

The Minnesota Connection to the Philippine Centennial: The Erroneous Plaque in the State Capitol

On the wall of the Capitol Rotunda, our state's most visible building, hangs a plaque that is historically inaccurate and insults the heroic Filipino freedom fighters of the Philippine revolution and Philippine-American War. The plaque honors the 13th Minnesota Volunteer Regiment, who in May of 1898 volunteered for the Spanish-American War, intending to go to Cuba to fight the Spanish. Instead the Minnesota soldiers were sent to the Philippines and fought against Filipinos in the Philippine-American War. The plaque states:

"They [the soldiers] served the cause of humanity. They battled to free the oppressed peoples of the Philippine Islands, who suffered under the despotic rule of Spain."

The true story

The true story, largely unknown in America, is that after a one-day sham battle against the Spanish the Minnesotans participated in a war that crushed the Philippine independence movement, defeating the first democratic republic in Asia. By the time the Minnesotans arrived in Manila Bay in August, 1898, the Filipinos, under General Emilio Aguinaldo, had already declared independence from Spain and were close to defeating the Spanish. Also, they had begun to set up a structure for local governments.

The Minnesotans arrived just in time to participate in the Battle of Manila on August 13, 1898; this one-day battle was the only combat American soldiers saw against the Spaniards. *Before the battle*, Spanish and American diplomats had already begun negotiating a treaty turning control of the islands over to the United States. Spain, having lost money during its occupation of the archipelago, invited America to take over. They hoped to prevent the Filipinos from gaining independence, and avoid a takeover by Germany or Japan.

Minnesotans fought Filipinos

After the Americans took Manila they became increasingly more aggressive in their relations with the Filipinos even as the Filipinos, under the leadership of Aguinaldo and his top advisor, Apolinario Mabini, convened a congress to write a constitution and establish a democratic republic. In December President McKinley made a speech stating that US would "benevolently assimilate" the Philippines, by force if necessary. On January 23, 1899, Aguinaldo was inaugurated as President of the Philippine Republic.

Once the Minnesotans discovered the Spanish had offered little resistance, the soldiers felt betrayed, and quickly began lobbying American officials to allow them to return home. It took more than a year, however, to receive recall orders. An incident on February 4, 1899, at the San Juan bridge on the outskirts of Manila, where a US sentry shot and killed 2 Filipino soldiers, was used as an excuse to launch a full scale US attack on the Filipino nationalists - who were falsely called "insurgents." The Minnesotans, who had acted as Manila's police force, then became combatants against the Philippine Republic. The 20 battles fought by the Minnesota volunteers, and listed on the plaque, were all battles against Filipinos. Letters sent home by the soldiers show the war was very brutal - American troops might retaliate for the killing of an American soldier in battle by burning entire villages and killing Filipino civilians. At least 250,000 Filipinos died in the war (of a total population about 6.5 million).

As Americans read such letters from soldiers, many of which were published in local newspapers, a vigorous reaction against the war erupted. Many Americans, including Minnesota Governor John Lind, strongly objected with the policies of the McKinley government. Governor Lind, *even on the occasion of welcoming these brave soldiers back to Minnesota* on October 12, 1899, offered praise that rang hollow with the horror of what the men had discovered in their tour of duty: "The mission of the American volunteer soldier has come to an end. *For purposes of conquest he is unfit, since he carries a conscience as well as a gun.* The volunteer soldier has always stood for self-government, liberty and justice. With your generation he will pass from the stage of our national life [Emphasis added]."

Offensive language and attitudes cast in bronze

The plaque reflects the patronizing and racist attitudes that stood behind the American occupation. The plaque refers to the Philippine soldiers as "insurgents." In truth, the Filipinos were fighting for the independence of their homeland, fit to govern themselves. In their mind, the largest threat to the Philippine government was posed by the American troops. This racism is most sharply demonstrated on the plaque when President Emilio Aguinaldo is called "Chief Aguinaldo" as if he were an Indian tribal chief.

Philippine Study Group of Minnesota (PSGM) leads the effort to correct the plaque

The Philippine Study Group of Minnesota (PSGM), as part of the Philippine Centennial Movement Minnesota Chapter activities for 1998, is leading an effort to correct the plaque. The goal is two-fold. First, we will show Minnesota officials how this plaque offends the 4,000 Filipinos living in the state. The plaque offers a false picture of history and denies the capacities of the Filipino people. It belittles their long-standing quest for true independence. Sentiments such as those found on the plaque create severe obstacles to Filipino-Americans who wish to fully belong in their adopted country, as well as insulting all other Minnesotans. Second, we feel it is crucial that a second plaque of equal stature be installed nearby that would offer a more even-tempered version of this history - a statement made with full Filipino tact, pointing out there was a substantial movement for independence in the Philippines at the time of the American invasion, and the fact that US troops were sent in to wrestle the Philippines *away from Filipinos*, not to "liberate" Philippines from the Spanish. We would like to install this plaque by June 12, 1998 - the 100th anniversary of the Philippine Declaration of Independence from Spain.

PSGM has won substantial victories, but difficult obstacles remain. The Capitol Area Architectural Planning Board (CAAPB) and staff of the Minnesota State Historical Society have agreed that some action should be taken to correct the errors on the plaque. The Minnesota Adjutant General has written a letter in support of corrective action. Our campaign convinced CAAPB to develop lasting policies for correcting many other inaccurate and/or offensive artifacts at the Capitol. Most importantly, We have won permission to install a temporary corrective plaque for the Centennial. However, we are still negotiating for the right to commission and install a permanent bronze plaque with as much stature as the offending one.

What you can do

Please write 3 letters of support for a permanent bronze plaque in the next two weeks, and encourage your friends and co-workers to do the same. One should be sent to Lieutenant Governor Joanne Benson, CAAPB chair, at the State Capitol (55155). One letter each should also be sent to your State Senator and State Representative, whose addresses are listed on the accompanying list of Metro legislators. Please send copies of your letters to PSGM at the address below. Also, please call us if you would like to get involved!

For more information, contact:

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