not by being or becoming Americans but by stop being Americans and staying Filipinos. Closing of military bases, more economic ties with Asian neighbors, decline of English and dissemination of Tagalog (Filipino) as the national language have certainly changed the Filipino psyche since the end of Marcos era in 1986, while the United States continues to be a focus in their mental maps after all. Furthermore, it might well be noted that the bulk of naturalized Filipino American community activists, who immigrated to the United States during the 1970s and '80s, have carried strong nationalist sentiment vis-a-vis the United States of the old days when they left the country. It was the tenacity of this nationalist sentiment that the singing of "Ang Bayan Ko" at the SFVEC's workshop offered a glimpse into. Concerning this sentiment shared among many of Filipino community activists, Joel Bander, a non-Filipino civil rights activist leading the equity movement in Los Angels, made the frank remark that "anti-American attitudes and strategies practiced in the American arena are the death knell to success."[90]

With all these Filipino national psyches considered, the Filipino World War II veterans turn out to be the people whose tales are in fact not so much easy to be consolidated as an icon of Filipino American community but rather complicated and even controversial if one begins to ask who they are, why they fought, and why and how they did or did not become Americans and return to the Philippines with SSI checks. Their stories are too multiple and full of contradictions, even in a single veteran's life story, to tell in one common thread which is consistent with the pursuit of the political empowerment. Different ways to tell their stories could provoke ambiguous or even conflicting memories and strategies not only within their own community, as shown in the split between ACFV and SFVEC, but also with mainstream society, as warned by Joel Bander. These difficulties are unique to Filipinos, whose lives in the United States continue to be under shadow of the colonial past and the postcolonial "continuing past."

The bulk of non-activist Filipino Americans, it seems, respond to these difficulties by being "invisible" as described in U.S. media[91] and pursuing their interests through "quiet penetration." The relative success of Filipino American population depicted in the U.S. census show their strategy has worked quite effectively so far. Then they do not have to think their 'invisibility" mean their weakness as lamented by some activists. Instead they may say they are the people who would solve their problems through not collective but individual means. Even

---

[90] Joel R. Bander, "Champion of Veterans' Equity Speaks Out: Infighting Must Stop Now or Else...," *Filipino Reporter* 25, no. 3 (January 15, 1998): 26. Database online. Available from Ethnic News Watch.

[91] See footnote 33.

the community activists seeking ethnic (collective) empowerment share much in common with their less active comrades, since they themselves are the immigrants or the sons and daughters of immigrants who chose U.S. citizenship as a way out of something they did not want, not by employing collective means (i.e., national independence/national development), but individual ones (i.e., becoming Americans).

Pursuit of individual solution does not mean Filipinos are helplessly absorbed in a maelstrom of assimilation into American society, either. Quite the contrary, many are successfully penetrating mainstream society while maintaining a transnational way of life. Here it should be reminded that ACFV, the group riding high on the tide of American patriotism, actually opened up the way by their greatest success, the SSI Extension Act, for the Filipino veterans to either go back home or come and go as they like, in other words, to live a transnational life. Then, it might well be that seemingly different strategies taken by All American ACFV, almost Filipino SFVEC, and even non-activist Filipino Americans, merely represent different means to the same end: that is, surviving transnational spaces created by an entanglement occurring between the colonial past and emerging new realities in postcolonial U.S.-Philippine relations. In this regard, Filipino World War II veterans receiving SSI checks on both shores of the Pacific certainly deserve to stand as an appropriate symbol of all the Filipinos in the United States, who have been so skillfully negotiating with both the Philippine and U.S. systems of national integration in order to earn what they deserve in every possible way.